

Oh, David: As Mortals See
1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13
Luke 12:22-34

"for the Lord does not see as mortals see;
they look on the outward appearances
but the Lord looks on the heart."
1 Samuel 16:7b

Our Lenten Sermons this year will focus on King David, whose story is recorded in the Old Testament, mostly in the books of 1st & 2nd Samuel. The culmination of this series will come on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, when the children and youth of LOGOS present the musical performance "Young David" – written by our very own Ned Wetherald and first presented here at SCPC back in 2002. Eight years brings a whole new LOGOS generation, so we decided it was time to bring David back again.

Our lesson this morning is unusual in scripture, because it begins with God admitting that God made a mistake: "Samuel grieved over Saul, and the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel (1 Samuel 15:35)."

So before we can get to David, we need to spend some time with Saul. You may do that at your leisure, by reading all of Chapter 15 in First Samuel. But let me save you some time and tell you what I discovered about Saul by reading that chapter.

I expected, since God was sorry he had made Saul king, I expected I would find Saul to be a tyrant, blasphemer, apostate.

Imagine my surprise when I found Saul to be a perfectly reasonable, understandable, common-sense sort of guy. I found Saul a person who, faced with the situation he was in, made the kind of decisions you might have made or I might have made.

The situation was this: God, through Samuel, told Saul to do a certain thing.

Saul went off fully intending to do this thing which God had told him to do (it involved conquering an invading army and killing all the enemy. These particulars, however, complicate our hearing of the story with twentieth century ears; so it is better simply to focus on the issue as something that God told Saul to do).

Saul would have done exactly what God told him, except that the complex nature of the situation, pressure from his own people, and his own sense of his stature as merciful king all combined to convince Saul to do something a little bit different

from what God had told him to do (not completely different -- just a little bit different).

God was furious with Saul for not doing exactly what God had told him to do.

Samuel was furious with Saul.

Saul was rejected by God and Samuel, and the scene was set for the appearance of David (which is what this sermon is supposed to be about in the first place).

But David, in this chapter sixteen of First Samuel, is a non-entity.

David is a nobody who doesn't even speak on his own behalf, who's not well enough thought of to be called in from the fields for Samuel's visit, who shows no particular competence or promise for the future that anyone can see (including his own father Jesse).

David is such a non-entity that we are forced (based on a reading of this chapter alone) to ask what David can possibly offer in competition with Saul, great Saul, the warrior king?

And Samuel -- who, in these days, can understand someone as sure of himself, and as sure of God's will, as Samuel was?

Samuel is a gigantic figure striding through this story as he strides through Israel from the north to the south, making kings and breaking kings and speaking the word of the Lord, which Samuel hears directly from God.

It is hard for my twenty-first century mind to grasp what it could be like to be Samuel, with that kind of certainty, that sureness about what God wills.

But Saul -- Saul, it seems to me, is a thoroughly modern character. Saul is flexible, merciful, at times confused, willing to look at both sides of a situation, willing to compromise.

Saul, in fact, was rejected by God for acting exactly like you, or I, or the leaders of our nation might well have acted in his place.

Saul was neither a bad person nor a bad king (as kings go). He was neither a tyrant nor a demagogue.

He had all the trappings of a king: power, wealth, status, stature, dignity.

He had all the perceptions of a thoroughly modern leader: he was realistic, flexible, he had common sense, was ready to compromise.

So what did Saul lack?

The Bible doesn't say. . . but perhaps if we ask what the Bible says that David had which led God to choose David, when God said: "I have provided for myself a king (1 Samuel 16:1)."

If we discover what David had, then perhaps by contradistinction we will know what Saul lacked.

And also, perhaps, we will understand a bit more about what God wants from us as well.

So . . . what did David have?

It is certain that David did not have status, age, wisdom or stature.

When Samuel invited Jesse to bring his sons along to the sacrifice, Jesse didn't even think it worthwhile to get little David from the field where he was tending sheep.

After all, with seven fine, good-looking sons like Eliab, Abinadab and Shammah, why should anyone pay much attention to the baby of the family. David was the one his older brothers probably called "runt," "pest" -- and told to get lost when they had really important things to do, like work in the fields, or go to war, or stand proud and tall before Samuel the prophet, the king-maker.

And they looked good to Samuel too.

Samuel liked what he saw when he looked at Jesse's boys -- liked what he saw well enough that he was all ready to pick the eldest, Eliab (handsome, strong and tall), and proclaim him king.

But God broke in and stopped Samuel saying, it's not Eliab and it's not Abinadab or Shammah, nor any of the other four, good as they look, "for the Lord does not see as mortals see (1 Samuel 16:7)."

And there we get our first hint about Saul: we have been looking at Saul as we see him. We have been looking at Saul in the same way we want to be seen ourselves.

