

Seeing as God Sees

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

March 26, 2017

4th Sunday in Lent (Year A)

1 Samuel 16:1-13



I am a big fan of *The Antiques Road Show*. I can't tell you the number of times one of my children would come in and see that PBS show on the screen, exclaiming, "Dad! Really. You're so old." Maybe you've seen it enough to know how it works, those of you of a certain age. The show travels around to different areas of the United States. They bring along high-end appraisers from auction houses in New York and experts in every conceivable category of collectables and antiques.

They announce their presence ahead of time and invite the community to bring their stuff, things they have in their homes that they've always wondered if it has any worth, and the experts will look at it and tell you if what you have has any value.

I'm not a big antiques person – though I do have some things I will take the next time the show is in Nashville – but the reason I watch is to try and guess the value. And I can say, along with my friend John, who is another fan of the show, that it "somehow combines my ignorance and the experts' knowledge to create a surprise for me every time. I will look at a piece and say 'Twelve bucks.' They will look at the same piece and say, 'Three thousand dollars.'" Or I will look at something gilded and shiny and say, "\$10,000," while the expert is declaring it maybe will get \$50.

That's why they are the experts. They see things I cannot.

Saul was a tall man. That was the first thing everyone noticed. He was well-built, like a soldier, impressive to look at. When he entered the room, he was the obvious choice to be Israel's first king. They had demanded a king like the other nations that surrounded them. When the prophet Samuel warned them against it and reminded them that God alone was king, they clamored even more, until Samuel and God relented. And now that Saul, freshly anointed, stood before them, Samuel and even God were swayed by his appearance. "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else" (1 Samuel 9:2b).

But something is off, and it doesn't take long for everyone to start noticing. Saul is deeply insecure, and his insecurity manifests in bursts of white hot anger, in haughtiness, and in a lack of humility that recognizes his anointing, his power, comes from someone not himself. Something's up with his heart.

For the ancient Hebrews, the heart was the seat of all the emotions, it was used interchangeably with the soul. The heart is the truest part of you, the place where the person you are comes through. It is where intention is formed. You ever hear someone say, "God knows my heart," or "She has a good heart?" The thing that usually prompts such a statement is a defense of some behavior that has called into question intentions, and so you say about yourself or someone else, "God knows my heart," in other words, "God knows what I intended." And those are the words that usually precede an apology.

David Brooks, columnist for the New York Times, calls it "character." In his book, "The Road to Character," he describes a central trait among all the people he identifies in his book as having great character: humility. "The humble person is soothing and gracious, while the self-promoting person is fragile and jarring. Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time, but egotism is a ravenous hunger in a small space – self-concerned, competitive, always hungry for accolades. Humility is infused with gratitude. 'Thankfulness,' the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, said, 'is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.'"¹

Character is rather intangible and usually cannot be seen so much in the words one says so much as in the actions one takes, especially when a person is given power. Which brings us back to King Saul. His actions belie a man whose heart is sick, whose character is deeply flawed. He is driven by a kind of narcissism that makes him incapable, it seems, of recognizing this. But God sees, and in a remarkable admission, says, "I repent that I anointed Saul king." God got all caught up in the campaign rhetoric too, was transfixed by appearances, but now knows.

So, in sovereign freedom, God plans a coup. God intends to anoint a new king while the old king is still on the throne.

God has already selected the king, sending the prophet Samuel to backwater Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse of the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest of the tribes of Israel. One of his sons will be king.

¹ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*. (New York: Random House, 2015), 8.

A bit reluctantly, and with some divinely-sanctioned deceptions at the ready, Samuel gets the elders of the city to let him in, and takes his place in the home of Jesse, asking to see his sons.

There are seven of them. Already, Samuel must be feeling good. Seven is a good number, the number of completion. This is a good sign. And when Samuel sees the eldest, Eliab, he can't help himself. Surely this is the one, he thinks. He is tall and strong, very kingly looking.

But God will have none of it. They had already been down this road once. There is more to human beings, much more, than appearances can reveal. "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" (1 Samuel 16:7b).

Next it is Abinadab. Not chosen. Shammah passes by. Not chosen. Each of the seven pass before Samuel. "Not chosen. Not chosen. Not chosen. Not chosen."

And then there are no more. All seven have been not chosen. They have come to the end.

It feels like a closed tomb, a terminal diagnosis, hope in the past tense. It is an ending, all options exhausted.

Something prompts Samuel to ask the question – thank God he asks the question – is this all? Is this it? Have all the choices been exhausted? Is the circle closed? It seems at once a question to Jesse and one to God. Have you brought me all the way out here, at great risk, to come up dry, empty? Is there no one with heart?

In a bold act of faith and courage, in deep trust, Samuel dares ask, "Are all your sons here?"

Is there an eighth son? Is there an unimagined possibility? Is there an abundance beyond the seemingly closed circle of seven? Does God see something none of us can see?

Jesse is perplexed. There is one more. He is so insignificant that his father saw no need to bring him to the meeting. He's so young Jesse doesn't think to include him. He's out in the fields, at the edges of things, tending the sheep.

And something clicks in Samuel. “Send and bring him. We will not sit down until he comes here.”

Imagine this scene. It must have taken a while to retrieve this son whose name we do not yet know. Everything freezes. No one sits until the eighth son appears. All the elders standing and waiting for this shepherd boy. There must have been some shifting feet, anxious glances.

And then, David appears. This is the one, the LORD says, and the narrator can't help but go right back into the old way of looking at things – “He was handsome, and ruddy, and had beautiful eyes.”

At first it seems an irony, that the first thing said about him should do with outward appearances. But notice what is said about him that was not said about Saul – his eyes, his beautiful eyes. Eyes are the window to the soul, they say, and God's eyes have looked upon eyes that see as God sees. David will not be a perfect king – far from it. But time and time again, especially in his own moments of failure, David is oriented to God, returns to God, confesses to God, is centered in God, humbly.

He has a good heart, this one. He is the king. He will be Israel's greatest king.

If they had been parading the sons of Jesse in front of the screen on *Antiques Road Show*, I would have said maybe twelve bucks. But God looks on the heart, God truly sees.

I've talked before about the symbolism of our baptismal font – how most Christian fonts are eight-sided. They are eight-sided because in baptism, we enter the eighth day of creation, the new creation. The eighth day is the open tomb, the new life where death seemed triumphant, God's ability to open a door that seemed forever closed.

Every Christian church, every Christian person, is a person of the eighth day, invited to see a world teeming with abundance, awash in possibilities of which we have not yet begun to dream. We will not give into cynicism, but will live in hope; we will not give into fear, but will trust; we will not give into hate, but will love.

This is what it means to live in the eighth day, to see as God sees. So church, let us not be afraid, whenever we sense a closed door, a lack of possibility, let us ask in bold faith, “God, are all your blessings here? We will not sit down, we will not stop trusting, until they are.” Amen.