

“Bye-Bye Saul; Hello, David”

13 June 2021: 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: 1 Samuel 15:34—16:13

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The deepest definition of youth is life as yet untouched by tragedy
(Alfred North Whitehead: 1861 - 1947).

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If there was ever a person in the Bible who lived a charmed life, it had to have been King David. He had beautiful wives, numerous children, and a kingdom that expanded under his reign as it never had before—or since! David captured the hearts and minds of Israel in an extraordinary fashion. He ruled Israel for some forty years (1 Kings 2:11). Even today, Israel remembers David as its most eminent ruler. Yet, David’s rule began in murky political intrigue. It arose when Yahweh directed the old prophet Samuel to speak some bad news to Saul—the currently reigning king.

God sends a grief-stricken Samuel to anoint Israel’s new king as Samuel grieves Saul’s disobedience. God told Saul to destroy all the Amalekites “had” (1 Samuel 15:3). Instead, Saul directed his soldiers to save “the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable” (15:9). Samuel said to Saul:

You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you. The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you (1 Samuel 13:13-14).

We may find it harsh that Saul received such stark punishment because he merely saved animal lives and other precious resources—a shrewd tactic in wartime. It is also easy for us to sympathize with Samuel’s grief. And yet, even if we do sympathize, clearly God does not. God’s reaction to Samuel’s grief is, in fact, quite unsettling: “How long will you grieve over Saul?” God instructs Samuel to fill his horn with oil and travel to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse’s sons as Israel’s new king.

So much for Saul . . . Often, we think that God wants order and pure relations between people and, perhaps, even institutions. Yet, reading this story, we see we can never take lightly the surprises God has for us. Hear the lesson, 1 Samuel 15:34—16:13:

34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. 35 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.

16:1 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." 2 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.' 3 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." 4 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?" 5 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.

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." 7 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." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." 9 Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." 10 Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these."

11 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." 12 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." 13 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 (1 Samuel 15:34—16:13).

The Bible doesn't tell this story for those who like things settled or steady. It is a candid, upside-down, kind of story. It is the kind of story youngsters like because the underdog gets justice at the end. The marginalized, disestablished, and excluded people think that this is the way things ought to be. What makes this story so delicious is that God's hand moves the events of the story. Wise old Samuel and the father, Jesse, appear baffled by what happens. Jesse and Samuel pass over the first born. Again and again, God directs Samuel to somehow pass over one son and then the next son and the next. We think, as we hear the story, that something is amiss here. Finally, from the fields of sheep, in comes the bantamweight, David.

The story tells us that we can hope in our renewed faith that God does intrude into our settled arrangements. The fix is not in. Rather, we can hope that God can move in ways that we scarcely imagined. Perhaps God does choose "what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27). This thought bedevils all those pursuing social standing.

In Corinth, for example, status consciousness appears as one of several obstacles afflicting the Corinth church. The Romans wiped out his ancient Greek city of Corinth in 146 BCE. Later, Julius Caesar rebuilt it nearly a hundred years later as a settlement for freed slaves and the poor. Thus, by Paul's time Corinth was a city of "upwardly mobile" folk. No "old money" in Corinth—only people trying to "make it." We see these ambitions in the divisions in the Corinthian church. Perhaps you remember that one leader or another (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ) attracted people in light of the social status that the leader could confer on their followers. Paul knew their truth better than anyone did! Adversity and surprise—these are the elements that make life not only a challenge, but also pretty interesting too.

We learn from David's call story: "It ain't over 'til God says it's over." It is not always the oldest or the most powerful who carries God's day. Often it is the person that we least expect. Also, life's adversity is often a blessing. David, as the youngest in his family, knew all too well how he gets scraps. Yet, our story proves Jesus' meaning: "The last will be first and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16).

I once read a story about how adversity makes stronger people. On 29 December 1987, a Soviet cosmonaut returned to earth after orbiting for 326 days. He was in good health, not always the case in record-breaking voyages. Five years earlier, touching down after 211 days in space, two cosmonauts suffered from dizziness, high pulse rates, and heart palpitations. They couldn't walk for a week, and after 30 days, they were still undergoing therapy for atrophied muscles and weakened hearts.

At zero gravity, the muscles of the body begin to waste away because there is no resistance. To offset this physical problem, the Soviets prescribed a vigorous exercise program for the cosmonauts. They invented the "penguin suit," a running suit laced with elastic bands. It resists every move the cosmonauts make, forcing them to exert a lot of effort every time they moved. Apparently, the regimen worked.

Some of us often long dreamily for days without difficulty, but God knows better. The easier our life, the weaker our spiritual fiber, for strength of any kind grows only by exertion—and sometimes difficulty (thanks to Craig Brian Larson for this story). From a field of sheep to a throne room, David endured much to prove worthy of God's choice. But remember our story's summary statement: "The spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward." May God be with all of us.

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