

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – November 15, 2020

Hymns: 103 – O Lord, Thou Art My God and King; 372 - Praise Him, Praise Him; 303 – Holy, holy, holy; 11 - The Lord’s My Shepherd

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:7; Acts 13:16-23; Matthew 12:33-35

Sermon Title: “The Lord Looks at the Heart”

1 Samuel 16:7

The Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Acts 13:16-23

Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness; and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

*“After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, **a man after my own heart**; he will do everything I want him to do.’*

“From this man’s descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised.

Matthew 12:33-35 - ERV

“If you want good fruit, you must make the tree good. If your tree is not good, it will have bad fruit. A tree is known by the kind of fruit it produces. You snakes! You are so evil. How can you say anything good? What people say with their mouths comes from what fills their hearts. Those who are good have good things saved in their hearts. That’s why they say good things. But those who are evil have hearts full of evil, and that’s why they say things that are evil.

Politics and leadership have been on my mind of late – I’m not sure why – and since I am committed to thinking biblically, I couldn’t help but be reminded of Israel’s experience with their own political system – most particularly, the administrations of King Saul, and his successor, David. And while the story goes back some 3000 years, there are aspects which seem uncannily current. It seems that people haven’t changed much in 3000 years. Or politics, either.

We read that when the nation went looking for a King, for their first King, a King to help them be just like all the other nations, they chose the kind of guy all the other nations tended to choose. Tall, good looking. Gleam in his eye. Expensive haircut. Hey, we still choose our leaders that way.

But, just like today, the politician's promises don't take long to unravel, and just because someone looks the part, it doesn't mean they can get the job done. It turns out that behind the shiny smile, there are secrets lurking. Underneath the perfect hair are less than perfect personal traits, and fatal character flaws. And King Saul had them all.

The prophet Samuel, who had ordained Saul as King, had done so with the strongest of misgivings, the most serious of reservations. But the people had been crying for a King, and they got what they asked for all right, and more. The national debt was skyrocketing, national confidence was plummeting, military spending was going through the roof, despite which the defeats on the battlefield continued to mount. And every time something went wrong - and there was plenty going wrong - the cracks in Saul's mental state deepened. Eventually, the people had had enough. Samuel had had enough. God had had enough. It was time to replace the King.

This time, however, the selection process for a new King was going to work somewhat differently than first time around. First time around, God had said, "Ok, so you're rejecting me, God, as King. You want a King like all the other nations have. Fine. Here's your guy - tall, dark, and crazy. Good luck with him." And the people were overjoyed, until the "crazy" part kicked in. Now it was God's turn to pick a King. And God went about it in a completely different way.

Step one was to send the Prophet Samuel to a little place called Bethlehem. Maybe you've heard of it. Back then, few people had. Samuel then called upon a man named Jesse and his sons. Maybe you've heard of him; again, back then, few people had. Jesse was a man from the tribe of Judah, blessed with eight sons, who he managed to feed through his shepherding and cheese making business. I found feeding one son to be a challenge; I can't imagine feeding eight.

Big, strapping boys, too, it seems. When Jesse brought his eldest, Eliab, to stand before Samuel, the prophet thought to himself, "*Surely the Lord's Anointed stands here before the Lord.*" Or, in another translation, "*This must be the one the Lord has chosen.*" In any case, Samuel thought his job was over - "We'll anoint this fine young man, ordain him as King, and my work here is done." But Samuel was still choosing a King the old way. God had a new way. We read:

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

For what happens next, listen as Samuel remembers this story of three thousand years ago:

Jesse told his son Abinadab to go over to Samuel, but Samuel said, “No, the Lord hasn’t chosen him.”

Next, Jesse sent his son Shammah to him, and Samuel said, “The Lord hasn’t chosen him either.”

Jesse had all seven of his sons go over to Samuel. Finally, Samuel said, “Jesse, the Lord hasn’t chosen any of these young men. Do you have any more sons?”

“Yes,” Jesse answered. “My youngest son David is out taking care of the sheep.”

“Send for him!” Samuel said. “We won’t start the ceremony until he gets here.”

Jesse sent for David. He was a healthy, good-looking boy with a sparkle in his eyes. As soon as David came, the Lord told Samuel, “He’s the one! Get up and pour the anointing oil on his head. He shall be the King.”

Or, in the words of the song:

*One by one Jesse’s sons stood before the prophet
Their father knew a king would soon be found
And each one passed except the last; no one thought to call him
Surely he would never wear a crown*

*But when others see a shepherd boy, God may see a king
Even though your life seems filled with ordinary things
In just a moment, He can touch you, and everything will change
When others see a shepherd boy, God may see a king*

(Shepherd Boy - Words and Music by Ray Boltz and Steve Millikan)

God’s choice was proven to be, not surprisingly, wise. David was soon called into the service of Saul, who was still King, despite knowing that God had withdrawn his support for Saul’s reign. Saul’s paranoia had manifested itself into horrible dark depressions and violent mood swings, and the only thing that could relieve his torment – golf not having been yet invented - was some soothing music. One of the court functionaries had heard a certain young fellow from Bethlehem play the harp,

and recommended him to Saul, who hired him on the spot, not knowing that David was already the one chosen to replace Saul when the big day came.

