

I Samuel 16: 1 – 13  
“The Lord Looks on the Heart”

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March 22, 2020

I love the fact that the elders of Bethlehem went trembling to Samuel, wanting to know if Samuel came peaceably to Bethlehem. Samuel, who is THE prophet over Israel. Samuel, who is not a warrior although based on the description of what he did to the king of Amalek, was capable of engaging in some violent behavior. But when Samuel—prophet and priest and non-warrior—showed up in Bethlehem, the elders wanted to know if he came peaceably.

Well, now, let's think of it in our terms. Let's say the governor of Tennessee--it doesn't matter whether you are a Republican or a Democrat or an independent--if the governor of Tennessee unexpectedly showed up at Trinity, everyone would want to know, why he was here? What's his agenda? Is he up to something? Does he come to worship or to engage in politics? Like those elders in Bethlehem, we'd want to know what his presence means to our worshipping community.

In Samuel's case, the purpose of his visit to Bethlehem was to anoint a new king of Israel, but that's not what he told the elders of Bethlehem. Samuel and the Lord God had a prior discussion about what to say to the elders after the Lord told Samuel that the Lord had chosen a new king and wanted Samuel to anoint that new king. Samuel was afraid—not only of what might happen to him if the current king, Saul, found out, but also what might happen if the people got wind of the fact that God's favor had left the old king. No one, in any age, wants a “crisis of leadership” –right??---so Samuel answered the elders' question in a rather cagey manner: “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.”

“Just a little worship service, no worries; get yourselves ready and come join me in prayer. Just passing through Bethlehem and thought we'd have a little worship and sacrificial ceremony.”

Samuel was cagey with the elders but the Lord was even cagier with Samuel. The Lord told Samuel that a new king had been chosen from among Jesse's sons, that he needed to grab his horn of oil and go but the Lord didn't tell Samuel which son. No physical description, not even initials.

Samuel was considered the high priest of Israel but at that moment, he was just a messenger, a gopher for God if you will. I think of this story as a twisted version of Cinderella, in which the sons of Jesse—clearly, in Samuel’s eyes, all worthy candidates to be the new king of Israel!—were competing to be king without knowing it.

As Jesse’s first son, Eliab, stood before him, Samuel thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before the Lord!” but the Lord whispered in Samuel’s ear, “Not this one.” Next came Abinadab, and Samuel thought similar thoughts. The Lord whispered, “not this one, either.” Likewise for Shammah, and then for the four remaining sons of Jesse.

Having reached the last of the sons, Samuel must have thought he had misunderstood the Lord’s instructions or mixed up the names. But just in case. . .”Are all your sons here?” Samuel asked, and Jesse hesitated a moment then said, “well, there is one more but he’s not here because someone has to watch the flocks while the rest of us attend worship. He’s the youngest, by the way,” thus conveying two things at the same time: that this youngest son must be pretty dependable if he’s left in charge of the flocks and fields, but not considered as important as his older brothers since he wasn’t invited to the worship service. That’s the quirky Cinderella-like part I mentioned—all your sons means *ALL* your sons, not just the ones Jesse thought worthy.

But, then, we know from the text, that neither Jesse nor his sons nor anyone else who was part of that consecration service knew what Samuel was up to. Samuel wasn’t even so sure! But he knew the Lord said “I have provided for myself a king among one of Jesse’s sons.” And so Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.”

They all waited while a servant or an older brother went down to the pasture to find David, and bring him (full of questions, no doubt!) back to the service of consecration. Here was David—sweaty, in need of bath, bits of fur and dirt sticking to his body, his hair loose and tangled—standing beside his clean, finely dressed brothers. Look at those seven strong, capable, good-looking brothers, and then look at David! Come on, the differences are great; the choice is obvious, and yet the Lord said to Samuel, “Rise and anoint *him*, this one, this is the one.” Remember, the Lord said, “Do not

look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

David was the least likely choice among the eight sons, but David wasn't a most unusual choice—after all, we are told that he had a healthy, outdoorsy complexion, beautiful eyes, and was handsome. He wasn't disgusting or disfigured; he was simply not the most obvious choice to be the new king of Israel—from a human point of view.

The Lord looks on the heart, and does not see as mortals see. The Lord is not persuaded by outward appearances, but looks deeper, closer.

But for what is the Lord looking?

