

Sermon from the 4th Sunday of Lent, Year A
19 March 2023
St. Matthew's Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit
1 Sam 16:1-13; Ps 23; Eph 5:8-14; Jn 9:1-41

This morning we hear from the grieving prophet, Samuel. If we could talk to him, we might wanna ask him why he's grieving, which, thankfully, God does. Surely, Samuel would tell us that he's grieving because he's just not that great of a prophet—one whose vision is inconsistent, fickle —and, so, he thinks, he's totally blown it by anointing Saul king, because he turned out to be a pretty wicked one. Our Gospel reading from this morning is likewise focused on correct vision — insight, judgement — and, particularly on the discernment of God's will, his divine trajectory in time as he submits it, “us,” to his work, our weaknesses, goodness, even wickedness. It is the reason for which we were born, as we read in John's Gospel, “so that [his] works might be revealed in [us].”

And, isn't this exactly what we all wish to be able to see? To see how it is that we are enfolded into God's divine work in creation. But, all this is sometimes quite hard to *see*.

Hence, Samuel's grief ...the Lord would agree, Samuel is not much of a seer, however “called” he is. He *is* still *though*, however dim, submitted to the Lord's purposes. God did not want Israel to have a king, because, of course, ... *they already had one*: God himself.

But, the Israelites' envy of their enemies' stability and power lead them to go off and build a kingdom for themselves.

Yet, it is God who has condescended and promised to remain with Israel, so despite their human replacement of him as “lord,” he continues to be with them. He permits, it seems, Samuel — encouraged by the cajoling crowds—to anoint Saul king. And, as Samuel does this, the Lord has in some way already fated Saul's kingship to failure.

It's no doubt that Saul is a haunted and tragic figure in Scripture; he's not just imperfect. He is like Esau, the rejected brother of Jacob; yet, this rejection is, nevertheless, caught up in divine intention.

But,... back to grieving Samuel. As God's man, Samuel, grieves Saul's rejection, the Lord intervenes and inquires after him, “*How long will you grieve over Saul? ... 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*” (1 Sam 16:1).

But, Samuel stalls... and, surely, we can understand why. God's command makes Samuel into an instigator of political scandal and intrigue. Israel has a king so going all cloak-and-dagger like to anoint another creates a dangerous situation for himself and anyone who goes along with it.

But, God gets Samuel over to the house of Jesse, and Jesse has his sons process before the prophet, but, really, of course, they pass before the Lord himself, as he dismisses them one by one. Like anyone else would have back then, Samuel thought that God's chosen king would inevitably have been Jesse's oldest, who would have been regarded as the most important son at the time (cf Ex 13:12-15, Num 18:15-16). After all, Israel was commanded in the law, to consecrate, to set apart, all the firstborn for the Lord (Ex 13:2).

But, the Lord doesn't choose the eldest. He tells Samuel to let the first and the greatest of these sons pass him by. The Lord instructs Samuel not to look for Israel's king as he did before, by observing their outward appearance, because God takes in something else, not judging as mortals, as *you and I* do, but by looking at the "heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

So we are told what those with good vision and discernment will look at — the heart. Instead of looking for someone who "looks the part," literally, as Saul did, standing "head and shoulders above everyone else, as we read in 1 Samuel 9 (1 Sam 9:2)—God points to the inward quality of the person, that which motivates us. *It's that, our love*, that shapes who we are more than anything else. This was what the people failed to do when choosing Saul as king. They pretty much went about choosing him by looking at his resume, and it looked pretty good! He looked like someone who could get the job done.... Someone who could fight battles for Israel *and win!* And, the people got what they were looking for: a charismatic, militaristic,.. tyrant, ...and hence Samuel's grief.

So, oldest to youngest, all the brothers pass by the Lord until there are none left. So Samuel has to ask Jesse if he has any other sons.

Of course, there is another. The youngest one. But, he's got the low job, so he isn't even hanging out at his dad's place. Instead, he's out in the fields watching over his family's little flock. This isn't an industrial sheep farming empire we're talking about here—just a little patch of sheep for some good ol' subsistence livin'. In other words, he's out doing the grunt work that the other brothers outgrew. Yet, this is the one Samuel calls for though, when he shows up, he is isn't described as any competitor of Saul's, he doesn't look to be of much use on the battlefield.

David appears and Scripture describes him as a "ruddy and handsome... with beautiful eyes" (1 Sam 12), ... words that will be echoed later by his enemy, the Philistinian giant, Goliath. When David goes to contend with him: Goliath calls him "ruddy," in other words, puny, *a runt*.