But God saw something about Saul (and David) that we don't see.

"The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (16:7)

God saw something in David's heart that was missing in Saul.

Perhaps Saul's fatal flaw was that he did not have it in his heart to listen to God and obey God above all else.

Saul forgot to listen and obey (a peculiarly modern failure, for listening and obedience are certainly not strong characteristics of twenty-first century people, we who are more prone to talk than to listen, and to question than to obey).

Yet this is exactly what being king under God meant: to listen and obey, in spite of all other pressing considerations of the moment.

Do you get as frustrated as I do by politicians who are always turning in the wind? Who say one thing when they are speaking to this group, and something quite different when speaking to that one.

They change their positions constantly in response to: polls or special interest groups or their handlers.

One of the most refreshing moments I have ever seen in a campaign came when a candidate became so angry at a heckler that he left the script and told him off -- that, at least, was from the heart -- but the media castigated him for it.

Saul had God and Samuel telling him to do one thing.

Saul had his soldiers and his people telling him to do something else.

Saul needed a heart reminding him to listen to God.

And that, apparently, is what Saul did not have, or, if he once had it, he had lost it. So, though I admire much about Saul, though I sympathize with Saul, though I at times feel like Saul. . . it is time to move on, as God moved on, to David.

After God turned down all Jesse's fine, big, strong sons, Samuel was confused. He scratched his head and said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" (1 Samuel 16:11)

Jesse stuttered out, "Well, now that you mention it, no, there is the youngest, out keeping the sheep; we could send for him, if it matters all that much to you."

Suddenly it was like Christmas all over again, with everyone waiting in Bethlehem for the coming of God's chosen one. And his arrival -- when he came running down from the hills, tunic aflutter and hair uncombed -- his arrival was as unimpressive as the birth of a baby, to two poor travelers, in a Bethlehem stable, just a thousand years later.

When Samuel took the horn of holy oil and poured it over David's head in the presence of his brothers and Jesse, their father, there was no immediate discernable change in David or in their world.

David was still a young shepherd boy and Saul still sat on his throne. There was no immediate, discernable change, but the world had changed.

The world just didn't know it yet.

This change came about not because David was strong, wealthy or competent, but because of what God had seen in David's heart.

So what did God see in David's heart? Perhaps the possibility that David's heart will be so attuned to God that he will both listen and obey?

I can't really see what else it could be. David was certainly not chosen because he was competent to be king.

In fact, the scripture clearly implies that David was not competent for anything more than tending the sheep -- a child's job.

His brothers were competent.

Saul was competent.

David had a good heart.

What did God see in David's heart?

A heart which can listen, and having listened, a heart which will obey?

Do you understand why I say that we, in the modern world, are far more like Saul than like David?

We have a constant dilemma with listening: we are bombarded with a multiplicity of voices pulling us from one side to another of any given issue.

We yearn to understand clearly what God wants -- and there is no Samuel to tell us.

Since we don't know how to listen for the word of God in our time, the whole concept of obedience has become foreign to us.

This story of David does not solve our dilemma (they, after all, did have Samuel to tell them what God wanted), but it does point us in the direction of a solution when it points us inward, to the heart.

David had nothing to recommend him.

There was no reason for him to be chosen by God, except for his heart.

"For the Lord does not see as mortals see,
the Lord looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7)."

What we call the human heart is a fairly dependable instrument of God's will -- leading us in God's way.

It is dependable when we listen to our heart.

It strikes me that most of the times I have been in trouble -- times when I have done something I later regretted -- were times when I did not listen to my heart.

They were times when I second-guessed what I knew deep inside was right, or when I yielded to pressure from others to do something which my heart told me was not the wisest thing to do.

Every time, hindsight tells me, I should have trusted my heart.

I believe God has put a good heart in most of us, to help us listen for the word and will of God.

Certainly not in all of us.

There are enough blatant exceptions -- those who seem rotten to the core -- to make us mistrustful of one another.

Still, in most of us God has put a good heart to begin with; maybe even into Saul, to begin with.

Yet fear and anxiety, harsh experience and self-interest, can keep us from trusting our heart and even, in some cases, erode that heart away.

Is that what happened to Saul?

I don't know.

I just know that Saul experienced heart failure when Saul forgot to listen and obey.

Would you listen to the voice of God?

Listen to what your heart is trying to tell you.

Listen to the voice of God speaking to you through the heart which God has given you.

Jesus once said:

"For where your treasure is,
there will your heart be also (Luke 12:34)."

Which I think is another way of saying: when God is in your heart and your heart is with God, and you treasure God above all things, then trust your heart.

Given half a chance, your heart will lead you where God would have you go.

Amen