Well, looking on the heart would suggest that the Lord isn't looking for perfection, but faithfulness. For the ancient Hebrews, the heart was not the source of emotions, but the seat of intelligence, intention, energy, and action. The heart was the source of the Shema, Moses' final command to the children of Israel to love the Lord their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their mind. From God's perspective, a human being has to do more than look good, he or she must love well—completely, totally, absolutely.

Perhaps what God saw in David was the promise of love of God and the willingness to be obedient. David obediently tended the sheep and watched the fields so his father and brothers could be about their holy business. David quickly responded when asked to appear before Samuel at the service of consecration. God saw in David the promise of love, the willingness to be obedient to God and that was a sight more beautiful to behold than David's complexion or eyes or handsome features.

The story of the Lord looking on the heart is repeated many times in scripture. Between the twins, Esau and Jacob, Esau appeared to be the better choice but the Lord chose Jacob, a less-than-perfect-specimen of manhood or upright behavior, for that matter. And then there's Moses, who when

called out by the Lord from the burning bush, lists all the reasons why he isn't the most obvious choice. Later on, Jeremiah the prophet protested that he was simply too young; Isaiah declared that he was simply too sinful. And then we come to Jesus of Nazareth, whose appearance isn't described in the gospels at all, but whose appearance was unremarkable enough to cause Pilate and Herod to exclaim, "So *this* is the king of the Jews?"

Generations earlier, the prophet Isaiah had described the Messiah as one who had "no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." And for his part, Jesus chose plain, ordinary folks to be his disciples—no one spectacular in appearance.

In a society swayed by beautiful complexions and handsome faces, the Lord is looking for more, much more as the Lord does not see as mortals see; but the Lord looks on the heart."

The Apostle Paul reminds us that "We who once knew Christ from a human point of view no longer know him in that way. Anyone in Christ is a new creation." We hear that assurance after our Sunday confession of sin. The old has passed away, the new has come to take its place.

The good news in Jesus Christ is that now we know we are chosen by God, there is no doubt. Whether we are easy on the eyes, or hideously disfigured, if we are in Christ, we are a new creation, we are now called by God, we are now summoned into God's presence, to serve the Lord with all our heart, mind, and might.

The Lord has come among us and made choices, and the Lord has chosen each one of you reading this sermon, because the Lord has seen something in each of our hearts that is worthwhile; something in each one of our hearts that promises faithfulness, the love of God and the willingness to be obedient.

So what if we're not kings—we're not all ministers, or elders or even leaders in the church. But we are all disciples of Christ, new creations. If we walk by faith and not by sight, as Paul suggests, we walk in the power of the Spirit who anoints us for service to Christ using the bodies that are our earthly home, the lives we have to share, the gifts we have been given.

We know that we walk in the power of the Spirit and have been anointed for service to Christ because in this time of crisis, the threat of the corona virus, the social distancing and self-quarantines, we continue to love and care about each other, our neighbors, and our families. We take the time to read this sermon or to find a worship service on television or online so that we can be strengthened by God's word. We pray, for those we know and those whom we don't know, for those working to bring an end to the spread of the virus and those who are adversely affected by the virus. We come from all walks of life, with all kinds of mixed motives and expectations, different abilities and theological opinions. But all of us walk by faith, anointed by the Spirit to hear, receive and respond to the gospel. The evidence of the Spirit's anointing is that somewhere along our life's way, you and I heard the gospel message and responded to that invitation of grace. That's the promise of love that the Lord sees when the Lord looks on our hearts.

And the second evidence that we walk in the Spirit and are anointed for service to Christ can be seen in the fact that everyday we seek to be better men, women, boys and girls. We struggle to understand what scripture leads us to do and how to act, we want to be new creations every day, to be better today than we were yesterday, to be better tomorrow than we are today. We aren't satisfied with the way the world is, our nation is, our lives are. We want justice, and mercy, and righteousness for every person. We desire to put to death the old ways, the old creation in us: anger, malice, wrath, grudge-holding, slander, lying, division, and we desire to live in as new creations, clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, forgiveness, patience and forgiveness. That's the willingness to be obedient that the Lord sees when the Lord looks on our hearts.

The Lord has come among us and chosen every one of us for service because the Lord has seen something in each of our hearts that is worthwhile; something in each one of our hearts promising the love of God and the willingness to be obedient.

The Lord does not look on our appearance or on the height of our stature, for the Lord does not see as mortals see; people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. Take heart, even in these times of uncertainty, knowing the Spirit of the Lord has anointed each one of us for service—for we walk by faith and not by sight.

