

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fourth Sunday in Lent • March 22, 2020

1 Samuel 16:1-13 • Psalm 23 • Ephesians 5:8-14 • John 9:1-41

We're going to take that story we just heard from 1 Samuel, and we're going to think about it in three different ways. First, we're going to think about this story theologically. So we're going to ask what this story tells us about God? Second, we're going to think about this story in terms of practical theology. Practical theology is concerned mostly with how we structure society. Questions like ethics and social responsibility and morality are all part of practical theology. And then we're going to think about this story in terms of pastoral theology. And pastoral theology is concerned mostly with how we live out our faith in our everyday lives. So in some ways it's about vocation.

So here's the basic story. It's the story of David's anointing as king. But to really understand why it's such an interesting story, it helps to have a little bit of context. The Israelites wanted a king. All the other nations had kings and they all seemed to be doing well, so the people asked God if they could have one, too. And God said, *No. I'd rather not. It won't end all that well and I'm going to have to fix everything and it's going to be this whole thing.* (I'm paraphrasing.) But eventually God decides they can have a king. And God and the prophet Samuel choose a man named Saul. Saul is tall. He's handsome. He looks like the kind of person who would be a king. But he's also humble. He doesn't act like he's the kind of person who should be a king.

So Saul becomes king, and it's a disaster. It's never really clear why. But it doesn't work. So when today's story begins, Saul is still on the throne, but things aren't going well. Samuel is kind of moping and wallowing around because he's so disappointed by the choice he and God made. And then God interrupts and says that they have to go find a new king. And since Saul is still on the throne, they come up with this elaborate back story so if Saul finds out, Samuel can just say he was going to Bethlehem to sacrifice a cow like everybody else. So God tells Samuel that one of Jesse's sons will be the next king. So his seven sons parade around. And it's no, no, no, no. And they get to the end and Samuel turns to Jesse and says, "Are those all the sons you have?" And Jesse says, "Well, we got one more named David. But he's just a kid and he's not really king material." And that's who God chooses to be the next king.

Let's put on that theological lens and ask what this story tells us about God. What is God doing in the story? This is probably the easiest one. In verse 3, God says, "For the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." We don't have to guess what the story tells us about God because God comes right out and tells us. God doesn't judge based on appearances.

This is all relatively straightforward. It kind of makes sense. God doesn't judge based on appearances. Neither does Jesus. But you can actually take this a step further by cutting off the end of what line. God doesn't judge based on appearances. But God does judge. This whole story is set off because God looks at the job Saul is doing as kind and says, "This really isn't working out." This story makes an especially dramatic point of that because God tries to find a new king while Saul is still sitting on the throne.

When we say that God doesn't judge based on appearances, we're not saying that God has no opinions about anything. The whole premise of the story is that God has very strong opinions about things. God has some real intention, some real purpose, some real goal. And when things stray from that goal, God takes action to change things.

Second, let's put on that practical lens. What does this story tell us about the way we order society? Think about the different visions people have in the story. Start with Jesse. Jesse has eight sons. But when Samuel shows up to try to find a king, Jesse starts cutting people off. Instead of

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saying, *This isn't my choice, so I'll present all the options and let them choose whatever they want*, Jesse starts cutting people off. He starts making value judgements to exclude people based on what he thinks the outcome should be. Jesse thinks he's presenting Samuel with all the available options, but he's really not. He's really giving him the options he thinks are feasible.

We often do the same thing. We say that we're acting in everyone's interest or we're pursuing everyone's goals, but we've really stacked the deck. When we say everyone, we're rarely talking about everyone. This past week, I've even realized that as we've been putting this tech stuff together. We do this so everyone can still feel like they're part of the community. But that "everyone" is self-selected. You have to have some device with internet and some skills to access this video. I say it's for everyone, but it's really for like sixty percent of everyone. Sometimes we act an awful lot like Jesse. We say we're doing something that includes everyone, but we're really keeping certain people out.

Third, let's put on that pastoral lens. What does this story tell us about the ways we live our everyday lives? Well, we can actually put those two things together. First, God judges by the heart and not by outward appearances. Second, we often stack the deck so that when we talk about "everyone," we're not actually talking about everyone. So when we think about our own vocations, it reminds us that God is interested in actively seeking us out. Remember that David is someone of seemingly no potential in this story. He's an afterthought. He's overlooked by his own father who thinks he's not cut out for an important position.

So maybe you feel like David. You feel like you're overlooked and left out and ostracized for not checking the right boxes. And if that's the case, the message is that God seeks you out. And this story reminds you that God sees your gifts and what you have to offer, even when other people don't. So trusting the judgment of God is more important than trusting the judgements of other people. Or maybe you feel more like Jesse. And your vocation is about learning to see things, to judge things, the way God does. It could be that it's about your ability to learn. Or maybe you feel more like Samuel. Your vocation your purpose is to question why things are set up the way they are. To ask, "Are those really all of your sons?"

The good news is that we don't have to choose. We're not just one of these characters but all of them. Sometimes we're the person who is overlooked. Sometimes we're the person trying to keep things looking a certain way at someone else's expense. And sometimes we're the person asking why things have to be the way they are. Are you David, Jesse, or Samuel? The answer is *Yes*.

Sometimes to see like God, to judge like God, we have to leave behind our old ways of thinking. Our old stories we tell about ourselves. Our old ways of evaluating other people's worth. Our old ways of seeing. "The Lord does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor