

Appearances Can Be Deceiving By Reverend Litton Logan

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Scriptures:

1 Samuel 15: 34-35

34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.³⁵ Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

1 Samuel 16:1-13

16 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.

Introduction and Comments:

There was an elderly couple, who were getting more forgetful as time went by. So they decided it would be a good idea to start making notes to themselves to help them remember. The couple was sitting and reading one evening, when the husband said he was going to the kitchen and asked his wife if he could get her anything.

She said, "A bowl of ice cream would be nice, better write it down so you won't forget." "No," the husband said, "I'll remember it - a bowl of ice cream." As he walked away she added, "Put whipped cream and a cherry on it please." "Okay," he said. In parting, the wife again told

him to write it all down so he wouldn't forget. "No, I've got it, ice cream with whipped cream and a cherry."

The husband is gone for what seems like a long time and when he returns he hands his wife a plate of eggs and bacon. His wife stares at the plate for a moment, then looks up at him and asks, "Where's the toast?"

So, this morning, given our text, what you think you're going to get ain't what's coming.

Sermon:

When you and I read text like today's, it is hard for us to wrap our minds around the ideas of ancient Israelite tribes, tribal chieftains, kings, prophet-judges, etc. Given our modern, post-enlightenment perspectives on the separation of church and state and our highly-developed sense of individualism, we tend to read scriptures with an eye on personalized insights not a message for our "people" as a nation.

The earliest audiences would have understood that the primary actor in our text today would have been God and God redefining God's relationship to God's people as they transitioned from a loose, covenant federation with charismatic, priest-judges as leaders to a nation with a king and priests, counter balanced with the prophets.

The first audiences of our texts along with their authors, writing long after the events they record and drawing on much earlier traditions, would have been Judah's or Jerusalem's elites in the Babylonian Exile. The writers' major points seem to be the legitimization of the Davidic dynasty, the abuses of kings, which by the time of the writing had, had disastrous effects on the northern tribes of Israel and Judah. We also see the authors' understandings of God's leading and rectifying hand at work in the life of God's people. Rank-and-file tribal members at the time of our story and later the non-elites and peasants serve as nebulous backdrops for the stories and were referred to simply as "the people."

Due to the hostile and ambitious Philistines' constant harassment and incursions into Israel's territory and the aged Samuel's inability to suppress the Philistines in conjunction with the malfeasance of his sons, whom he had appointed judges over certain cities, the people asked Samuel repeatedly to appoint them a king like other nations. Initially, the people's desire for a king was little more than a request for a strong and capable military leader to help them defeat the Philistines as well as other enemies, such as the Ammonites and the Amalekites.

Samuel, however, knowing the ways of Ancient Near Eastern potentates, warned the people that such leaders took on a life well beyond their original purposes, which Saul did. As Lord Acton said in 1887, power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

We have two accounts of Saul's selection and appointment as a military leader-king in 1 Samuel, reflecting two different perspectives on the Israelite monarchy. Nonetheless, due to a series of events, which showed the charisma or spirit of God was upon Saul, Samuel becomes convinced that Saul is the man. Saul is this tall, good looking, charismatic guy from a prominent family, whom we would call a born quarterback. (This whole physical stereotyping thing plays an important part in our scriptures today.) Saul, although initially reluctant and modest, would eventually find his head like most of Israel's kings and run afoul of God and Samuel, leading him and his lineage from the tribe of Benjamin to being rejected as leaders in Israel.

Saul was rejected primarily for his failure to follow God's instructions to annihilate the Amalekites and all that they owned; he also allowed his men to eat meat with the blood still in it, and he presumed upon the office of Samuel by officiating at a sacrifice instead of waiting on Samuel to arrive. Saul and his family tribe of Benjamin were rejected, their fate decreed.

In our text, we hear God tell Samuel enough with his grieving over Saul's rejection. Samuel needs to get up, go, and anoint a successor to Saul. As instructed, Samuel heads out to Bethlehem in the land of the tribe of Judah, but he is afraid that Saul is going to get wind of his trip and its purposes. It is important that we understand the bible writers are not saying that God is duplicitous but rather, expanding and clarifying the reasons for Samuel going to Bethlehem with a heifer, which just happened to be the proper sacrifice when anointing a king. The first audiences would have understood all this, but we, and I think maybe they, tended to see all this as a bit dodgy on God's part.

When Samuel gets to Bethlehem he is met by the Elders of the city, who are suspicious. These Elders had probably heard about Samuel's and Saul's falling out. So, Samuel showing up in their town could mean trouble for them and their village at the hands of Saul. However, Samuel belays their concerns and tells them to prepare for a sacrifice and feast, and oh, by-the-way, be sure to invite good, ole Jesse and all his sons.

