

“A Different Perspective”

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1 Samuel 16:1-13

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.

PERCEPTION

In our children's sermon today we learned (will learn) that what we see is a matter of perception.

I showed (will show) the children some pictures that can be viewed two different ways depending upon where we look. We might see a vase ... or we might see two people looking at each other. We might see a beautiful woman or an older woman.

It's the same picture, but we see things differently because our minds organize what we see in a different way. Psychologists know that perception plays a big role in how we organize and interpret our world.

And sometimes faulty perception will cause us to draw the wrong conclusion about things. What's the old saying? "Don't believe anything you hear and just half of what you see?"

The study of perception is important not only in the study of psychology. It is also important when it comes to faith.

Many of the stories in the Bible are about people who had the wrong idea about what God was doing in the world. Their perception was clouded by their personal ambition, by politics or by tradition.

I would suggest that this is still true.

People of faith have radically different views on many political and social issues.

Who's right and who's wrong?

What is the Christian answer?

In light of such differences, several answers have been given. Some would say that their opponents are just not faithful.

If only our opponents had eyes to see they would read the Bible the way we do.

Others suggest that we just shouldn't talk about it.
Let's not bring up religion and politics at the dinner table. It only causes heartburn.

Right?

But, that old saying is not biblical.
We cannot withdraw from the problems of the world.

FAITH AND POLITICS

All of the biblical stories are about what it means to be faithful to God in the world.

And all the stories of the Bible are about the relationship between faith and politics.

For example, today's lesson begins with politics.
What's the big question asked by our text for today?
Who's going to be Israel's next king?

That's a very political question.
And it is a question that is being asked by the prophet.

Throughout the Bible, the prophets challenge the actions and authority of the religious and political authorities. They talk about new kings and new kingdoms.

And that culminates in the ministry of Jesus.
And he challenges everyone's authority.

He challenges the authority of the king.
He challenges the authority of the priests, the scribes and the Pharisees.
He even has the temerity to challenge the authority of the Roman government.

And don't make the mistake that Jesus was a populist, an ancient Andrew Jackson, a man of the people. When Jesus looked at the crowds, he had

pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. In other words, they didn't have a clue.

And when that crowd tried to make him king, he rejected their call. Why?

Because he looked at the world in a different way.
His kingdom wasn't about power in the usual sense.
It was about something more.

The Spirit of the Lord was upon him.
He was God in the flesh.

And he wasn't bringing in just any kingdom.
He was bringing in the Kingdom of God.

BLINDED BY SIN

But, most rejected or didn't understand the ministry of Jesus. They were looking for God in all the wrong places.
Their perception was distorted by their assumptions.

And our perception is often distorted by a single minded way of looking at the world as well.

For example, I have a hard time seeing the second picture in some of those drawings that illustrate the importance of perception.

I spent thirty minutes this week trying to see the old woman instead of the young woman in one of those Gestalt pictures. But, I couldn't do it. My mind wants to organize reality in a way that is familiar and comfortable. I didn't have the mental flexibility to see the other picture.

The same is true when it comes to faith.
Our perception is distorted by family history, politics, early religious education ... and so forth.

We often miss God's call.
We cannot see because we do not have "eyes to see".

Sin blinds us to the truth ... especially when it comes to the truth about ourselves.

So how can we learn to see things more clearly?

How can we learn to see things from God's perspective instead of our own?

I think today's lesson gives us some clues.

SAMUEL'S PERCEPTION PROBLEM

The prophet Samuel hears a message from God that he doesn't want to hear.

King Saul has been unfaithful.

He has to go.

Change is always hard.

Some would say that even a bad king is better than no king.

Perhaps Samuel's sympathy for Saul was based upon his last encounter with the king.

When Samuel told Saul that he had disobeyed the Lord one time too many, Saul was distraught.

And as the prophet left Saul, in desperation the king grabbed the prophet's robe.

The robe tore and the king was left with nothing but a piece of cloth in his hand.

Samuel said that this was a sign of what would happen to Saul. The kingdom would be torn from his hands.

Maybe the sight of the once mighty Saul begging for forgiveness made Samuel question God's word.

Did Saul really have to go?

The thought made Samuel very sad.

The Bible uses very strong language.

The Bible tells us that Samuel "grieved" over Saul.

Samuel was the mightiest of the prophets.

If anyone had spiritual insight it was Samuel.

When Samuel was a child, the Bible tells us that the Word of the Lord was rare and visions were infrequent. And yet, even as a child Samuel heard the voice of the Lord clearly and was able to see what God was going to do.

And from that time forward Samuel's reputation as a prophet began to grow.

But, even a great prophet like Samuel was subject to a perception problem. Samuel heard God's word and saw God's plan, but in this particular case, he did not trust it.

Samuel must have grieved about Saul for a long time because finally God seems to get frustrated with him. The Lord told the prophet,

"How long are you going to mope around and do nothing? It's time to anoint a new king.
Go to Bethlehem and visit Jesse.

One of his sons is going to be the new king.
I'll tell you which one. Anoint him."

A DANGEROUS JOB

Samuel had one more objection. He said,

"Lord, Saul might be a bad king, but he's still king.
If I anoint someone else, I will get into big trouble.
He'll probably kill me."

Samuel was right of course.
Kings don't give up their thrones without a fight.

They might cling to the prophets and religion as a way to try and legitimate their rule.

But, let the king's rule be challenged by the clergy and the king will be quite willing to change religions ... or even throw the prophet under the chariot and get a new prophet that is more favorable to his reign.

Think of what Herod did when he heard that a new king was born.
Think about how the religious leaders treated Jesus when he challenged their power.

Think about how the early Christians were persecuted when they dared to say that Jesus was Lord (and by contrast Caesar was not).

