

## HEART OF THE MATTER

*When they came, he looked on Eliab 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, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he 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 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." 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." 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. (I Samuel 16:6-13, NRSV)*

Conventional wisdom has its place. And let's face it, it's usually right. Usually, but not always. Today's scripture lesson reminds us that conventional wisdom can be wrong, that what seems to be foolish may actually be wise, that God's ways are not necessarily our ways, that we need to look at things from God's perspective to move ourselves beyond the conventional and into the plane of true wisdom. Ask anybody who works in personnel if the following was a smart move: God chooses David, a shepherd boy, to be king. Sure, those of us sitting here today know the end of the story. We know that David turns out to be Israel's greatest king. From our vantage point, David was the natural candidate, a shoe-in for the job. But at the time, this choice must have seemed puzzling, risky, foolish, unconventional. It even caught the prophet Samuel off guard.

The background of today's story involves Israel's first king, Saul, the one conventional wisdom assumed would be the nation's greatest king. He was the George Washington of his day, a leader whose rise to power resulted from an impressive string of military victories. He was unusually tall. He came from a wealthy and powerful family. Both the political pundits and the public loved him. You could say that Saul had it all. If he had run a campaign, "Saul has it all" would have made a great slogan. But as it turned out, he skipped that whole process and simply landed the job.

Saul's anointing as king sounds like the stuff of *The National Enquirer*. It seems that one day Saul was out in the countryside searching for some missing donkeys that belonged to his father. Having no luck, he entered a village to ask for help from the local seer. The local seer turned out to be none other than the prophet Samuel who on the spot

anointed Saul as the king designate of Israel (*Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, p. 976). Following the private selection process, Saul was chosen by public lottery and proclaimed king—not exactly democracy in action.

In contrast to Saul, David was a nobody. If Saul was like George Washington, then David was like Abraham Lincoln, born in a log cabin in the woods of rural Kentucky. David was a humble shepherd who spent much of his time out in the country. David's family had seen its share of scandal. One of his ancestors, Tamar, was almost executed for adultery, and another, Rahab, was a prostitute. (*The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II*, pp. 1099-1100). Unlike Saul, David had no impressive military victories under his belt, unless you count the bears and lions he fought off to protect his sheep. He didn't stand head and shoulders above everyone else because he was only a boy. And he wasn't even the eldest. David was the youngest son out of eight sons. Conventional wisdom and the odds in Vegas alike would have chosen Saul as the most likely to succeed as a king, but God saw something else. God saw their hearts. And between the two, it was David who was described as one after God's own heart.

While God and the people held high hopes for King Saul, he did not stay in God's good graces for long. Instead of obeying God, he followed his own timetable and his own agenda. When he was told to wait for Samuel to offer a sacrifice before an important battle, he instead impatiently made the religious sacrifice himself. On other occasions Saul disobeyed God's orders in specific battles with hostile nations. In time Saul showed himself to be paranoid, insecure, and cruel. Eventually God was fed up and told Samuel it was time to find a new king.

I find it very interesting that the Bible mentions that God regretted choosing Saul to be king (15:35). We need to remember that God had not wanted Israel to have a king in the first place. Up until Saul was chosen as Israel's first king, the nation had been a theocracy with God calling the shots through prophets and judges. But the people were perpetually dissatisfied and begged God for a king. Eventually God gave in and Israel changed from a theocracy to a monarchy, albeit a shaky one under Saul.

Even though Saul made mistakes, the prophet Samuel was very fond of him and found the whole prospect of finding a new king rather depressing and frightening. After a while God says to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way for I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king." Understandably Samuel objects, "How can I go? Saul will hear about it and kill me." So God concocts a plan and tells Samuel, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Then invite Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice and I will tell you who to anoint" (I Samuel 16:1-3). Did you hear what could be God encouraging the little white lie in there? You've got to pay attention to these stories, because you never know when they're going to slip in something really intriguing. Yes, according to these verses, God provides Saul with a believable story so that the poor guy can protect himself. The scriptures are not as predictable as we might think.

Samuel does as he is told and goes to Bethlehem, finds Jesse and his family, and takes them aside for what they think will be a time of religious sacrifice. Once they are alone, Samuel looks over Jesse's sons and picks the logical choice, the eldest son, Eliab. However, God lets Samuel know that this is not the one and informs him, "Do not look at his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things that people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (16:7).

