

June 13th, 2021

I Samuel 15:34-16:13 “When the Right Choice Seems Wrong”

We are now in week two of our series on the books of Samuel. This whole section of the Bible from Judges all the way through 1 and 2 Kings are sort of like *Game of Thrones* minus the dragons and ice zombies. This section of the Bible even has giants, but we'll get to that next week. Let's talk about where we are now in this passage. Last week we read the story of how Israel demanded a king even though it wasn't part of God's plan. God once promised that Israel would be a great nation whose numbers would exceed the stars in the heavens. So Israel thought the best way to achieve this was to become just like all the other nations. What did these other nations have that they felt they needed? Kings. But God told the Israelites that if they wanted a king, they were going to have to face the consequences of what comes along with having a king. “You want to be like the other nations? Fine. You're going to have the same *problems* as all the other nations.” The two takeaways we had last week was that God gives us the gift of free choice, even when we make bad decisions. The other is that we are not called to be like other nations or churches ... we are called to be faithful.

So between last week's story and this week's story, Israel chose Saul as their king. And honestly, at first glance, Saul was everything you could want in a king. He was tall, handsome, a fierce warrior ... all the characteristics that the people of an up-and-coming nation would want in a king. The problem is, Saul spent most of his time stumbling around and making poor choices because he was prideful, dishonest and had no integrity. Even though he said he was all about doing God's bidding, he rarely listened to God and was always mired in conflict with the neighboring nations. In chapter 15, verse 10 the author of 1 Samuel wrote, "The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.'" Wait a minute. God *regretted* making Saul king?! God's not supposed to feel regret! Right? Maybe? But here's the important thing – God did *not* say, "I regret giving the people a choice about having a king." Big difference.

So that's where we are this week. Saul is doing *exactly* what God warned he would. God's feeling regretful. Samuel is grieving. It seems that *everyone* is feeling pretty bad about *everything*. But this is the story of God's people. And God never stops giving God's people chances to make things right. Saul's not working out as king? That's okay. God provides ... or as the old gospel song goes, "The Lord will make a way somehow!" But

remember, this is the God of Israel we're talking about here. And you know that the way that God provides isn't going to be conventional. At all. And this is where a boy named David comes into the story. "Ooh! You mean David as in *David and Goliath* David?" Yup. That's next week though. Hang in there.

This week, we have the story of Samuel heading out to find a king to replace Saul. Where does God send Samuel? To Jesse of Bethlehem! Why? Because God said that one of Jesse's sons will be king and undo all the damage that Saul did to in order to put Israel back on the right track. Jesse in the Bible is a lot like other Jesse's throughout history. He had awesome sons. But unlike the Jesse who stands before you today, this Jesse has a *lot* of sons. And most of them fit the bill for what the world believes would make a great king. His firstborn son Eliab looked like an obvious winner. But God told Samuel, "Don't look at his outward appearance. That got you in trouble last time. If we're going to find the right king, we've got to look at the heart and not the appearance." Good to know. Let's take Eliab off the list. Next in the line of Jesse's sons to be considered was Abinadab. (Abeen Adab) Same thing. He looks the part, but is his heart right? Nope. Okay, how about Shammah? Nope. Jesse parades 4 more sons in front of Samuel. Nope. Samuel is beginning to wonder what God is up to. Jesse just showed him 7 pretty decent possibilities for king, and

God hasn't given the green light yet. Huh. I wonder if Jesse has another son? So Samuel asked Jesse, "Are these *all* your sons?" And Jesse said, "Well, I've got one more, but he's just a kid and he's not here because his job is to tend the sheep." Okay. Well, bring him down anyway and let's have a look-see. I imagine that all the other sons looked like the starting lineup of an NFL team but God said, "No. None of these are going to work." Well if none of *these* guys were going to be king, then this son who we haven't met yet must be a beast. He must be the most kingly looking king you could ever imagine! So they bring Jesse's youngest son David in. Samuel looks up and here's a kid that looks more like a Nordstrom Young Men's Apparel model than a king. And of course, God says, "Bingo! That's our guy!" So Samuel anoints David as the future king, God's spirit settles on him and thus begins the journey to his eventual rise to the throne.

