

“God Provides a New Direction”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 24, 2021

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 51:10-14

Rev. John Wahl

I Samuel 16:1-13

If you open your bible to Psalm 51, you see that it is ascribed – like many of the Psalms – to David; specifically, it says, “when the prophet Nathan comes to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” If you know this episode, which takes place in Second Samuel, you will remember that it comes after David’s shameful affair with this married woman, whose husband, Uriah, David then orders to have killed on the battlefield. Only after Nathan confronts him and announces God’s displeasure does David acknowledge the gravity of his sin.

Psalm 51 declares that only God can fix what we have broken: only God can create in us a clean heart; but that there is more: the one who is forgiven and restored by God is also called to declare to others about God’s grace; to sing aloud of God’s deliverance.

Most biblical scholars agree that these ascriptions are likely not original to the Psalms but were added sometime later. There is nothing in Psalm 51 to prove that this poem was about David amidst the Bathsheba-Uriah debacle. Anyone, that is, – not just David in Second Samuel – might pray the words of Psalm 51, regardless of the specifics of their own sins. The prolific use of the Psalms in both church and synagogue demonstrates, in fact, that countless saints have done just that.¹

Our narrative lectionary realizes that Psalm 51 is, therefore, “moveable;” and, by pairing it here with this reading from I Samuel 16, it invites different connections between the ascribed author of the Psalm – David – beyond that later prophetic confrontation with Nathan. One link is with what we will hear in verse 7, when God says, “Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart.” Listen now to God’s word.

Read I Samuel 16:1-13

Other than Jesus, the Bible says more about the life of David than any other character. A complex person if there ever was one, David exemplified the best and

¹ Brent Strawn from *WorkingPreacher.com*

worst of what life looks like when a person does and does not follow God. He is both the fulfillment of Israel's deepest longings and the epitome of God's warnings that Israel should have no king other than the Lord.

Many people have fond memories of David from their Sunday school days: the slayer of the giant, singer of the Psalms, brave warrior and king. Here, David is chosen and anointed as Israel's next king. The lesson seems to be the same one as we see over and over in biblical texts. The world has an established pecking order: elder son over the younger, masters over slaves, the sons of priests over outsiders. And God pays no attention to that order.

A second lesson is that the people God calls are not always easy to find. Samuel travels to Bethlehem – an out-of-the-way village – to find this new king. David is not there; he is away, tending the sheep. God has to search for David, just as God has to search for Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves to freedom, just as God had to call out to young Samuel again and again in the middle of the night. God does not simply pick those most notable or available into service, but reaches deep into fields and faraway places. This is also a lesson for us to remember.²

As our reading begins, Samuel – the prophet – is still grieving Saul's failure as king; but God is ready to move on and has located the next king in Bethlehem among Jesse's sons. But Samuel is not just sad, he is also worried: a rival designee to the throne will certainly cause political problems. And Samuel is not the only one concerned: the city elders shake with fear when the prophet shows up at their gates. Exactly why they are afraid, we are not sure, but God gives Samuel a reason to be there; a cover story: he has come to offer a sacrifice; nothing more. God tells the prophet, "Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will make clear to you what to do."

We talked about how this story might remind us of the fairy tale, *Cinderella*, but it looks a little like an episode of *Project Runway* as well. Jesse lines up his sons in order – the oldest to the youngest. The eldest catches the prophet's eye, but God speaks to Samuel with the words we quoted before; that while humans can be drawn by a person's outward appearance, God instead looks within. So, after the seven are all rejected, Samuel turns to Jesse and says, "the Lord hasn't picked any of these."³

In verse 12, David finally comes onto the scene. And to our surprise, he arrives with a lengthy description of his beautiful eyes and rugged good looks; and right on the heels of this warning that we too readily look on outward appearances while God looks on the heart. It would have made far more sense at this point if David was

² Beth Tanner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ John Holbert, "Looking Beyond for Good or Ill" from *Patheos.com*

described as not worthy of a second glance; or if the story had not given any physical description at all.

