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SERMON

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Teach Us to See

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When flooded with a sea of alternatives to select, we rely upon guidelines and curated lists.

Going to a new city on vacation? Consult TripAdvisor for the top attractions rated by previous visitors.

The March Madness of NCAA college basketball begins with teams vying for top seeded positions to smooth their way to the final four. Then, we marvel when these highly calculated brackets get blown apart by the unknown and unexpected teams who take down the presumed winners. Hold on to that thought.

A friend and former dean of a top business school used to dread *US News'* rankings of best MBA programs. The pressure to improve a mere fraction could corrupt admission decisions to admit students based upon test scores and starting salaries rather than values and intellectual curiosity.

David Letterman launched a comedic genre with his top ten lists. His lists inspired myriad game shows with teams competing for the top spot by naming the top ten *whatevers* within categories.

A colleague places today's story in his top ten list from scripture.

He crafted a sermon series to combat biblical illiteracy by selecting key people and events. I teased him: Did he plan to test and rank his congregation against others in his denomination?

Its true though. Certain stories from scripture rise above others in a *need to know ranking*. They are either foundational to faith, launch a repeated theme, or shape our cultural language. Think of the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan.

Unlike last week's story, which we usually sidestep, the stories for today and next week's sermons would make the top ten.

Today marks a point when we learn more about ourselves and God. God disrupts the prophet Samuel's limited expectation of human potential.

Samuel anointed the first Israelite king. He chose Saul, a warrior who stood head and shoulders above everyone and would fit the criteria of the people's desire for someone to "fight their battles."

Saul fails miserably. He wins in battle but serves himself. Even though he still sits in control, everyone knows God has other plans.

Dear God,

*You've given us so many senses in which to discern
your presence among us.*

*Tune out all that distracts us from experiencing you –
all the noise, the flashing lights, so that we learn your will for our lives.*

Send your spirit among us so that we trust your holy word. Amen.

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

³⁴ Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.

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.

16 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 to look after 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."

⁴Samuel 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?” ⁵Samuel 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.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely his anointed is now before the LORD.”

⁷But 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.”

⁸Then 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.”

¹² He 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.”

¹³ Then 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.

Long before on-demand viewing became the norm, as a little girl I recall the weeks of waiting, annoying my mom by finally counting the days to see the movie, *Cinderella*.

We know the story.

It opens with the youngest, least favored among the sisters relegated to menial tasks while the older ones attend the lavish ball hosted by the handsome prince. Through the kindness of a fairy godmother, Cinderella acquires the gown and shoes to accentuate

her inner beauty. She captures the heart of the prince. Tragedy turns into a happily ever after.

Whether the ancient Greek version of *Rhodopis*, or a medieval French fable, or Chinese drama, or myriad stories across cultures, or incarnations by Disney, these stories of *Cinderella* refer to the overlooked, undervalued, marginalized who finally becomes recognized and lauded.

I recall driving through the Loyola campus in Chicago during the 2018 NCAA basketball tournament. That year, their team scored one victory after another to reach the final four, lifted by the prayers of Sister Jean, their aged and devoted nun. Honestly the air in that part of the city vibrated with excitement.

I'll wager that more people remember their success than who won the final game. Truly Loyola earned the nickname: Cinderella. My heart swelled with the same little-girl joy felt long ago.

Anytime you see a person or team no one expects doing their God-given best inspires.

We are so fickle, we continue to rank the expected winner, order the other contenders with weaker credentials underneath, and then celebrate when our tidy expectations get over turned...that is as

long as we are not the ones cast aside or our secure position caves in.

God asks Samuel, how long will you grieve? In other words, you need to get over your inability to find suitable leaders, whether your corrupt sons or the poster-boy good-looking who is thoroughly incompetent.

How long will you grieve? How long will you wait to do a new thing?

When God asks him to anoint the next king, the task is tantamount to treason and Samuel – in addition to his grief about Saul and his world order crumbling – is nervous for his own life.

Despite the cover story of offering a sacrifice, when Samuel shows up with heifer in tow, the officials in Bethlehem do not rush to welcome this prophet to their hometown.

They, too, are looking over their shoulder. They don't want to be innocent bystanders when the current king comes for his professed enemy.

Samuel gets to God's business.

Jesse has a passel of sons. He parades seven of them before Samuel, beginning with Eliab, who was not only the eldest but big and tall

and studly. He looks like excellent king material. God declines. Another and then another son appears, and God shakes God's head..

They go through the entire line of Jesse's son, only for God to keep looking. Samuel must wonder, doesn't age matter? Brawn? Intelligence?

Finally, Samuel—desperation in his voice—asks Jesse if he had seen all his sons. "Well, there is one more, the youngest. He's fit only to tend the sheep." In other words, doing those menial tasks considered beneath the position of the others. The son not even included in the dinner party.

Samuel says, "Bring him." They'll not begin to feast on the sacrifice until everyone joins in.

The youngest, the smallest, the least likely, a mere boy, becomes God's chosen.

This leads to one of the best lines, elevating this story to one of the best in scripture: "do not look on appearance or on the height ... for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

The heart. The ancients considered the heart the center of one's being. From the heart flows emotion, intelligence, discernment,

wisdom, commitment, and character. These elements form what we might call the soul.¹

It is the last, the youngest, and the smallest son that God chooses, so insignificant the story waits to the end to name him: David.

This is like much of our scriptural history, God does not choose the one with the birthright, or the fertile, or the visibly strong. God plucks David from obscurity to teach us to see the potential we undervalue. And, God allows those we place on pedestals, expecting greatness or super-human feats succumb to the same demise as Saul.

The best stories in scripture turn upside down our expectations and ask us hard questions.

This one pushes us to wonder if we, like Samuel and the people of Bethlehem will risk doing something new when we select who will serve the people. In church, at our places of work, and, in our communities.

Do we have the capacity to change for our own good?

¹ Robert Alters' *The David Story*, David Jensen's *1 & 2 Samuel* from Belief Commentary Series, and Donald P. Olsen's article in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 2, 100 all contributed to the exegesis within this sermon.

More personally, can we take off the lens that distort what we see about others and ourselves? Prejudices about appearance, sexism, ableism, or any other -ism? Can we see how often we make choices on a superficial basis or merely rely upon someone else's standards? God needs us to look beyond the rankings and surface and into someone's heart.

It's also a story for each of us who harbor in our heart of hearts a sense of deep inadequacy. We think we're not enough. Not smart enough. Not good enough. Not faithful enough. We feel we are very unlikely candidates for God's love, for doing God's work in the world.

We think we cannot make a difference, so we stay out in the field.

Here is the truth from this story: God does not create top ten lists, brackets, or winners or losers. God exhibits a preferential option for the unlikely because we often do not. God wants everyone to receive the best God gives for the benefit of everyone.



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