So down the line Samuel goes, gazing on each of the sons thinking each time that he has found the next king. And each time God rejects the choice until there are no more options left. After considering seven sons Samuel scratches his head and asks, "Is this it? You don't by chance have any more do you?" Jesse affirms that there is still one left, but he is the youngest and is out tending the sheep. It's worth noting that even those closest to David, including his father, had no clue what God was about to do. David is brought in and immediately God lets Samuel know that the search is over. So Samuel takes the horn of oil and pours it over David's head, thus anointing him or setting him aside for God's special purpose, in this case, to be king. Following that the Spirit of God comes upon David in a special way. While he is next in line for the throne, it would be several years before his time came to rule. In the mean time, the whole event is kept a secret and David continues his life as a shepherd boy who would one day slay the giant Goliath and become the superstar king, expanding Israel's borders beyond people's wildest dreams.

What was it that God saw in David that was lacking in Saul? Saul was insecure in his own abilities while David was secure in God's ability to help him slay any giant that crossed his path. Saul had no joy in life while David stripped down to his skivvies and joyfully danced when the Arc of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem. Saul did not trust anybody while David made friends and followers everywhere he went. Saul did not trust God while David's trust in God led him to write the words, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

What was it that God saw in David that was lacking in Saul? The heart of the matter was David's ability to trust in God through thick and thin. It's not that Saul hadn't started out with good intentions, it's just that in all the confusion and pressure of being king he lost touch with the one who had put him there in the first place. David too started out with good intentions, and he managed to stay in God's good graces much longer than Saul. It would be great if David's story had ended with him as an aged but virtuous King Arthur, faithful to the end. But David had plenty of Lancelot in him as well and so he ends up falling for another woman, Bathsheba, who unfortunately was married. David's life was a downward spiral after that.

If two kings personally selected by God end up making messes of their lives, who can we trust? Conventional wisdom bet on Saul and was wrong. God bet on another who eventually let God down. What are we to make of these leaders? First and foremost, we all have feet of clay. None of us follow God as closely as we should, always think of others as we should, or look after ourselves as we should. We just don't.

It's part of being human. We're not perfect, and we all end up hurting people intentionally or unintentionally from time to time.

People see our outer appearance, the masks we wear to cover our pain, our anger, our fears and anxieties. We show our good sides to the world and hide our brokenness for fear of seeming less than perfect. But here at church we are a family of faith and as a family we are here to support one another through the tough times. We are here with listening ears and open arms to face life's ups and downs together. We are a gift to one another from God, a gift to be graciously received.

Let us also remember that while we are trying to show strength and confidence to the rest of the world, that God knows what is in our hearts. God wants to offer us the power and wisdom we need to overcome whatever obstacles block our paths to abundant life. And when we make mistakes, God offers us forgiveness and encouragement.

Finally, let us remember as we look at other people that only God knows what is really going on in another's life, only God sees straight through to the heart. We may see someone aloof while God sees an introvert. We may see someone gruff while God sees a person who's been hurt. We may see someone with a dazzling personality while God sees a person trying to hide the past. Whoever we see when we look at another person, whoever we see when we look in our own mirrors, God sees a person created in God's own image for a life full of purpose and love, meaning and hope. Whether conventional wisdom ever deems us worthy is beside the point. The God of the universe deems us worthy, gifted, and lovable. Everyone else's opinions are secondary at best. AMEN.

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March 10, 2002  
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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, who knew us at birth, has accompanied us everyday of our lives, and will welcome us home at the end of life's journey, we praise you for grace and mercy. You know us inside and out. You know our successes and our shortcomings. And through it all you remain faithful, through it all you remain constant in your steadfast love. Increase that love in us that we might grow in compassion and faithfulness.

We know that there is pain in body, spirit, and soul here in your church as well as in the world at large. Use us to alleviate suffering and soothe the pain.

Today we especially remember those who are still suffering six months after September 11<sup>th</sup>. For families who lost loved ones, friends who lost friends, and all those who are suffering as a result of that tragic day we ask your help. But not these only, for all who suffer as a result of violence in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in New York, in Nassau County, and in faraway places we will never know, we ask your assistance and help.

And now, O Lord, to you be all blessing and honor and glory. AMEN.