

Before You Ever Did a Thing
Sermon 196 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 17, 2023
1 Samuel 16:1-13

The book of 1 Samuel tells the story of the first kings of Israel. Which can be confusing, right? Because there is another book called 1 Kings which actually is about the decline of the monarchy and the rise of the prophets - like Elijah.

In 1 Samuel, there is also a prophet - (appropriately named) Samuel - who understands God's will and moves the narrative along as best he can. We meet him today in chapter 16 in a dangerously liminal place. You see, Samuel, the prophet, understands that God's favor is not with the current king, Saul. In fact, God has found another candidate to lead the people, and the one God has chosen is coming out of left field, almost literally.

While a new king might seem like an exciting thing for those of us who appreciate pomp and circumstance... Perhaps those of us who watched with absolute delight at King Charles coronation, earlier this year. But we are going to have to set all of that aside today because this transition of power is not going to transpire with so much hopeful anticipation. No, this one will begin with grief, fear, and the not-so-fun kind of surprise.

How long will you grieve over Saul? The Lord says to the prophet, Samuel, For I have rejected him as King of Israel. Go and fill your horn with anointing oil, take a calf and bring it as an offering. Go! This chapter has ended and I am doing something new.

Even the residents of Bethlehem tremble with fear when they see Samuel coming. They already have a king, one who is not interested in an early end to his lifelong term and so *how is this going to play out?* They probably want to know.

You have to feel sorry for Samuel. He's just trying to do the Lord's work, passing along a message from God to the people. He did not ask for this... He is not trying to get himself killed because it turns out the king on the throne is not the king God has in mind. You know that old phrase: *Don't kill the messenger?* Well, I wonder if that was crossing Samuel's mind as he bravely went on about this divinely appointed task, wondering how his boss is going to take it when he finds out what his prophet has been up to.

What happens in Bethlehem though, reaches beyond even the wildest prophetic imagination. Notice, God didn't tell Samuel the whole plan here, God just sent him to Bethlehem with a horn, a heifer, and a promise saying: *I'll show you what you shall do.* This is how I know that Samuel the prophet is working for the same God that we are. How many times do you feel like God calls you to step out on faith, to leave the past behind you, while you're still waiting on the game plan, the directions, the bigger picture...?

Well Samuel does as he is instructed and when Jesse shows up with his sons, Samuel looks at Eliab (the oldest) and he thinks, *surely this is the one*. He is tall and strong, has all the makings of a king. But God says, “Nope... Do not look on his appearance... for I have rejected him. I do not see as mortals see. They look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (7).

Now, it is important to remember that when we read this story, we bring our own excitement and hopeful anticipation because we know how the story will end. We know that at the end of this fateful calling we will find David, who will become the great King. We already know that David isn't just the youngest son of Jesse. We already know that he may be just a shepherd boy now, but one day, he will be the greatest king of Israel.

But when Samuel set out on this journey with a heifer and a horn, he did not have the benefit of all that history, he did not know how this particular story would go. So while our story with this story may be overshadowed with hope, it is important to remember that Samuel's story, with this story, begins with grief, fear, and uncertainty.

[but back to the story]

After the oldest son is rejected, six more of Jesse's sons are paraded in front of Samuel, bringing the total number of candidates to seven - which as good students of the Bible should signal something in our astute little minds. Seven is the number of completion. Samuel has seen seven sons, surely he's misinterpreted. Maybe he should look again at the seventh one? But trusting his gut and his finely tuned faith, the prophet asks Jesse an unexpected question: *Is everyone here?* Well, Jesse says, not the youngest, but he's tending the sheep. (Implied: *What in the world would you need him for? He isn't even worth considering. No way he's the future king he isn't ready, he isn't right, he's not your guy.*)

What I love so much about this part of the story is that God seems to stretch even beyond God's own patterns and preferences here to “draw our attention to the one outside of the completed number. The one who is surely an outsider. The eighth son is the youngest, surely unimpressive, with no claim to make and no credentials to present”¹ and yet the eighth son is precisely the one with whom and within whom God is at work. Others struggled to see it because they (like us) wanted some evidence that instilled some kind of confidence. I mean, let's not forget, they already had a king. If God wanted a new one, surely God was wise enough to call someone worthy of the task at hand.

No one believed David was ready. He was so far off everyone's radar, he didn't even get invited to the sacrifice with his brothers. He wasn't even invited to participate in the offering and yet he was the one God chose. Before he ever did anything to earn it, God knew David was a king.

¹ Interpretation, 1 and 2 Samuel, p.122.

You know, we've talked about how surprised everybody else probably was as God's plan unfolded in Bethlehem. But can you imagine David's own surprise when over the horizon of the field he saw his father's messenger running toward him saying: *Come, David, leave the sheep, hurry, Samuel wants to see you!*

I wonder if David felt like some of us have felt when God calls us into service? Whether it is a call to vocational ministry, a call to serve on the diaconate or another leadership role in the church... whether it is a call to teach, listen, lead, or serve behind the scenes, sometimes when God calls us we are shocked beyond belief.

Really, God? Me?! What makes you think I could do that? Lucky for us, God sees differently than we do. Remember what God said to Samuel? *"The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*

Now, we are not in the business of anointing Kings or political rulers, but we still recognize, call, and ordain spiritual leaders from within our community of faith to lead us into our future together - and today we are doing just that - we are celebrating, recognizing, and naming those whom God has called to serve this church as deacons.

Each one brings different life experiences, each one offers unique skills and gifts that have equipped them for the work ahead. And each one has been recognized by someone else here in this congregation (kind of like Samuel) who sees the work of God in their lives, and I'd be willing to bet that EACH ONE of these new deacons was a bit surprised when the call came... like David must have been, when he was standing in the field tending his sheep, thinking: *"Really... me? Are you sure?"*

But here's the truth: Before you ever did a thing, God called you beloved. Before you ever did a thing, God began gifting you with all the tools that you would need. Before you ever did a thing, God was equipping you for the task ahead.

All you have to do now is say yes, and commit yourself to the task, to the journey, and to the service of others. And in so doing, you will become the deacons that we are ordaining and installing you to be. And friends, even though we are focusing on deacons and deacon ministry today, that does not exclude the rest of us from the gift or the responsibility of being a part of God's work in this world. Rather, it reminds us that we are all called as stewards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Agents of God's love in this world. Servants of all. And so we must ask ourselves: *What is the Gospel that I am called to share? And What kind of Christian witness will I bring to this world?*

And if we ever doubt that we are capable, equipped, or worthy of this work, let us always remember that Before we ever did a thing, God called us beloved. Before we ever did a thing, God began gifting us with all the tools that we would need. Before we ever did a thing, God was equipping us for the task ahead.

All we have to do now, is say yes, and get on about the work.