

God's Election

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1 Samuel 16:6-12 — When Jesse and his sons came to meet Samuel the prophet, Samuel looked on Eliab, Jesse's eldest son, and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD." 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." Then Jesse called Abinadab, Jesse's second eldest son, and made him pass before Samuel. Samuel said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah, his third eldest son, pass by. And Samuel said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And Jesse said, "There is still the youngest, but he is out keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send for him and bring him; for we will not sit down to eat until he comes here." Jesse sent for David and brought him in. Now David was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."

This morning's story is about an election—not a democratic process, like the elections in this country, but a divine appointment, by way of the prophet Samuel. An election like this had happened just eight chapters earlier, actually. Samuel appointed a man named Saul as king of the Israelites—but that wasn't *exactly* what God wanted.

You see, before Saul, the ancient Israelites did not have a king; instead, they had what they called "judges," men and women who managed various governmental responsibilities and who spoke with authority on both social and theological matters. But by the time we get to 1 Samuel 8, the Israelites are demanding a king, because they want to be like the nations around them. God speaks to the people through the prophet Samuel and warns them that kings care more about power than peace. Kings are obsessed with military might and with the accumulation of wealth. Kings take from the poor and give to the rich, just so that the rich can enhance the king's own prestige. "Is that what you want?" Samuel asks the Israelites. And—perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not so surprisingly—they say, "Yes."

So, the tall and handsome Saul becomes the first king of all twelve tribes of Israel. At first, his reign looks pretty good, but by the time we get to this morning's passage in 1 Samuel 16, it is clear that Saul is not following in the ways of the Lord—and so, we get another divine appointment. God leads the prophet Samuel to the household of Jesse, where God will elect one of Jesse's sons to be the second king of the Israelites. Mind you, this is being done in secret, because Saul is still king—and he has no plans of handing over his throne any time soon. Nevertheless, we read in the previous chapter that God has rejected Saul's leadership, and though it will take some time, his reign will eventually unravel, and he will eventually be replaced by whomever God elects at Jesse's house in this morning's passage.

The scene plays out kind of like your stereotypical beauty pageant, with successive candidates passing before the judge, Samuel, who gives a verdict for each of them right then and there. The first candidate is the one who looks most like Saul: Eliab is tall, handsome, and Jesse's oldest son—which makes him seem like the most appropriate leader among his siblings. With Eliab standing before him, Samuel thinks, "Surely, this is the one who the LORD is anointing." But then the Lord throws Samuel a curve ball: "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."

Many of us, I imagine, think we don't need to hear this counsel from God, because we think we don't judge people by their outward appearance. We don't discriminate, we don't have prejudices, we don't play favorites based on shallow physical characteristics. Sadly, the evidence is stacked against us. For decades, studies have shown that all sorts of people operate with *unconscious* biases based on gender, race, profession, physical traits, and more. As just one of countless possible examples, look at the trait that gets named in this morning's story: height, or stature. Our country has had 26 presidential elections in the past century, and in 18 of those 26 elections, the height difference between the two main candidates has been one inch or more. Of those 18 elections, the taller candidate has won 13—72%. We may think we're above all such biases, but I don't think any of us are. I think we, like Samuel, can find ourselves thinking, "Surely, this is the one"—as we uncritically comply with society's shallow standards and assumptions.

But after hearing the LORD's counsel, Samuel starts to get the hang of it. The second oldest son passes by, and Samuel immediately intuits that this isn't the one either. Then the third son: nope. Then the fourth: uh-uh. You can imagine the painful awkwardness: all the sons are lined up, and each one nervously walks in front of the prophet, gets looked over, and then—without any real explanation—gets dismissed. The seventh son passes by, everyone in the line-up has gone through, and it looks like the game is over, but then Samuel calls a timeout: "Are all your sons here?" he asks. "No," Jesse answers, "There's the youngest—but he's just a boy. He's out doing his chores, watching the sheep." "Well, have someone go and get him," Samuel replies. "The rest of us will wait here." A boy named David approaches Samuel—and the rest is history. Samuel proclaims God's blessing, God's anointing, on this boy, who will eventually become the most famous king of the Hebrew people.

The moral of this story may appear to be "Don't look at outward appearances; look at the heart." But I think there's more to this story than that. Notice the precise wording of God's counsel to Samuel: "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." It is the LORD, not us, who sees a person's heart—I mean, you and I can *try* to, and we hope to rightly discern at least a few things about a person's heart, but of course, we can also be mistaken or deceived. At the end of the day, we are mortals, and we cannot see as God sees. But what we can see is who is missing. Like Samuel, we can ask, "Are all your children here?" Because God isn't just looking at the heart; God is also looking at who

has been left out of the line-up. God is looking at who has been kept on the margins and deemed unworthy of consideration by a shallow society. There is a special place in God's heart for people like young David, who was written off by everyone, even by his own father—but not by God.

Friends, God has elected all of us for different purposes at different points in our lives. And as you pursue those purposes today, tomorrow, this week, and this season, go out in the knowledge that God is seeing those who the world refuses to see, and choosing those who the world refuses to choose, and loving those who the world refuses to love. And we, as God's chosen ones, are called to see, to choose, to love, as God does, by the power of the Spirit within us. Amen.