

I

As some of you know, in our Presbyterian way of being the church, women and men who wish to be ordained as pastors must take and pass five standardized examinations, similar to the bar exam for a lawyer or the CPA exam for an accountant. And as I've shared with you before, I enjoyed one of those five ordination exams so much that I took it three times. Once I'd finally passed, all five, I was certified as a candidate ready to receive a call and permitted to begin interviewing for a call to a church.

But because of that little delay in finishing my exams, I wasn't really looking or listening for God's call; I needed a job, and fast. So I began using all of the job search skills I'd learned during my time in the corporate world, and sure enough, before long, I had landed a telephone interview with a pastor nominating committee. (This was in the dark ages before Skype and Zoom.) During that phone interview, I turned the charm up to the top of the dial, and sure enough, the nominating committee invited Amy and me to come to their town for a weekend visit. And the whole weekend, even though there were a few things that were already giving us pause, I kept the charm dialed up to 11. And sure enough, before we even left town, there was a job offer on the table.

Problem solved. I found God's call with the very first interview. Wasn't I smart and resourceful and charming! But for reasons that I don't need to bore you with, it quickly became apparent that even though that committee was nothing but kind and gracious, and even though that congregation is filled with lovely, faithful people, it was clearly not the call God had in mind for us. In fact, I would end up doing many more phone interviews and Amy and I would go on many more weekend visits before we found the place to which God was clearly calling us.

II

Maybe you've had a similar experience. Maybe you've been in a situation where you had to make an important decision, but you were under pressure and so you were tempted to just take the very first option that looked like it would possibly fit the bill. But something kept nagging at you that it just wasn't quite right.

When we're under pressure, how do we discern God's will, especially when it's not immediately apparent right in front of us? Those kinds of questions are at the heart of our story from 1 Samuel this morning.

III

This Fall, we've been reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament. When we left off our story last week, the people of God had returned to the Land of Promise, and each of the twelve tribes of Israel settled in their ancestral homelands.

However, they had no unified system of national government. There was no capital city and no center of political leadership. Instead, whenever disputes would arise within or between the various tribes, the people appointed judges to make rulings and settle any differences. Within biblical history, we refer to this as the period of the judges.

But after a while, the people of God began to look around at their neighboring nations, and they noticed that all of their neighbors had something that they did not - a king. And I'm paraphrasing and summarizing a great deal of the biblical story here, but they said to themselves, "We'll never be taken seriously if we don't have a king, too." And so they went to a prophet named Samuel, and they asked Samuel to tell God to

appoint a king over Israel.

Samuel prayed to God, and God said to Samuel, again in Ryan's Revised Translation, "Tell the people that a king is really not a good idea. A king will just take their sons and conscript them into the army, he'll and take their daughters and make them serve in the king's court, and take he'll take their cattle and their land, and maybe even their very lives."

God continued, "Why can't my people trust me to be their king? Why do they insist on being like all the other nations? They are my treasured possession out of all the earth, and I've provided for and will continue to provide for their every need!"

And so Samuel went back and told the people all that God had said, namely that a king was a really bad idea. But the people said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.'

And so God said, "I'm telling you, you're not going to like this, and this is not going to be good for you in the long run. But if you insist, OK." And so for the first time in their history, the 12 tribes of Israel were ruled by a single king, a man named Saul.

At first, things went OK. The Israelites won a few military battles, and they started to get a little respect in the neighborhood.

But then, just as God had predicted it would, Saul's reign turned into a disaster. Things fell apart in the land. The sad turn of events grieved the prophet Samuel to his very core, and as the text puts it, "the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel."

And so God decided it was time for new

leadership. It was time to anoint a new king, and God had just the man in mind. The only problem was, Saul was still alive, and he had not abdicated the throne, and it's very dangerous business to publicly anoint a new king while the throne is still occupied.

And that brings us to our story for today. We're going to begin with the final verse of 1 Samuel 15 and read through chapter 16 verse 13, so listen now for a Word from God.

³⁵*Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.'*
²*Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.'* And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord."
³*Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.'*
⁴*Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?'*
⁵*He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.'* And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.
⁶*When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.'*
⁷*But the Lord said to Samuel, '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.'*
⁸*Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has*

the Lord chosen this one.’⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, ‘Neither has the Lord chosen this one.’¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, ‘The Lord has not chosen any of these.’¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ And he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.’ And Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.’¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, ‘Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.’¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

When Samuel arrived in town, he didn’t exactly receive a hero’s welcome. By this time in Israel’s history, God’s people had learned that when God’s prophets showed up, they didn’t always bring good news. But Samuel assured the nervous people of Bethlehem that he came peaceably, and he asked to see a man named Jesse and his sons.

