

Sermon for Sunday, March 20, 2014 Lent 4 1 Samuel 16:1-13 "The Unexpected Choice"

We have moved forward from the beginnings of God's relationship with humanity in the Garden of Eden to the definition of what faith looks like in the story of Abraham to the struggles of Moses as he led God's people out of Egypt. Now we are in a very different place – the call of David to be the anointed King. Just as we have moved forward chronologically, we have also moved forward to another chapter in the often fractious relationship between God and God's people.

At first, it was just God and the first humans. Animals, too, and trees and plants and other things. But in terms of relationship, it was very much an intimate encounter. God walked in the garden with them. God sat by as Adam named the creatures. God dug his hands into the dirt to form Adam, and then dug his hands into Adam's own body to create Eve. And God's disappointment in Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit was the palpable pain and grief of a parent whose children disobeyed and caused themselves harm as a result.

As time passed, and as the number of humans increased, the relationship changed. It was not quite as intimate. God became more distant, seemingly sitting above the workings of the humans – both good and bad workings, both good and bad humans – and did not directly address them all. Except for Abraham, to whom God made a promise of parenthood, of nationhood, of a particular relationship with God. Abraham did not always follow instructions, his children were sometimes wayward, but the relationship with God remained as if it were the frame of a house in which they all resided, and God continued to bless Abraham and Abraham's descendants, even when they erred.

But somehow, the relationship frayed and became even more distant, at a time when it seemed Abraham's descendants, now numbering so many more than the first and second generations, should be particularly grateful. God had saved them, giving the charge to Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt, directly protecting them over and over again, providing for them...but those children of Abraham, now wandering in the desert, doubted God's presence, doubted God's promise, until God, through Moses, once again did a miraculous act to remind them of divine love and care and promise.

Fast forward and now we are in a different time as we hear the reading from 1 Samuel. Abraham's descendants are now a nation. They have crossed into the promised land, the land of milk and honey. But they look around and see that other nations who neighbor them have a different political structure. Instead of relying on their relationship with God and their religious ritual to structure their nation, they want a king. An earthly king to rule and to fight for them and to lead them. A king who is as powerful as Pharaoh was in ancient times. Someone who looks like a king.

Prior to this point, they had had judges who were the arbiters and the leaders, judges who had sometimes been faithful to God's instructions and who had sometimes fallen in love with themselves and forgotten their God. It had not been perfect, but it was, at least to some extent, a system that tied the actions of the nation to their relationship with God. But that wasn't good enough. Now they want a king. And the prophet and judge Samuel says, in essence, "be careful what you wish for." They insist, in part because they don't much care for Samuel's sons, and want someone else to lead the nation. So Samuel is led by God to anoint Saul, a powerful and physically attractive military leader, to be the first king of Israel.

The people rejoice, seeing that they have gotten just the king they wanted. Great military man, handsome and tall, fearless, but also flawed. Of course he was flawed. We are all flawed in some way. And it seems that powerful people, people with big personalities, often have big and powerful flaws. And when he was in the grip of emotions and stress, Saul made bad decisions that were in conflict with the instructions that God had given him.

And so it was necessary for Saul to be replaced. God gave instructions to Samuel, the designated anointer of kings in that time. Samuel was still grieving over Saul's failure but God said, "Buck up. I've got a plan. Get your anointing oil and go to Bethlehem. The next king will be there among Jesse's sons." Now Samuel knew that this was risky business. Saul was still technically king. Anointing a new king while the old one was still around was treason. If Saul heard about this, Samuel would be toast. But God gave him a cover story, and off he went to do what God commanded. There was one problem: God didn't say which one of Jesse's sons was to be king, and Jesse had several sons.

You know how things went in the ancient world – the eldest son was always the logical choice when it came to things like being in charge, getting inheritances, making decisions. So Jesse trotted out his firstborn, Eliab. Eliab was a handsome young man, tall, attractive, personable. Sort of like Saul, whom the Book of Samuel described as the tallest and handsomest man in all Israel. But the Lord whispered in Saul's ear, "No, not him. How he looks is irrelevant to me."

