

God at Work

A sermon series on 1 & 2 Samuel

#3 "God Sees"

Sunday, June 16, 2024

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

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"For the Lord does not see as mortals see..."

"There is nothing more astonishing than a human face," wrote Marilyn Robinson in her great novel, "Gilead." "... You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it."

We've been noticing the ways that God has been at work in 1 Samuel. It is an ancient story of families, religion, and politics that intersects with our lives on many different levels. The Book of Samuel includes stories we have heard and treasured for years. There are stories of leaders being raised up by God to acts of valor and courage, but also stories of leaders cut low by corruption and bloody violence.

We've heard God responding to Hannah's desperate cries. We've watched as God has called her young son Samuel to serve him, and how the people demanded a leader so that they could be "like all the nations." The story unfolds like a novel, with tension and trouble never far away.

Indeed, today's text seems bathed in trouble and fear. Samuel, troubled by Saul's failure as king, is grieving and fearful of what might happen next. Bethlehem quakes with fear as Samuel approaches, with the elders rushing out to inquire about why the powerful judge and prophet of Yahweh is coming to their village. People, said Eugene Peterson, carry sufficient residual guilt about God that even the very mention of God's name can shake them.

But the place that this text troubles is much deeper, much more profound. And it is not until Jesse's sons have been paraded before Samuel that the truth of this troubling text is made clear.

This is a story about what God sees, and the truth of it will surprise us.

In this story, God is still at work in Israel, even though they have rejected the ways of God. As a king, Saul has failed miserably. You could make an argument that Saul had been an impressive king, that as the first of Israel's monarchs, he achieved great military successes. But the Lord does not see as mortals see. Instead of rising to the occasion to be the sort of leader whose heart was connected to Yahweh, Saul has pursued his own agenda. Having tasted power, Saul is reluctant to let it go. He has seized the public's imagination by claiming religious authority that did not belong to him, because as a politician he knows public approval can be easily manipulated by signs of piety.

But Samuel has seen what Saul has done. More importantly, God has seen. And now Samuel is called to anoint another one to become king.

Once Samuel arrives in Bethlehem and quells the fears of its elders, he summons Jesse, a powerful farmer, the grandson of Boaz and Ruth, and apparently someone who has captured the attention of God.

And here is where the trouble really begins.

God has told Samuel that one of Jesse's boys shall be the new king. We can almost hear Samuel muttering under his breath, "You know, God, it might have helped if you had told me the name of the boy you have selected." Yet God's choice is not revealed, and so Samuel has Jesse line up his sons for a beauty-pageant style parade.

Can the person with the envelope marked #1 stand up? See, here is Jesse's eldest...Eliab, a tall, fetching young man, the pride of Bethlehem High School. He's lettered in three sports and was president of the student body. The sun casts a shine across his chiseled good looks. Samuel takes one look at Eliab and says, "Well, this might be easier than I thought! Surely this is the one the Lord has picked."

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Sit down, number one. Fortunately, says Jesse, maybe you'll like Abinadad, his brother. Who has envelope #2? Please stand up. Abinadad would be a fine choice, says Jesse. He's not as tall as his brother, but he has those strong second-born overachiever genes. Samuel adjusts his glasses, but then shakes his head. "Nope." Thank you, number 2.

Jesse lets out a strong sigh, and then says, well, bring out number 3! Please stand up, number 3! And Shammah comes passing by. His credentials look good, his resume is impressive, but before he even turns in front of Samuel it's clear that he's not the one, either.

So, sit down number 3. What happens next will resonate with all the later born and youngest children here. You know how your mother called all of your sibling's names and then the names of all of your pets, living or dead, before she called you? This is even worse. Jesse has four more sons waiting to pass before the prophet—and their names are not even mentioned.

Numbers 4, 5, 6, and 7 – just wave your hands. Don't bother standing up!

Is that all? Are all the boys here?

Jesse twitches a bit, well, yes, except for David.

David – the youngest son, the one who has not yet matured, who is still wearing hand-me-downs. David, the idyllic shepherd boy who spends his time playing guitar and singing to the sheep.

David: the one who was always being made fun of by his older brothers, the runt of the litter. As the youngest, he was used to being overlooked, and probably preferred being left alone in the pasture with his sheep.

He was too young to be considered, too short, too inexperienced.

But Samuel says no one will sit down until David is brought to him, and when he does, the Lord says, "Here's the one."

Here's the one: a ruddy and handsome boy with beautiful eyes.

I imagine that behind the scenes the other brothers – especially those four unnamed ones – are more than a bit miffed. "Didn't the old guy just say the Lord doesn't see as mortals see? Didn't Samuel reject our brothers who were taller, perhaps even better looking, and certainly older? What on earth does he mean when he says, "The Lord looks upon the heart."

Let us tell you a thing or two, Samuel: we know what's in his heart. He's all about listening to music and staring off into space. He's barely equipped to feed sheep, and certainly not

the one you want to be king.” God has said that outward appearances do not matter, but we hear more about David’s appearance than any of his other so-called qualifications.

Nothing about this makes sense, perhaps, unless you dig a bit and realize that in the Hebrew Bible heart does not mean something like an emotion. Heart was the center of one’s being. To act from the heart was to act on what matters most. The heart was the place of one’s primary actions. To lead with the heart meant to lead in accordance with God’s desires. To have a heart for God is not to feel sentimental about God, but to have a posture that is aligned with God’s priorities and God’s way of being in the world.

What does the Lord look upon?

God saw a childless couple, well beyond their parenting years, yet promised them a blessing. God saw their readiness to follow.

God saw a man named Moses, a man who was not a good speaker nor exceptionally even tempered. But God saw Moses as the one who would lead God’s people out of bondage.

God saw a young widow named Ruth, the great-grandmother of David. She was a foreigner from a despised people, a shirt-tail relative who had no business following her mother-in-law. But this unlikely woman remained faithful. God saw a teenager named Mary, tax collectors and fishermen, and people who were blind and filled with leprosy. God used these unlikely people, because God looks at the heart.

And when the world falls apart, as indeed I felt it had this morning, God uses broken, fragile persons, to surround each other with love and promises of faith...that is what God sees. Amen.