The people in charge do not want their rule challenged.

We still see this today.

For example, if a Russian lawmaker dares to cross Putin, he just might end up dead on the street. Kings and dictators do not want dissent, and when push comes to shove, they will do anything to squash a rebellion.

But, God has a way to protect Samuel from the scheming of this unstable king.

He says, "Tell the folks in Bethlehem that you've just come to make a sacrifice to the Lord. You're going to have a little worship service with Jesse and the boys."

So, that's what Samuel does.

But, the folks in Bethlehem were not so excited to see Samuel. When you have a fight with the king, the word gets out.

The folks in Bethlehem suspected that the old prophet might do something to challenge the king. And that meant they also might be subject to the king's wrath.

They were literally trembling when they met with Samuel. "Please. Let's just keep the peace."

Samuel reassured them.

"I come in peace.

We're just going to have a little worship service.

We're going to sacrifice to the Lord at Jesse's place.

And all of you are invited. Put on your Sunday best and join us."

So, it happened that way.

They all came to Jesse's house for a worship service.

LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING

And while the sacrificial barbecue was going on, Samuel looked at the eldest of Jesse's sons, Eliab and thought, "This guy looks great. Surely he's the one God is going to pick to be the next king."

But, that's when God warned Samuel not to judge a book by its cover.

You look on the outside.
I have the advantage of looking on the inside.

Looks can be deceiving.
Keep looking.

So, Samuel had seven of Jesse's sons come before him.

They all had GQ looks.
They were big, strong guys with muscular bodies and intelligent eyes.

But, none of Jesse's seven sons met God's approval. And so Samuel asked Jesse,

"Do you have any more sons?"

And Jesse said,
"Well, there is the youngest son.
He's out watching the sheep while we make this sacrifice. Somebody has to watch the sheep."

And Samuel replied,
"Bring him here.
The party can't start until I've seen all your sons."

And so they go out into the field and bring back David. David is shorter than the other brothers, but he's good looking too.

All of Jesse's sons are good looking.
They're just that kind of family.

But, God looked at David and saw more than a good looking teen.

God saw someone who had a godly heart.
And God selected David to be Israel's next king.

So the old prophet Samuel anoints the youngest of Jesse's sons to be the next king of Israel.
And then the prophet leaves town.

GOD'S WAYS AND OUR WAYS

This is not the end of the story.

Indeed, the story continues even today.
God still calls the most unlikely people to do the most awesome jobs
... because God's ways are not our ways.

God looks at things differently.
We just see the outside.
God sees the heart.

For this reason it's important that we have a bit of humility in our judgments.

Our perception is clouded by the things that are around us.
Our decisions are often made out of fear or political expediency or pride.

And sometimes this causes us to follow the wrong person.
Sometimes this causes us to doubt that God is with us and for us.

Sometimes we trust more in the king or the politician or the religious leader than in the Providence of Almighty God.

But, remember.
God is working God's purposes out in the lives of ordinary people.
We do not place our hope in the strong leader.
We place our hope in the grace of God.

And this means that we should look at people and situations differently.
Our worldview should be colored by the grace of God.

WE WANT A KING

Today's Old Testament lesson is part of a larger, very messy story. God's people were very slow to do God's will. They insisted on having an earthly king like all the other nations.

Instead of trusting in God, they trusted in Saul.

It was understandable.

Saul was a good looking, strong person.

He stood head and shoulders above everyone else ... literally.

He was the one that the prophet Samuel picked.

But, when God's people decided to trust in the king instead of God, it proved to be a disastrous experiment.

King Saul was an unstable and dangerous leader.

Some even said he was crazy.

And in the end the king put his own interests above the commands of God and the needs of his people.

God saved his people by having Samuel anoint a new leader.

God knew that young David had the right stuff to be king.

And yet, we know the rest of the story.

Even David, a man who truly had a heart for God, would, in the end, sin against God and his people.

By and large, the story of God's people in the Old Testament is the story of one failed king after another. It is the story of a kingdom divided.

And all of this occurs because the people looked on the outside instead of looking on the heart.

The people and their kings made judgments based upon expediency.

They based their decisions upon what they wanted at the moment instead of faith.

They forgot about justice, mercy and walking humbly with their God. (See Micah 6:8)

A HEART FOR GOD

Sometimes we make the same mistake, and we get the leader that we deserve instead of the leader we need.

When we look on the outside instead of at the heart, and we pick crazy King Saul every time.

But, in the final analysis the answer is not a new leader.

Even a great leader like King David is just a human being who will fail at some point.

The answer is a heart for God.

The answer is trying to see the world through the lens of God's grace instead of the lens of self-interest.

The answer is not another king or earthly kingdom.

The answer is the kingdom of God.

In the final analysis, only God can truly know the heart of a person.

We not only pick the wrong leaders; quite often we are not aware of our own motives and desires.

We don't even know our own heart much less the heart of our leaders.

And yet we can do a better job of understanding God's will by paying attention to God's Word.

Through God's Word and especially through the Word made flesh, we have an opportunity to see more clearly. I think John Calvin once said that the Word of God was like a set of "spectacles" through which we can see the world more clearly.

Those of you who wear glasses know that if you don't get the prescription right, your whole world is distorted.

The same is true for us.

If we try to look at the world through any lens other than the Word of God as revealed in Jesus, it's like having glasses with the wrong prescription.

Our lives will be out of focus.
We will not be able to see things as God sees them.

Christians have made a conscious decision to follow Jesus.

We have decided not to view the world through a different lens.

And when put on the spectacles of faith, we will have a different perspective.

We will see more than just what we want.

We will see the coming of a new king and a new kingdom.
And it will be a reign of justice, mercy and compassion.

God give us eyes to see.
God give us a different perspective.

Amen.