A Cinderella Story

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Charles Perrault lost his job as secretary for the king of France. As a widower faced with the prospect of raising four children, he began to write children’s stories. He published a collection of children’s stories in 1697 called The Tales of Mother Goose. One story in the collection was called Cinderella or alternatively The Glass Slipper.

You may know Cinderella’s story. She lived with her wicked stepsister and two stepsisters. They were perpetually mean to Cinderella and made her work like a slave. The family was invited to a royal ball held at the palace of the king. Cinderella was pressed into duty to make gowns for her ungrateful stepsisters and fix their hair. There was no way Cinderella could fashion a gown for herself and attend as well. After they left, she lamented, “Oh, how I would love to go to the ball.” Her fairy godmother appeared and waved her magic wand, changing Cinderella’s old clothes into a beautiful gown complete with glass slippers. When she waved her wand a second time, a golden coach pulled by six white horses magically appeared. Her godmother reminded Cinderella that the magic spell would last as long as midnight.

Cinderella made quite an impression when she entered the ballroom. The king’s son was among those smitten by her charm and beauty. The prince would dance with no one else the entire evening. Cinderella lost track of time. When she heard the clock strike 12, she left in haste, leaving behind one of her glass slippers.

The prince resolved to marry the woman whose foot fit the glass slipper. He visited every home in the kingdom to find her. When he arrived at Cinderella’s house, her stepsisters were a poor fit to the glass slipper. When the prince asked if anyone else was in the house Cinderella stepped forward and her foot fit perfectly into the shoe. They married and lived, as is said in all fairy tales, happily ever after.

The Cinderella story has become synonymous for any who achieve unexpected success after a period of obscurity and neglect. David’s story in Scripture functions much like Cinderella’s story. David lives in obscurity before unexpected developments thrust him into a place of prominence. While Cinderella has a fairy godmother working in her
“They [people] look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”
- 1 Samuel 16:7

corner, David does one better. He has God interceding on his behalf.

We’ll devote 12 sermons this fall to telling David’s story. We’re encouraging you to follow along in our daily devotional as well as read Eugene Peterson’s book, Leap Over A Wall. Peterson writes in his introduction that “the David story is the most extensively narrated story in Scripture.”

We know more about David than anyone else in Scripture. His story dominates the Old Testament. Sixty-six chapters are devoted to telling David’s story. When the New Testament opens with the story of Jesus, it should come as no surprise that Matthew identifies him as “the Son of David” (Matthew 1:1).

David’s story commences in 1 Samuel 16. God tells Samuel, “I’m sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem; I have chosen one of his sons to be king” (16:1). But Israel already has a king on the throne. Saul once showed great promise but has made a mess of things. It’s risky for Samuel to anoint a new king when there’s already one on the throne. God directs Samuel to take a heifer to sacrifice in Bethlehem and await further instructions.

Samuel does as he is told. His arrival in Bethlehem unnerves its residents (16:4). They’re uncertain whether the coming of this prominent prophet spells doom or good fortune. Samuel reassures them of his peaceful intentions and invites them to the sacrifice. Jesse and seven of his sons attend, also.

When Samuel invites Jesse’s eldest son to step forward, he regards Eliab as an obvious choice as the next king (16:7). He certainly looks the part. Like Saul, he’s tall, dark and handsome. But height and stature are not requirements for the job. God says, in effect, ‘No more tall guys.’ God tells Samuel, “The Lord doesn’t see as people see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart (16:7).

Two more of Jesse’s sons, Abinadab and Shammah, appear before Samuel, but they’re not in God’s future plans either. At this point, our narrator stops naming Jesse’s sons. None of the seven will be chosen as Israel’s next king.

Samuel asks Jesse, “Do you have any more sons?” (16:11). “There’s one more,” Jesse answers. “He’s the youngest, who’s out tending sheep.” “Send for him,” Samuel says. This son’s insignificance is underscored by the fact that he’s not yet named. When Jesse’s youngest arrives, our narrator seems to go out of his way to comment on his attractive appearance. While God doesn’t judge by appearances, it’s rather ironic that David is handsome, nonetheless.

