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Proper 6B
Peace, Seattle
June 17, 2012
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

TURNING THE PAGE

Last week we heard the first in what will be a summer long series of readings from the Old Testament which follow the story of Israel's Kingship first under Saul, then David, and then Solomon. But before we move forward with today's reading, a bit of backstory is required.

Up to this point in their history, the twelve tribes of Israel were a nation in name only.
They had no central government and no unified mechanism for decision-making. Since entering Palestine, they had worked together only during emergencies, when inspired "judges" (perhaps best described as "military heroes") stepped forward to lead them into battle.

The last of those judges was the priest Samuel (the same guy who, as a young boy, heard God calling his name in the night.) But Samuel was getting on in years, and while he'd served the people well, his corrupt, self-serving sons were clearly not the ones to succeed him. With the Philistines posing an ongoing threat, what were they going to do?

Looking around at their neighbors, Israel's tribal leaders noticed that virtually ever other country had a king. A king offered two advantages: first, he provided central government; second, since his sons would normally succeed him, the nation didn't have a crisis of leadership every time its leader got old.[1]

In last week's lesson we witnessed Israel's elders lobbying Samuel for the right to have a king, so Israel could unite and be "JUST LIKE OTHER NATIONS."

Samuel, you might recall, received their demand like a slap in the face, but God told Samuel,
IT'S NOT YOU BUT RATHER ME THAT THIS STUBBORN PEOPLE WOULD LIKE TO BE RID OF.

SO GO AHEAD, the Lord tells Samuel, GIVE THEM WHAT THEY WANT. BUT WARN THEM FIRST ABOUT WHAT THEY'RE GETTING THEMSELVES INTO. And so Samuel does.

But in spite of being warned about what life under a KING would look like, (**HINT:** not the life of prosperity and security they were hoping for!) the people remained insistent, and so a human king is what they got.

Saul was that first king; a strong warrior who stood head and shoulders above everyone else.
He was chosen by God, anointed by Samuel and presented to the people as their king.

But Saul runs into trouble in his role as king. And his errors in judgment finally cost him God's backing and Samuel's support.

As today's reading begins, we learn that Saul's days are numbered.
God commands Samuel to go to the family of Jesse, in the region of Bethlehem, with horn and oil at the ready, to anoint one of Jesse's sons to become Saul's successor.

[1] *Augsburg Student Study Bible.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) p. 300.

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There are a few details in this story that I would like for us to focus on this morning.

(1) The first is how Samuel's grief over Saul turns to fear when God calls him to anoint another as king.

HOW CAN I GO? He tells the Lord, IF SAUL FINDS OUT, HE'LL KILL ME!

You see, as close as Samuel and Saul had become during their year's together, with Samuel serving as a mentor for Saul, affirming work well done, correcting work done wrong, Samuel knows that paranoid and jealous Saul will not hesitate to kill perceived enemies—even if they are old friends.[2]

If Saul hears of Samuel's errand, his goose is cooked!

So the Lord, it appears, colludes with Samuel to hatch a plan that will allow him to escape Saul's notice by disguising his journey and keeping his true purpose hidden.[3]

Now, what are we supposed to do with this?
First, I venture, we place this detail within the context of the whole story of Israel, which is to say, we remember that God's methods for moving the story forward don't always follow human logic.

- God chooses 90-year-old Abraham and menopausal Sarah to be the progenitors of a new and everlasting covenant.
- God chooses the serial schemer Jacob—rather than his brother Esau—to become the father of nations.
- God sees Joseph exiled to Egypt so that, by means as unpredictable as they are successful, he is positioned to save the lives of thousands—including his family—and to open the future for the generations to come.
- God saves baby Moses by seeing that he's raised within the very household from which his death sentence originates, then brings him back to face Pharaoh, not leaning on the might of armies, of which he has none, but only on a wooden staff and the unassailable promise of God.

You get the point. God's logic doesn't follow human expectations.
Our plans and, equally important, our perceived weaknesses, are no match for the God who will do whatever needs to be done in order to push the story of redemption forward, in order to see his promises enfleshed.

And today's story is another case in point (and here's the second detail!)

- **After the feast with the elders of Bethlehem;**
- **after** seven of Jesse's sons line up to pass before Samuel;
- **after** God runs Samuel through a remedial course in human sight vs. divine insight;
- **and after** the suspense rises to epic levels with each successive rejection;
- **after all of this,** as Samuel stands there with the sacred horn still full of oil, and the whole errand is beginning to look like a fiasco…**He asks Jesse: IS THIS ALL THE SONS YOU'VE GOT?**

…And you hear a pin drop and see the eyes darting and the gears turning as the implication of that question works its way through the minds of everyone present until, after some interminable interval, Jesse finally answers: **WELL…NOT QUITE. THERE'S THE RUNT; THE YOUNGEST ONE; BUT HE'S OUT IN THE HILLS WITH THE SHEEP.**

[2] Feasting, Marianne Blickenstaff.
[3] Ibid.

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BRING HIM HERE ON THE DOUBLE! Samuel commands. And so Jesse does.

And when that youngest one, the last and quite literally the least of the brothers arrives, the Lord says to Samuel: RISE AND ANOINT HIM; HE IS THE ONE.

At the end of the day, this text leads us to ask one simple, crucial QUESTION:
What qualifies David for this role he has been chosen to fulfill?
And our ANSWER? Our answer is: We have no idea.

But if we've been paying the least bit of attention to the larger story that's been unfolding, that God's been working on for many generations now, we know at least this much: that people chosen by God are never qualified—at least not in any way the world would recognize…not in any way our eyes could perceive…not according to any personnel or search committee checklist.

Not that we don't need to articulate what we're looking for as we choose pastors and leaders and staff members—we do. But whatever criteria we come up with within the community of faith, whatever litmus test we may feel should apply, we do well to remember that when God is involved in the process, it's not simply a matter of adding up pros and cons or tabulating columns.

"The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

God's reign, like this surprising scenario in 1st Samuel, is a mystery beyond our ken.
It's like the sower who scatters seed and sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed he's sown sprouts and grows, he does not know how.

It's like the mustard seed – so small, so least – and yet when sown it grows to become a great shrub, whose branches stretch out to welcome, whose shade becomes haven and home for birds and critters of all kinds; a mini-ecosystem of hospitality and community.

Sisters and brothers, God, apparently, likes to keep us in suspense!
Traveling off well-beaten paths; confounding expectations; upsetting protocols and challenging traditions in order to bring about something new; some ONE, who embodies God's Spirit with a strength and compassion and self-giving love the world has never understood, but deeply, deeply needs.

This ONE, whose name is Jesus, son of David, meets us at the Table today. Offering himself, body and blood, he anoints us so that we become, through the Spirit's power, bearers of salvation's story, cultivators of mustard seeds.

Amen.