So, what's the lesson here? I think part of it is, "What you think is the right choice, may in fact be the wrong choice, and what you think is the wrong choice might very well be the right one." Now when we start figuring out how that applies to our day-to-day life, there's a potential for trouble. "Well, I've been told that obeying traffic laws and not driving recklessly is the right thing to do, but *Jesse* said ..." No. That's not what I'm trying to communicate here. Maybe a better way to frame this is to say that appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes we

find ourselves in the same position as Samuel where we have several choices in front of us that *seem* great. Maybe we're in a situation where we have a choice between two jobs. One offers a good deal of material benefits and has the potential to rapidly advance your career and move you up the social ladder. But ... it doesn't seem to give much opportunity to spend quality time with family or loved ones. The other job doesn't pay much but has all sorts of perks that allow you to have a social life apart from work. What do you do? If the message you hear most often is that you've got to make as much money as you can to survive in this world and that the most important thing is coming out on top, then you'll probably gravitate toward the first option. If the message you've heard throughout your life is that human relationships are your most important assets and that taking care of your mind, body, and spirit are valuable to your well-being, then the *second* option may seem like the better choice. Now I'm not going to get into which one is "right" or "wrong." I am, however, going to draw from the wisdom of our scripture lesson this morning when Samuel looks at Eliab and thinks, "Wow! This guy would make a great king!" but then God says, "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*."

Remember, Samuel was in this position before when the people demanded a king in the first place. Saul certainly looked the part. But he ended up being a train wreck. Now Samuel is presented with a second opportunity to decide who will be king, and he almost makes the same mistake. Eliab *looks* like he would a *great* king! But God reminds Samuel to reject the outward appearance and to look at the heart instead.

Here's another case that might be a lot closer and more applicable to the situation in this morning's story. What do we look for when we have the opportunity to choose a leader? And I'm talking *any* leader whether it's the CEO of a company, a board chair, a county commissioner, an employee, the chair of a committee ... heck, even a pastor. What do we do when we have a lineup of Sauls, Eliabs and Abinadabs who have impressive credentials and there's one little David who doesn't seem to have the credentials, but maybe "feels" right?

Once there was a flagship church in Virginia that had a long history of being a status church. It had a big, strategically located building in the nice part of town. It also had a long history of famous movers and shakers among their members. It had an impressive list of "who's who" ministers that went all the way back to the 1800s. They were accustomed to having a "place at the table" as far as their influence in public life was concerned. But as

with most mainline Protestant churches, they started to decline during the 70s and 80s. I wouldn't say they *lost* their place at the table, but they definitely weren't as close to the head of the table as they used to be and they were not happy about it at all. So when a flagship status church starts to lose influence, who do you think they're going to start blaming? The ministers! Exactly! They went from ministers whose tenure could be measured in decades to ministers whose tenures were measured in months in some cases. But they had a plan. They decided to invest the remainder of their increasingly shrinking budget to call a *really* "big name" minister. That didn't work out so well. One minister, who came from a long line of ministers and whose siblings were all clergy too, had a hard time keeping his affairs in order. And when I say, "affairs" I'm talking the extra marital kind. Another who had similar credentials and influence was caught with child pornography on his computer and eventually wound up in prison. Then the church decided that maybe they needed someone who was a scholar and so they lured the dean of a prestigious seminary to be their pastor. The problem was this seminary president had *never* pastored a church before. He was an academic and honestly had no idea what he was doing. The poor guy even got physically assaulted at a board meeting once because he made a passing comment about what he thought of then President Bush's decision to invade Afghanistan. Needless to say he didn't last very long there. By then,

the church had such a horrible reputation for eating ministers that no one wanted to apply. No one except Carolyn.

Unlike any other minister that served that church, Carolyn didn't have "doctor" in front of her name. She was quiet and unassuming. She had mostly served small churches and wasn't "known among the ranks" of the denomination. She wasn't anything at all like what they were used to. But she patiently and meticulously took that church under her care and helped them heal. This congregation is not a flagship status church anymore, but they are well-known for doing the kind of ministry that Jesus calls all churches to do and that is reaching out and serving those who do not have a place at the table.

Again, God judges the heart. There was nothing about David that suggested he should be King. He was a shepherd boy, ignored even by his own family, yet it was upon David that God built the Kingdom of Israel. The lesson? Those that have no business changing the world are often the ones God chooses to do just that.