The more crucial detail, though, is that David is a shepherd; a favorite metaphor to describe kings in the ancient Near East; and the same profession practiced by Moses at the time he was called. David was neither big enough nor old enough to serve as a soldier, as his older brothers likely did. It is no wonder that Jesse would have not even considered bringing his youngest boy to the line-up. Unlike Cinderella's step-mother, typically portrayed as evil, David's father innocently would have thought his youngest son was not ready to be chosen.

But God prompts Samuel to ask Jesse, *who's not here?* Perhaps we, too, are called to take notice that – regardless of intent – our assumptions about who belongs and who is ready to serve can also be limiting. In this text that is so much about sight and appearance, we are called to pay attention and ask similar questions in our churches and communities. Who is not here? Who else belongs? Who has been excluded or forgotten?⁴

So, Samuel secretly anoints David – a young boy working as a shepherd outside an out-of-the-way town – as God's future king while Saul is still reigning. For the next fifteen chapters of First Samuel, the conflict between Saul and David – the current king and the king-to-be; a conflict that neither of them created – balloons from rivalry to jealousy to deadly hostility. Saul, the recognized king of Israel, is determined to destroy David, his heir; who – time after time – eludes his grasp.

The story of David's anointing as Israel's future king is, thus, beset by tremendous ambiguity; both human and divine. Despite its outward resemblance to fairy tales and reality shows, it is by no means simple. This is a story of shadow and deception, all orchestrated by God with Samuel as his grieving, though willing, accomplice. It mirrors, in some ways, Israel's own ambiguous experience with its monarchy: kings who wield great power and authority, waging battles and expanding the nation's territory and prestige; yet forgetting, time and again, God's desire to be worshipped alone and trusted above any human agent.

Despite David's super-sized role in Israel's story, this is the only week in this year's cycle of Narrative Lectionary readings that we encounter him. We will hear nothing else about his dramatic successes or moral failures. Maybe this is why it is so important to also look at Psalm 51 which – whether or not it was written with any one, specific sin in mind – reminds us of our overwhelming need for God's boundless

⁴ Gregory Rawn, "Who's Not Here?"

grace. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Paul says in the book of Romans. (3:23) As wide as God will search for us, that is how far God will remove our sins from us. This does not mean that there are no consequences to our wrongdoing – which is a lesson David certainly will learn – but it does mean that God is able to wipe the heart clean; to restore in us what which has become broken; and make us whole.

And it also means that one of the ways we may have been called– or may yet one day be called – is to offer testimony of God’s grace to others. Reminded, as we are, that God seeks out the younger, the less powerful, and the less likely; we are entreated to enter into this process of forgiveness: not casting others away or withholding our grace from them; but seeking restoration and a renewed spirit. God’s call does not mean that we, as humans, are perfect. We can and will sin; sometimes in dramatic and traumatic ways. And yet, without God’s forgiveness, we cannot move on. The way scripture speaks about David – the great king who is brought low by his sin – is designed to teach us just that lesson.

This is a story that tells us about the choosing of an unlikely king. It is about our God who will choose whomever God elects to choose. It becomes a story about a deeply flawed human being, surrounded by other deeply flawed human beings, each of whom attempts to discern the will of God for them, but just as often acts in whatever ways they decide; God or no.

Thus, it is also a story about each of us: beautifully created but flawed human beings who seek to know and follow God’s will for us; but who sometimes instead just do what we want. When those choices lead us to sin, we are called by God to repent and turn back to God; who wipes our hearts clean and restores us to the joy of salvation.

We can’t do this on our own. And yet, we have a role to play, because others around us – sometimes including those hidden from us – are angry, or grieving, or hurting, or stuck; they cannot see God’s desire for them to repent and return. Therefore, we reach out to them, we care for them, we proclaim and embody grace to them. And we trust that God will find them; just as we have been found. Amen.