

Scripture: 1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13 (at the end of this document)

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

Sermon:

Last Sunday I preached on the topic of the complexities of leadership. The Hebrews pressured their leader, Samuel, to appoint a king for them. Samuel had reached the point of losing his effectiveness and his sons would not have been accepted by the people as successors. After laying out all the reasons why a king was a bad idea, Samuel talked to God, gave in, and gave the people Saul as king. I don't have time to go into it, but Saul made a number of mistakes and did not follow God well enough to survive as king very long.

Knowing Saul was going to be on his way out soon, Samuel prayed to God for guidance. What was he supposed to do now? After all, Saul had been very successful in some of his military conquests. How could he find someone better? Or perhaps a better question, what kind of a leader was needed now? Every leader brings a unique set of skills, expertise, blessings, and shortcomings to a particular season.

God told Samuel to go see Jesse, a man in Bethlehem with several sons and to cement their friendship by offering a sacrifice. Hmm, Jesse and Bethlehem, does this ring a bell?

Often during Advent we (incorrectly) read the Christian story back into this text from Isaiah 11: *"On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."*

During Advent we sing "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" with these lyrics:

*"Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night."*

To state the obvious: the rose, the flower bright descended from Jesse by way of David is Jesus.

David was Jesse's youngest son, the one who was not originally present when Samuel carefully looked over each of Jesse's sons.

You remember that the Gospel of Matthew begins with these words: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” This introduction is followed by a recitation of the lineage leading up to Jesus. The long list of names ends with these words: “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.”

For Christians, part of the importance of the young shepherd who would become King David, is that, at least in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is a descendant of David. Furthermore, Saul, David, and Solomon were the three kings that reigned during the glory days of the brief 100 years when the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah, were united. When Jews prayed for a Messiah, they expected that the Messiah would once again bring the united kingdom back. The Zionist movement that led to the formation of modern-day Israel also had this image in mind.

When we as Christians read 1st Samuel, we need to be aware of all of this context.

God’s selection of David as Jesse’s son who would hold together Israel and Judah has some lessons for us today. Those of us that are parents know that:

- Each and every child is precious and offers unique gifts to the world
- God and the world will discover gifts in our children that we as parents, may never have noticed
- While the spotlight in this story shines brightly on David, each of Jesse’s sons plays a role in the family, even Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah, and the three unnamed sons. Most of *us* are like Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah and the other three sons. We live out our lives to the best of our abilities and the talents God has given us. We are every bit as precious in God’s sight as David.
- Please also remember that David was an afterthought. Samuel had to ask Jesse, “are all your sons here?”
- Perhaps most importantly, Samuel, the judge, the prophet, the wise leader had no clue which son of Jesse was the one God was looking for.

Today an HR department would require that we write up a job description, including a list of both required and optional skills the king that would succeed Saul would have to possess. We would have a minimum set of requirements, in terms of experience, knowledge, and education potential candidates would need in order to even be considered. If we were really sophisticated, we would create a series of scenarios in which the candidate would have to explain how they demonstrated a set of kingly competencies.

Especially in Sycamore, we think in very practical terms. We’d figure out how much experience the king would have to have in battling the Philistines, what leadership experience, and diplomacy skills were needed.

We are wired to be problem solvers. Usually the way we define the problem to begin with limits the number and nature of potential solutions we explore.

Well that is why we are who we are and why God is what God is! None of what I just described mattered to God. What mattered was the depth of David's faith. As a young shepherd, David faced loneliness, endless boredom, and terrifying moments of fighting off wild beasts to protect his sheep. His heart had been refined in the wilderness to trust God, realizing that his survival and those of his herd depended solely on God. When a wolf drew near in the middle of the night, David's first action was to pray – to ask God for help, for strength; and he drew upon God's presence for courage and guidance.

When Samuel was looking for a king, he too, looked solely to God. He did not "lean on his own understanding" to figure out which of Jesse's seven sons was the right one. He trusted God.

If there is one behavior I would like to cultivate both in my own life and our life as a church, it is to rely less on our intellectual and emotional understandings and to trust God.

I daresay we would all be better off if we made sure we asked the right questions and began our considerations with a vision, informed by God.

How do we do this? One way is to pray, not just when we need guidance, but every day. Start with little things. Just ask the question, "what is your will for me today, O God?" Then the hard part, be quiet for awhile, and see if we receive some guidance. When we prepare to talk to someone, even someone we have known for years, ask the question, "how would you have me engage with or speak to this person, God?"

For some situations, we can follow the Quaker's example and set up what is known as a Clearness Committee. In their context, a member may have requested the support of a clearness committee in order to discern how best to deal with an important personal decision, whether to make a change in the circumstances of their lives, whether to test a leading or for some other reason. There are a prescribed set of procedures to follow. Key features of a clearness committee include: the use of silence, deep listening, and carefully formulated open-ended questions, not to give guidance or advice, but to help the person discern more clearly the nature of the decision they are considering.

Perhaps one way we could strengthen our already good process for considering the building project is to shift our focus. In addition to asking the question how would we or community members use the new building, let's ask questions like these:

How can we open ourselves as a church to God's guidance?
What is your will, what is your vision, O God, for the ministries of this church?
To what extent would a new building help or hinder that vision?
How can we be most faithful to your vision for us, God of heaven and earth?
<reflect in silence on last question>

If we consistently open ourselves to guidance, as individuals and as a church, then perhaps we will have the experience Paul described in 1 Cor. 2:9: *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love God."* Amen.