

Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the Lord said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the Lord.” 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.” Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.” Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” 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. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

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One of my seminary professors, Fr. Paul, used to say that our bible was full of truth and some of it happened. What he meant was that we don’t take the books of the Christian bible to be history books, although there are some historical references. We don’t take them to be unquestionably factual, although there are many facts in them.

What may surprise you is that, despite some carelessness here and there, we also are not intended to receive scripture as the Word of God with a capital “W.” We reserve the capital W for the “Word made Flesh,” the Second Person of the Trinity.

When we say: “the word of the Lord,” at the end of our readings from Hebrew scripture and at the end of the Epistle, we don’t mean

“these are the unquestionable words captured and presented exactly as God spoke them directly to Moses or Samuel or to Paul.”

For us, the Word of God with a capital W, the *truth* that is in our bible, is God’s self.

When we say: “the word of the Lord,” or refer to scripture as “the word of God” with a small “w,” we mean that the library of books we call our bible *presents* God; words that form a collective testimony to God’s existence; God’s activity and interaction with specific people in history.

Scripture is a record of people’s experience of God’s self-revelation.

The bible is the word of God in the sense that these books hold and caretake the stories that help us to engage the awe of creation, that help us to anchor our traditions and that guide our way through the course of life from birth to death.

These words *convey* the *living* God who uses these stories to see into our hearts and speak into our lives.

Consequently, scripture can be subversive to those human structures based on violence and domination. Especially when powerful people within those structures take single sentences of scripture out of context trying to justify systemic injustice.

Last week, we heard the passage from First Samuel where the elders of Israel insist that Samuel find them a king. They were not pleased with the current political and religious systems and they thought a king would make them like other nations.

That’s the first problem.

God’s intent for the Israelites is that they *not* be like other nations. God called Israel to be a blessing to the other nations – to be holy and distinct people chosen to show the world how to be in relationship with God. God makes it clear that replacing God with a human monarch is the wrong choice, and yet because of God’s gift of a stunningly free will for humanity, the people insist that Samuel find them a king.

Samuel warns the people that God freed from the Egyptians that they are choosing to enslave themselves. Even so, because influential people believe that he will go and fight their battles for them, Saul is made king anyway.

And that's the second problem.

Asking someone else to do the work that is ours to do is a recipe for failure. That move reinforces a sense of helpless victimhood in us and the person we recruit to rescue us often learns to resent us instead.

And, true to form, for two years, the newly crowned King Saul becomes enamored with his own exceptional brilliance and begins bullying the Israelites. He takes on responsibilities that he can't fulfill, ignores the wise counsel of Samuel and repeatedly rejects God's teachings.

God continues to work around Saul's belligerence until, as we heard this morning, both Samuel and God renounce Saul's kingship. God commissions Samuel to choose another king.

Now, as amazing as God's gift of free will for humanity truly is, God's gift of patience with us is all the more stunning. Maybe that's obvious, but from time to time, we need the obvious pointed out to us so that God's disclosures do not become hidden in plain view. There are clear patterns in scripture and these patterns are consistent because they reveal God's own characteristics.

The scriptural stories of the Jews reveal the God of Israel as the hope and the promise of people searching for wholeness. Yahweh repeatedly leads the people toward greater solidarity and harmony, and deeper maturity as a faith community that stands out with vastly different values than those of the world around them.

Our readings this morning maintain that plotline with a specific focus on the unlikely people that God enlists to bring about Divine purposes. God said to Samuel, "Adonai does not see the way humans see – humans look at the outward appearance, but Adonai looks at the heart."

When God raises unexpected leaders, the selection has nothing to do with worthiness as the world defines worth. Instead of choosing those who pursue power, prestige or wealth for themselves, God looks to those who have come through their own failures, shortcomings or smallness with a stable sense of humility that opens them to God and to others.

God chose Jesse's youngest and least experienced son, David, to be king over the Israelites. David had seven brothers who were

more obvious choices by earthly standards. His own father, Jesse, didn't consider David to be a potential candidate and left him tending the flock. Even Samuel saw one of David's brothers, Eliab, and said, "Ah yes! Before Adonai stands the anointed." More than a few scholars consider this moment to be evidence of Samuel's human unreliability.

Maybe Saul was actually Samuel's choice and not God's after all. As humanly wise as he is, what Samuel sees are appearances; surfaces. God also sees exterior appearances *and*, more importantly, sees into the heart; God sees into the center of each person's awareness. God speaks to Samuel about what God sees eight times this passage.

There's a pattern emerging.

When God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem, the Hebrew reads, "I have seen Me among his sons a king." God tells Samuel not to "look upon the appearance or the height" – the surfaces – of David's brother, Eliab. "Adonai does not see the way humans see," God says, "humans look at the outward appearance, but Adonai looks at the heart."

When Jesse eventually calls David in, we hear that David has "beautiful" or "fine eyes" and that he is "goodly to look upon." Having seen David as only God can see, God commands Samuel: "Arise, anoint him, for *this* is the one."

Human vision and Divine vision come into resonance. David is anointed and the spirit of Adonai "gripped him" – that's the Hebrew phrase – the spirit of Adonai gripped him from that day onward.

The specific nature of David's consciousness is not revealed here. But if we explore other scripture, we see David standing out as a different kind of leader, a man leading with humility, mistakes and all, who seeks to stay true to God's yearning for creation.

Tradition says that David wrote the psalm that we recited today, Psalm 20, as a song of blessing for the people. The first verses are a tribute to David and might appear a bit self-serving at first. But then David's voice joins the people's voices.

"I know now that *God* will help His anointed," reads one version. David's confidence is not in his own strength and power. His self-

assurance comes from the knowledge that God's presence from holy heaven was with him.

Chariots and horses power the engines of other nations. But David puts his trust in God; puts God first. David allows his love of God to guide him. "All we need to do," reads another translation, "is mention God's name and [our enemies] will be subdued and surrender; we will rise up and cheer."

That's what Paul is talking about when he reminds the church in Corinth that it is the love of Christ that urges us on; that we, the church, are to live no longer for ourselves but for the One who died for us. Trusting God to make us a new creation is what liberates us from our attachments to worldly powers; frees us from our clinging to possessions and status, releases us from captivity to our fears and mistakes.

With our consent, our willingness and our humility, God will perform the mystical work within us until the day when the glory of God completely fills and illuminates this world of darkness.

Regardless of our situation in life, God has seen into our deepest centers and planted seeds of love in action there: mercies to show, pain and loneliness to ease, injustices to address.

"Adonai does not see the way humans see – humans look at the outward appearance, but Adonai looks at the heart."

Are you willing to see and nurture the gifts in people who have no money, no power, no prestige to give you in return? Are you willing to see and give the gift that God sees within you?

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