King Saul began to have the uneasy feeling, in a brain filled with uneasy feelings, that maybe God's favour had left him, and now shone upon this one-time shepherd boy. Saul, in his mind's paranoid eye, began to see the crown slipping off of his own head, and onto that of David (Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean you're never right). What Saul didn't realize, though, was that his greatest enemy wasn't David, but was his own twisted heart. Because David, with a heart pure as the soon-to-be-driven-snow, had nothing but the desire to live a life useful and pleasing to God. And maybe this is why Saul hated him so. And when others began to look at David in an admiring way, Saul narcissism and paranoia took over. David, thought Saul, had to go. "You're fired," he told David. Which in those days meant, "You're dead."

There's nothing more dangerous than a nutcase with an army to command, and despite his pure heart and sound motives, David was soon fleeing the King, living life on the run, moving from place to place, village to village, in and out of disguise, with Saul hot on his heels, blood in his eye. Remarkably, and to our advantage, despite the need to sleep with one eye open in a different spot every night, David somehow still had time to compose many a Psalm, the best of which are collected in the Bibles we have today. And through these Psalms, we have a window into David's very heart. For although David wasn't above wondering to God why things were so tough, why his life had become a series of narrow escapes, and how God's plan could possibly come true, somehow, he never lost heart. Listen, from Psalm 57:

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy! I look to you for protection. I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until the danger passes by.

I cry out to God Most High, to God who will fulfill his purpose for me. He will send help from heaven to rescue me, disgracing those who hound me. My God will send forth his unfailing love and faithfulness.

In fact, that's why God picked him to be King. It wasn't just because David was a good shepherd. There were countless shepherds in Israel in David's day. It wasn't just because David was a good musician. There were plenty of those too. It wasn't just because he was handy with a sword. There were plenty bigger and brawnier than David. And it certainly wasn't because David was perfect. He'd be the first to admit that. And he did. Often. And proved it. No, God picked David to be King, because, as God said to the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 16:7): "*The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the*

LORD looks at the heart.” David is remembered, in Old Testament and New, as “*a man after God’s own heart.*”

Who is a person after God’s own heart? A faithful person. An honest person. A person who recognises their shortcomings, but does what needs to be done anyway. A forgiving person. A courageous person. A grateful person. A hopeful person. A person who knows what anger is, but who knows what joy is too. Perhaps, above all, a person who realises that all they do, all they have, all they are, and all they ever shall be, is dependent upon God. Comes from the hand of God. Or, as David said (Psalm 16:2): “*You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.*” David recognized that the only good in him was the God in him. And so, in the midst of David’s many imperfections, was God able to work his Story through David’s life. And so, in the midst of your many imperfections - and so, in the midst of mine - is God able to work his Story through us. If we will. If we will.

*Well it wasn’t the oldest, it wasn’t the strongest, chosen on that day
And yet the giants fell, and nations trembled
When they stood in his way*

*When others see a shepherd boy, God may see a king
Even though your life seems filled with ordinary things
In just a moment, He can touch you, and everything will change
When others see a shepherd boy, God may see a king*

Saul, increasingly overcome by madness, became ever more cruel and reckless, until the fateful day he found himself wounded and surrounded by his Philistine foes, his sons having fallen before him. Unwilling to face the final humiliation of defeat by his foes, Saul took his own life, leaving this world behind, but forever entering history as the wrong man for the job, and the dangers of choosing style over substance.

And David? Upon Saul’s death, which David had the decency to grieve, David was finally anointed King, and many adventures followed. It wasn’t a straightforward path to the throne, though; David, as he was to sing in the 23rd Psalm, had to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and others besides, and a long, hard walk it was, before he was able to experience the full blessing of the promise God had made when he was but a boy.

Maybe that’s where we come in. God has tremendous promises for us. Promises of hope and healing, promises of peace and love. God promises he will be with us, beside us, will never forsake us. God promises that when we come to him

with open hearts, that he will fill us with new life, will recreate us from the inside out, that we'll never be the same again. He promises that our lives can make a difference, as we share with others the gifts he put within us.

But the going isn't always easy. The road is often rough. There are things about us that seem reluctant to change, there are problems and worries, there are heartbreaks and debts. Dreams we once had, we put aside, and we find ourselves just trudging through from day to day, wondering what comes next, wondering if we have the strength to carry on. There are, and there ever will be, dark valleys ahead. But God is faithful. God is there. God is there for you, God is there with you, God will never let you go.

*One by one problems come, and dreams get shattered
And sometimes it's hard to understand
But things like chance and circumstance, they don't really matter
Our Father holds tomorrow in His hands*

*And when others see a shepherd boy, God may see a king
Even though your life seems filled with ordinary things
In just a moment, He can touch you, and everything will change
When others see a shepherd boy, God may see a king.*

From David's unlikely beginning, as the least promising of his family; from David's terrifying years as a wanted man on the run; from David's stubborn determination to be faithful even to those who done him wrong; God brought forth a King and a Kingdom that is remembered to this day. And from David's descendants, God brought forth a different kind of King; one who would rule not with a sword, but love; one who would do battle, not with armies, but with the powers of evil and hate; one who would be victorious, over sin and death itself. From David's town, from David's line, came Jesus Christ, to us all. And so is our story joined with that of David; and so is our story part of The Story; and so are our lives in God's plan, and in God's hands.

Ask God to be your Shepherd. Trust God to provide for your needs. God will help you find refreshment and rest. God will restore your wounded soul, and put you on the path that leads to fullness of life. God will be with you through the darkest valley, and will give you the strength and comfort to carry on. God will help you overcome, will give your life purpose, will fill your cup to overflowing. Goodness and mercy will surround you all the days of your life, and at the end of this life, the Good Shepherd will lead you – will lead us all - safely home. Amen.