And so Jesse brought his sons and stood them in order of age. He took Eliab, his firstborn, and presented him to Samuel. And Samuel was convinced that this was the one. He just had that look about him. He was tall and athletic. He carried himself well. He had what we would call command bearing. So Samuel thought he would pour the oil on Eliab, hightail it out of town, and be back in Ramah in time for supper.

But God said, ‘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.’”

And so Samuel went to the next in line, Abinadab. But no, it wasn’t Abinidab. And so Samuel moved down the line to Shammah. But nope, it wasn’t Shammah. And it went on like this until Samuel had worked his way through all seven sons that Jesse lined up before him.

And exasperated, Samuel said to Jesse, plenty loud enough for God to hear, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.”

But then Samuel had a thought. He said to Jesse, “Is this it? Are all your sons here?” And Jesse said, “Well, yes, there’s my boy David, but we’re shepherds, and we couldn’t leave the flocks unattended. He’s watching them while we’re all here in town. Honestly, he’s youngest and the runt of the litter, so we didn’t even think to bring him with us.”

And Samuel said, “Well, you better go get him.” And when young David came in from the shepherd’s fields, the Lord said to Samuel, “This is the one.” And so Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed David in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

IV

I wonder, friend, if you’ve ever had this kind of Samuel experience? Maybe you had to find a new job, or a new home, or some other major change, and when you started out, you hoped the search would be short enough that you’d get it done and be home in time for supper.

I wonder if you’ve ever had the experience of searching for something, coming across the very first one, and being certain that your search was complete, only to find out quickly that no, that it wasn’t the one that God had in mind for you. I

wonder if you've ever found yourself at what you thought was a dead-end, and asked God, "I know that you've got something in mind for me, and I haven't found it yet, but I'm getting tired and frustrated. Is this all there is? What am I missing?"

My friend, here's what I have come to believe about the God whom we worship and serve. I believe that God always has a preferred future in mind for us. Just like God knew which of Jesse's sons God wanted on the throne, God always knows what God wants for every aspect of our lives.

And it would be easier if God would just give us a clear sign about God's will for us. It would be easier if God would just speak out of a burning bush or drop a stone tablet or speak to our hearts in such a way that we are convinced and convicted that we know the will of the Spirit. And sometimes, God does. Sometimes, you just know.

But at least in my experience, more often than not, God sends us through an Eliab and an Abinadab and a Shammah and sometimes even more options, and we still don't have a clear sign. Sometimes, the most important skill we can develop as a disciple of Jesus Christ is the ability to step back even under pressure and pray, "God, I trust you have a plan for this thing, but I'm not seeing it. What am I missing? What questions have I not yet asked that I should be asking?"

V

This is a strange season for us to be the church. Given all that we've been through in the past year-and-a-half, my sense is that most of us, if not all of us, have a growing sense that whatever the future holds, things both inside and outside of the church are not likely to be the same as they were on the second Sunday of March in 2020. There's a sense that we are living through massive change in nearly every aspect of our lives, and nearly

everyone I know is feeling tired and at least a little afraid.

So we would do well to remember that more often than not, when God begins to move, when God begins to do something big, something world-changing, God doesn't usually start with the option that everyone thinks is the obvious choice. God looks not on outward appearances, but upon the heart. The boy that God intended to become the king of Israel, the one who himself would grow into a man after God's own heart, was not right there in the Bethlehem town square. He was out in the fields, tending the sheep.

And not for nothing, in a few weeks, we're going to read another story from about 1,000 years later, another story about the announcement of a new king of Israel. Those days, too, were full of fear and anxiety, but when God began to move, when God began to do something new, something so world-changing that it would literally change the way we tell time, the news was not first announced in the town square or in the palace.

The good news about the birth of the boy Jesus, the one who would become king of kings was made in a field outside of Bethlehem, to some shepherds who were watching over their flocks by night.

And that descendant of David is named Jesus, and he is the One whom alone we must worship and serve. He is the one whom alone we must follow. He is the one who rules not with scepter and spear, but with wash basin and towel, the one who came not to be served, but to serve, who willingly gives his life for you, for me, and as a ransom for many.

Thanks be to God. Amen.