The next scene is Samuel checking out the sons of Jesse to identify the new king. The oldest son, Eliab, is another tall, good looking, and imposing man. God tells Samuel, "No, it is not him. He may look kingly, but I am looking for something totally different in a king this time." Samuel checks out seven of Jesse's sons and each is rejected. Finally, Samuel asks Jesse, "Is this all your sons?" Jesse tells him, "No, there is the youngest son, who is out tending the sheep." Samuel tells Jesse to send for him because they are not going to kill the heifer and eat until he arrives and Samuel gets to check him out. So, the youngest son is sent for and everyone waits to see what kind of kingly appearance he will present.

Enter David, a handsome, ruddy faced kid with beautiful eyes. God tells Samuel that's him, this is the one, anoint him forthwith as the "*masiah*". Samuel anoints David in the presence of his father and brothers. The anointing of the younger son defies the hereditary traditions concerning the role of the first-born son and subsequent birth-order sons. It makes the point, however, that God chooses God's leaders and prophets based upon God's criteria not heredity, physique, or social status.

We all know the various stories concerning David and his role in Saul's court as a musician. We also see David portrayed as a military deserter, an outlaw, and a Philistine mercenary. In addition, there is evidence that he is implicated in Saul's death, Abner's death, and Ishball's death, not to mention his dalliance with Bathsheba and the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

Through all of this, however, at least according to one tradition, there seems to be something working in David's life which makes him a man after God's own heart. God forgives David, restores him, and uses him despite his sins and flaws. David's weaknesses and sins are never denied, but God nonetheless sees something in him that makes him a charismatic and dynamic leader, at least when he is under divine guidance.

One of the fundamental themes in the bible is God working in the most unexpected places and through the most unlikely persons to bring about divine change and revelation. To choose the youngest son, who labors as a menial shepherd, to be Israel's future king, as I said, is to ignore the traditional paradigms of transferring power and influence in tribal families of the ancient world. Unlike Saul's father, Kish, David's father, Jesse, is not described as "a man of wealth", meaning a man of great honor and power, although Jesse is obviously a person of means. I say this because Jesse has eight sons, a sign that he was blessed by God and a prosperous man.

Also, the family tree of David is not all that distinguished. Jesse's grandmother was Ruth, an immigrant Moabite woman (Ruth 4:17). His grandfather was Boaz, whose ancestors included Tamar, who was almost executed for adultery. Not to mention a Canaanite woman named Rahab, according to some a prostitute from Jericho. In the world of honorific, power pedigrees, David's is

blotchy. However, in God's plans sometimes "the last shall be first" (Matt 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30), including an absent eighth son tending the sheep.

The unlikely course of God's grace through the line of David leads to Jesus, himself a man of low-birth and of questionable paternity, who was born in a stable, grew up in the out-backs of Galilee, and finally, crucified as a criminal. But Jesus, for 3/5^{ths} of the world's population, is truly the anointed One, the "*masîah*", through whom God meets some of the most unlikely people, like you and me in moments of empowering grace.

God's word to Samuel (16:7) about outward appearances versus the dispositions of the heart is very timely for "the people" of our time. When so many of us are, or have been fooled by appearances and political rhetoric, it is somewhat comforting and encouraging to know that God looks at the heart and sees past our preoccupations with the superficial, which characterizes so much of the decision-making in this nation and the world today.

If we as Christians and as the Church are to discern and mediate God's blessing in and for the world, which is our mandate, then we must struggle to see as God sees. We must look beyond appearances, political parties and candidates, denominational affiliations, or even national loyalties at times, to grapple with local, regional, and global issues and concerns about the environment, other creatures, and human suffering and oppression, whether caused by this nation's or other nations' foreign and domestic policies. Nothing less will be acceptable in the life of God's people. Furthermore, if we succumb to the temptation to opt for appearances and superficialities, then God's rebuke of Saul and the rejection of his house, his tribe, will be ours.

Today as economically, socially, and politically empowered, bible-reading people of God, we must be discerning as we pick and endorse our leaders, even if we only have a choice between the lesser of two incompetents or the stronger of the weakest. Who knows how God can and may use whomever; look at such egotistical scoundrels as Saul and David, who were like many leaders today. In all of it, never doubt God is at work confirming, leading, and rejecting leaders. If only our leaders understood this - well, some do now.

The irony of this text is that when David appears, he, too, is ruddy and handsome, but as scripture will tell us, appearances are deceiving and power corrupts. In fact, I think King David makes a good case for term limits for our politicians, don't you? As Christians, we must attend faithfully to our personal spiritual lives and allow our moral, ethical, and spiritual sensibilities to inform all our decisions, but especially our inputs to the process of selecting those who lead us. Who knows whom God will choose or call out from among the people to do whatever God needs - maybe you, maybe me. Have you ever thought about that, being called out from among the people by God?

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