So maybe the obvious choice was not the one. "Okay," Samuel told Jesse, "Show me your next son." And Jesse called forward Abinadab. We don't know if he's a tall guy, or a handsome guy, just next in the queue...in a heartbeat, the Lord says to Samuel, "No, not him." And one by one, Jesse called each of his sons to parade before him – sort of sounds like a strange Miss America contest, doesn't it? – and each time the Lord said "Nah. Not him." One wonders what poor Jesse was thinking..."not a single one of my wonderful boys?" But Samuel, prompted by God, said, "Is there any other one?"

Another one. The youngest. The smallest. The least likely choice according to the way that things worked in those days. Jesse must have thought Samuel was crazy. "Yup, there's one more. But he's the little one. He's out tending the sheep." Samuel, tired by now, said "Get him, and get him quick. We are all going to stand here until you get him." I expect he sounded sort of testy at this point and I am sure Jesse was nervous. So they ran and got the youngster out of the fields and brought him in. Not tall and handsome, but appearances must count for something, because he was described as having a bit of a flush in his cheeks and beautiful eyes. And the Lord told Samuel, "this one is the one. Don't argue with me. I know perfectly well he is just barely a child, that he has no experience in battle, that he is small. Anoint him. This is the one." And the scripture says "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."

We don't know if the brothers said "why him and not me?" We don't know if Jesse was shocked. We don't know if David was frightened. All we know is that this most unlikely choice was the Lord's choice, even if to human eyes it all seemed ridiculous.

Quite a story, but how does it fit into the conversation we have been having over the past few weeks about sin, grace, faith and redemption? We've talked about both individual and corporate failure to live as God intends us to live. We've talked about the staggeringly generous and undeserved grace that God gives us, forgiving us our sins, through Jesus Christ. We've talked about finding hope that we can do better even as we admit our many failings. But how do we figure out where hope lies? There are many options as we try to amend our lives. Which way is the right way? We might find a clue in this story of the anointing of David.

Remember the first choice of king? Saul, the one who looked and acted like a king? Saul, who displeased the Lord because he thought he should do things his own way rather than following God's instructions? Saul was the obvious choice. And yet he was the wrong one. It was not about earthly measures of who would be the right choice. It was not about his exterior, his handsomeness, his height. The way he looked was not the only measure of whether or not he was the right choice.

So God's next choice was David, the least obvious choice. An attractive child, to be sure, but a child. Not an experienced leader of anything except sheep. Not the visual image of a king, tall and easy on the eyes. Not a fearless warrior. Not even the firstborn in his family, a child so insignificant that when Samuel asked Jesse to show him his sons, David wasn't even invited to the party. But there was something God saw in David – not the exterior, but the interior. And so God chose David. David, the one who would become King David, an imperfect King but one who loved God, the one whose line would culminate in Jesus of Nazareth. The least likely one in which the people of Israel should have hope, and yet God's choice.

What if the right choices to repair our brokenness and failures are not the obvious ones, the easy answers, the checklist solutions? What if the right choices are the hard, strange and unlikely ones? Changing our priorities to ones the world doesn't understand. Forgiving those that some folks who say don't deserve our forgiveness. Helping those who are dirty or scary or strange or ones we can't really fix. Not buying the newest and shiniest trinket so as to avoid adding last year's toy to the landfill. Passing on that Starbucks grande caramel macchiato in favor of a cup of coffee from your own kitchen and putting that money into the UTO blue box. Speaking up when someone says something unkind or demeaning, even when it's your boss. Thinking that a good vacation is not the one that takes you to the wildest place on the planet just so you can say you did it, but the one that gives you the opportunity to spend time with your family.

These are not choices that make much sense to 90 percent of the people around us. These are most certainly not easy choices. But they are the choices that are shaped by God's definition of what it means to be good, to be in relationship with our Lord, to be, in the fullest sense, a Christian.

What choices will you make to grow closer to God this Lent? What choices will you make to live as a Christian for the rest of your life? Think twice – it's not the obvious choice. But it will be the right one. You'll know it when it surprises you. Amen.