

## God Blesses the Small

- [1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)
- [John 9:1-41](#)

Our first readings this Lent are continuing their rapid journey through key moments in the formation of the people of Israel, our spiritual ancestors.

Last week we left them in the desert where they stayed for a very long time – as you know forty means very long - Jesus fasted in the wilderness forty days and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years before arriving at the Jordan, a distance of less than 250 miles by the most direct roads today and just one hour 57 minutes by EgyptAir.

So they spent a very long time getting to the Promised Land and then found it full of other people. The account in the Book of Joshua pictures them as an invading army, but the next book, Judges makes it seem like they moved in alongside other tribes. But even then it was not always peaceful and when necessary they came together to as one people to fight another nation. There was no permanent leadership for the Israelites – they were essentially a tribal people and at times civil war broke out between them.

Samuel was the last great tribal leader. He was called as a prophet – you will remember how he heard God calling to him in the temple, “Samuel, Samuel” and was coached by the ailing priest Eli to respond “Speak Lord for your servant is listening.” Listening to God became the core value of Samuel’s life, and he became a great statesman and judge. He prayed for and commanded the people in battle against the Philistines, and he was also a circuit judge, traveling between Bethel, Gilgal and Miizpah year after year to settle disputes.

But as Samuel aged and his sons proved to be corrupt judges, the people began to want a king. “just like all the other nations have.”. Samuel was not happy about this as he believed that (1) God should be their only king, and (2) a king would raise taxes and draft young men into the army. But they still wanted a king and God told Samuel to anoint Saul as king.

I don't really understand what happened with Saul. He started out really well, filled with the Spirit but corruption set in. And God decided that instead of his son Jonathan succeeding him, God would start a whole new dynasty. Some people say that God realized they had made a mistake, others that God simply changed their mind.

Last week I talked about the radical freedom of God and I think this may be another example. God is free to do whatever God wants and God has given humans the gift of freedom. There are of course limits to our freedom which we constantly push against. There are constraints caused by our being mortal and stuck in space and time. We cannot be in two places at once, we cannot fit more hours in the day, we will die. But within those constraints we have freedom. God never treats us like puppets.

So I think Saul used his freedom to do things which God told him not to do and God in divine freedom decided to try again. (Rather like the story of Noah where God decided to get rid of the corruption of humanity and start again.)

The demise of Saul brings us (finally) to today's reading. Samuel is now looking to anoint a second king. Saul is still alive and is still king so this will lead to a tricky dance between David and Saul especially as Saul goes slowly mad and the only thing that soothes him is David playing the lyre.

Samuel had had a close relationship with Saul and grieved that he was no longer to be king. But as we heard in the reading, God told him to go

and anoint Saul's successor. Who turned out not to be any of Jesse's strong, skillful sons but his youngest son who was out looking after the sheep. There is an irony in the story which always amuses me. As God is turning down the strapping young men who Samuel is eyeing favorably, God says, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." And then when the youngest, David, appears we are told "he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." As if his outward appearance *was* really important after all.

So this is the story of the founding of the house of David and with it comes motifs and symbolism which are still part of our religious and spiritual language today.

Bethlehem was never a big place, not in the time of Jesse and his sons, not even in the time of Mary and Joseph. The prophet Micah said, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." God has chosen the youngest son of the one of the families of one of the most insignificant towns in the country to be the one who builds the tribes into a recognizable nation. This is typical of God – all through the Book of Judges, the people who get called to lead the tribes are in some way lesser in human eyes, and that theme continues in scripture.

It is the topsy-turvy way of our God. The people we don't notice, the people we think are less important than us, are the ones who God honors. God takes the very small, like a mustard seed, and makes it into a big tree.

This applies to us in two important ways. Firstly, if, as his disciples we are to imitate Jesus, then we too will be looking for those who are overlooked and honoring them in a way that may stretch us out of our comfort zone. Humans tend to feel comfortable with people who look

and sound like us and that is even more true in the present political climate. Jesus challenges us to expand our experience of “us”.

Last week many of you participated in the neighborhood walk. Part of the reason for doing it was to help us see who we are sharing our community with who we may not normally notice.

At Messy Church on Friday we focused on the story of the Good Samaritan – as followers of Jesus, we are constantly called to stretch the definition of who is our neighbor. And radical welcome means we not only invite them to join us but we allow ourselves to be challenged and changed by who they are. The Parish Council has been considering the extent to which we are truly welcoming of trans people and, as an example, noticing our resistance to changing the way we think about and use pronouns. If we are truly welcoming then we meet people where they are which includes learning about what it means to be them and honoring their experience of themselves.

In the Gospel reading, after Jesus has sent the blind man to wash, he disappears from the story until the newly sighted man is driven out. And then Jesus goes to look for him. He prioritizes the one who has been discriminated against first for his blindness and then for his healing. So too we are called to seek out, serve and welcome those who don't fit.

When those leading our worship service process into or out of church, the Rector does not lead but always goes last unless the Bishop is present. This is a symbolic reminder to us of the basic principle that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. David was the last and the least of eight brothers, but he became the king whose name echoes through the millennia.

The second way that this topsy-turvy practice of God's applies to us is that St. Benedict's is not and never will be a mega-church. The Episcopal Church in this country is small. There are only one and a half million active members in the whole country, and the majority of

Episcopal churches are small. But size is not what is important in God's terms.

Demographics are not destiny.

God is at work here, in and through this congregation, and that will not change provided we continue to be intentional about listening and watching for what God is doing and aligning our activity and our prayers with that work. We might paraphrase Micah to say, "But you, O St Benedict's of El Camino Real, who are one of the little Episcopal churches, from you shall come forth for me a ministry which will bless you, all around you and the planet beyond you." Whatever else we know, we know that we are called to praise God in all circumstances and to be a blessing, a clear channel for God's love to flow into the world.

David was such a blessing. God made a covenant with him that his house would be established for ever, and as we are enrolled in the reign of God, in the Body of Christ so we too are adopted into the spiritual house of David. We are descendants of the covenant people. We ourselves are blessed with a new covenant - one sealed with Christ's body and blood which we remember again today as we celebrate the eucharist. God's new covenant is that we are freed from the sin matrix through the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection. We are free in a new way, not just the freedom of will which I mentioned earlier but the freedom of the daughters, sons and children of God.

For us, the rules and the laws are but training wheels that enable us to hear God speaking and to listen with the ears of our hearts and to see clearly with our spiritual eyes. Like Samuel we can connect directly to God and so we are free in a radical way. As St. Augustine famously said, "Love God and do what you please."

My friends, the two great commandments are, firstly, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And the second is like it, you shalt love your neighbor as yourself. On

these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. That is what Samuel saw in David's heart. May God see it in ours also.