God lets Samuel know that Jesse’s youngest is the chosen one. He anoints David king
God sees something in David that no one else sees.

and, immediately, the Spirit of God comes upon David with power (16:13).

Verse 7 is critical to our story: “The Lord does not see as people see. They look on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.”

Jesus said to his followers, “Stop judging by mere appearances and make a right judgment” (7:24). In one of Aesop’s fables, “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing,” a wolf dresses in sheep skins to blend into the flock and attack vulnerable lambs. As with all of Aesop’s fables, it comes with a moral, “Appearances often are deceiving.”

Appearance factors big time into people’s first impressions. The research indicates that seven percent of first impressions are shaped by what we say, 38 percent on how we say it, and a whopping 55 percent are influenced by appearance. We judge people by how they look far more than what they say or how they say it.

The Potomac River looks calm and inviting for would-be swimmers, yet deep underwater caverns and rapids create strong undercurrents. There are places in the river where swimming is comparable to the up and down motion of a washing machine. Swimming is banned in the Potomac because appearances can be deceiving.

David is identified in the book of Samuel as a “man after God’s own heart” (13:14). David is a study in contrast. He’s capable of heroic feats of courage as well as making tragic decisions. He ranks as Israel’s greatest king, yet his 40-year reign is also marked by epic failures. Adultery, conspiracy and murder come immediately to mind. How on earth can David’s heart be compared to God’s heart?

People in the Bible live messy lives. David’s life is a case in point. King Saul becomes insanely jealous of David’s sudden emergence. He becomes best friends with Saul’s son, Jonathan, which only complicates matters. Neighboring kings make life difficult for David. The family dynamics associated with David’s eight wives are messy beyond words. David’s life is made even messier by his own boneheaded choices.

Yet, for all his flaws, David has one thing going for him. He has a heart for God. Whether he makes the right choice or a mess of his life, he stays true to the Lord. His two predecessors, Solomon and Saul, are chronically unfaithful. They are perpetually seeking after false gods. David epitomizes trust. He never wavers from his conviction that God alone is his hope and salvation. The Psalms, most of which were penned by David, attest to his trust.

God sees something in David that no one else sees. God says, in effect, ‘I can work with this guy. I can make something of his life.’ The prerequi-
God often picks the least likely people to accomplish His mission.

Last Sunday, Chris and I worshipped with our daughter in a church near her home in mid-central PA. During the service, Emily directed my attention to the woman across the aisle. She was painting her nails during the service. That’s right; she had out her bottle of nail polish and was painting her nails with a little brush. This was a first for me—painting your nails in church. Don’t you ever do that here!

I whispered to Emily that this moment will be enshrined in a future sermon illustration. Now, in fairness to this woman, I couldn’t see into her heart. Maybe she’s more attentive to worship when she is doing something with her hands. I don’t think so! Her actions are replicated many times over. A thousand little distractions compete for our attention. The words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem come to mind: “Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

David’s rise to prominence is a Cinderella story. He’s a baby brother stuck in a dead-end job. He possesses no Jerusalem pedigree. He hails from Bethlehem, a no-name town from the middle of nowhere. He’s the youngest of eight from the smallest of Israel’s 12 tribes. God often picks the least likely people to accomplish His mission.

This story is not merely about David; it’s a story about God. God is the principle protagonist. David was merely doing his job and minding his own business when God calls him out of obscurity. One day he’s tending sheep; the next day he’s a king-in-waiting and people are out to kill him. David’s story bears witness to God’s transforming power in the lives of deeply flawed people whose hearts are open to God.

For any who struggle with whether God really and truly loves you, David’s story is living proof. If God can love a sinner and saint like David, there’s hope for us. I invite you to join us these next 12 Sundays to discover how God transforms David’s messy life. If God can redeem David’s messy life, He can do the same in our lives also.