The contrast between David and Saul couldn't be more stark. Saul came from a wealthy family, and David is basically the nearly-*forgotten* son of a poor family. And, they're in Bethlehem, not yet a prestigious place. And(!), when Saul was anointed, he *protested*, having little confidence in God, yet when David arrives he silently consents to the Lord's request. He appears as *called upon*, called by God, yet, he has not said or none anything praiseworthy—there is no resume or worldly measure in view, and so it is David's ruddiness, prescient in his weakness, that bespeaks of divine intent and the presence of the Lord.

But we come to find that, like Saul, David, too, disappoints ... to say the least. The bricks of his kingdom are eventually strewn over the land like so many lost sheep and the line of Jesse, that procession of so many sons, is eventually rendered a “stump.”

Scholars are often puzzled, too, by the fact that the tradition of the Church throughout history hasn't ever really focused on David as a king and a warrior. In the tradition, David is the David of the Psalmist. And, yet, even when David plays his harp to quell Saul's failing heart, Christians have understood the harp's true player to be the Holy Spirit. David is there, his hands on the harp, yet it is the Lord who plays. David is, from the start, usurped by God. He is important to Israel, but chosen prior to anything he has done. David, at his best, is the one at the Lord's disposal, so perhaps we should not be surprised that the tradition of the Church has memorialized David's heart, and little else. That heart, oriented toward God, is what is remembered and, indeed, it is this spiritual organ that allows us to see God at work amidst a fallen world.

Of course, this might all sound “neat,” but we are usually convinced the world “works” by other means and other measures—even if we don't like it, it is Saul who we think makes the world go round and secures our good. Apply the right methods, get the right resources, know the right people, ... better yet, be one of the right people, and, that's how we know we can ensure things are going to work out for good for us, and I don't mean just mean politically. I mean this about ourselves. This is why things like prayer seem so pointless and counter-productive most of the time. It doesn't seem to be a way to run a meeting, to get into the stuff that's “really real” about the world. But this is where discernment, and true sight comes into play for us.

In that procession of Jesse's sons we are given an image of time's own passage as it is subjected to the economy of *grace*. The procession of brothers is simply this for us, whose key to understanding is seen in God's choice of the “least of these.”

As the brothers pass they do from greatest to least. And in them we see the One who descends from the glory of *his* Father's house to the fields of labor. In the procession of sons, we see the road the Father's *only* Son traverses, from glory to incarnate obscurity. Christ's poverty itself bespeaks of the heart rended obediently before the Lord, and it is of him that David's heart speaks, ... in his being the “least,” a shepherd in his Father's fields, the good shepherd, whose heart is “right.” David's heart bespeaks of another totally disposed to the Lord's work. This is so because Christ is God's own, incarnate heart.

Into David's line he comes. When the angel appeared to Mary, he told her that her son, Jesus “will be great and be given “the throne of his ancestor David” and that “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:31-32).

It is for this reason that Christ leaves behind the safety of his Father's house to drink the dregs of our sin, failure, and death. In this way even Saul is given a future and meets Jesus. This second Saul we read about in the New Testament, in the one renamed Paul, who is given a future in meeting Jesus, Israel's *True* King, the only one purely after God's own heart, because totally *of* God's heart.

This, Jesus, is the “shoot” that Isaiah talks about who will come to give new life to Jesse’s stumped line. God has come to give us new hearts (Ez 36:25-27), ones whose hearts will bear the fruit of Jesse’s renewed one—Jesus himself.

And so we come back to Jesus’ words in John, when he says that we were born “so that [his] works might be revealed in [us].” We see it just in the way David is usurped as the Psalmist, the blind man born to reveal God’s work, All of which is epitomized in John the Baptist’s joyous insistence that: “*He must increase, but I must decrease*[!]” (John 3:30).

Whatever it means when we talk about God directing, intervening in history, in our lives, it means this good—that God descends to us, touches our lives in this way, purposes, redeems, transfigures, resurrects them, and by doing so gathers all things to himself for his kingdom, like the ingathering of so many lost sheep.

We could easily read the book of Samuel as a more or less banal history of the rise and fall of kings, the logical consequence of moral choice, and we might even compare ourselves to them to chasten our pride. But, this is not what the book is trying to show us. It is trying to show us God at work in a fallen world, among people like you and me. Despite all human failure, we see the way God comes amidst it all to subject it to his good purposes. In finding ourselves just here, in this place, we are “blessed.” And, insofar as we can *see* it— as the Lord bids us—it is by seeing ourselves touched and assembled, like Saul, David, and the blind man to God’s grace. It is in this way that we are peopled, with hearts remade to bear the fruit of Christ’s love, that we are sat with Jesus, the true King of history, in his Kingdom forever.

So may the zeal of the Lord’s house consume us, consume our hearts and help us to *see*, see Christ and his Kingdom in our very midst, and *full*, full in our hearts and in our eyes.

Amen.