

## “The Boy Who Would Be King”

Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, June 24, 2012

**Old Testament Lesson: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13**

**New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:25-31**

An African folk tale tells about a tribe whose men traditionally purchase wives in exchange for livestock. If a woman was especially beautiful, a man might offer her father five goats. If she was plain, only one or two. One year, as the tribe met at the oasis for their annual gathering, one young man set his eye upon a rather ordinary-looking maiden. To the astonishment of his friends, he went to the father and offered him ten goats for her. The father was surprised and delighted with his good fortune. He accepted the young man's offer instantly, and the two young people were married right away. A year went by and the tribe again gathered at the oasis. The young men laughed and pointed at their friend as he arrived from the hills. “And how is your ten-goat bride?” they asked, snickering. At that very moment, in walked the most lovely woman any of them had ever seen. “What's the matter?” their friend asked. “Don't you recognize the woman I married?” Truly, they hadn't. She had changed. What had changed about her was the knowledge that her husband loved her so much, he had paid 10 goats for her. And it was this knowledge, this inner awareness, that made her truly beautiful.

The ancient Israelites demanded for themselves a king so they could be like other nations – a 10-goat king, if you will, the handsome, tall, strong King Saul. And in demanding such a king – such a force – to rule over them, they unknowingly limited themselves when it came to what God was prepared to give them. While the Israelites were bound and determined to have things work out their way, God was even more determined to lead them toward a better way.

Last Sunday, we saw that God was not too keen about granting the Israelites' demand for a king like Saul. And yet God hung in there. God honored their struggle to make right choices in an increasingly complicated and diverse world. And in doing so, God gave them what they wanted, for the time being. You see, God knows the end-game no matter what it takes to bring the Israelites along to it. According to 1 Samuel, “The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul King over Israel,” and still he did it. God gave the Israelites what they wanted rather than force his will upon them. This is what it's like in becoming a people of God. We have to learn to discern and accept God's will even when it makes little or no sense to us, even when we don't see the end-game, even when we have a “better,” or “easier,” or “safer” idea in the midst of a particular situation. We have to learn to discern and accept God's will, trusting that, in the end, **God knows better.**

Our vision of what's better, easier, or safer – of what's the right way to proceed in a given situation – is not necessarily God's vision. God has a vision for your life, just like God had a vision for the Israelites. But first, God allowed the Israelites to see for themselves what happens when they have things their way. Remember, from last week, what they learned about King Saul, that he would (quote) “take your sons” and “take your daughters,” and “appoint for himself commanders ... and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest,” and that King Saul would amass “implements of war and ... chariots (and pay for these things with the) best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards....” God allows us to have things our way, if that's what *we think* we want, if that's what we demand at the time.

God allows this because, even though God knows a better way, God already knows and ensures the ultimate outcome regardless of how we choose to get there or how long it might take us. God takes even our misguided ways and turns them toward his divine goal. And through this process of trial and error on our part and divine patience on God's part, we are shaped into an ever more faith people. God uses the choices we make amid this complex and diverse world to bring us back, again and again, to God's way of seeing things.

When Samuel goes to Bethlehem, he finds the sons of Jesse just as the Lord had instructed him. But along the way, Samuel hems and haws a bit, doesn't he? (And so do the people of Israel.) Samuel's first response to the Lord is, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord tells him just how to proceed. And by doing things God's way, Samuel's fears are quieted. The Israelites were afraid at first, too, weren't they? When Samuel arrived at Bethlehem, "the elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?'" They couldn't see that Samuel was sent by the Lord and, thus, could come no other way but in peace.

We get like that, don't we? The Lord sends us an opportunity, or a challenge, or a new situation, and our first reaction is often fear and worry. "Is this going to work out for me? I've never done this before, will I succeed, will I be OK?" We live in a world of risk and uncertainty, and so God shows us the way to assurance and peace.

During my earlier career, I worked for a provider of services for people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities; you know – group homes, supported-employment programs, adult day-centers and sheltered workshops. We followed a philosophy of care called "Dignity of Risk." Dignity of Risk means giving people the chance to take the risks that go along with ordinary life, the risks that are necessary for personal growth and development. It is quiet different from the idea of "protecting" people with mental retardation by placing them in large institutions and not letting them do the things other people do. And Dignity of Risk is why we, as children of God, get to choose wrongly. God does not place us in a protective bubble where life is all nice and safe and predictable. God allows us to have our own way in life, God allows us to take risks, to take the wrong paths and make wrong choices. God allows us the dignity of risk that we might experience spiritual growth and development.

The story of the ancient Israelites – and our story, too – is the story of God's people learning to have the dignity of risk, learning to make mistakes and then to respond by following God's will as best we can.

In life, we need to decide how we're going to live our lives, we need to figure out how to make choices and decisions in keeping with God's will, choices and decisions that result in the peace, joy and love that God promises is ours for the taking, if we learn to see things as God sees them – right is right and wrong is wrong, and in the end there's no covering it up or getting around it.

The story goes that there were two evil brothers. They were rich, and used their money to keep up appearances. They even attended the same church, and looked to be perfect Christians. Then, a new pastor was hired, and he could see right through their deception. This pastor spoke well and true, and the church started to grow, so much so that a fundraising campaign was launched to build a new fellowship hall. All of a sudden, one of the brothers died. The remaining brother came to the new pastor the day before the funeral and handed him a check for the amount needed to pay for the new building. "I have only one condition," he said. "At my brother's funeral, you must say he was a saint." The pastor gave his word, and deposited the check. The next day at the funeral, the pastor did not hold back. "He was an evil man," said the pastor. "He cheated on his wife and abused his family."

After going on like this for some time, the pastor concluded with these words: “But compared to his brother, he was a saint.”

In following King Saul, the Israelites didn't care if he was a saint. They just wanted to be like other nations, and to have a king who was handsome, tall and strong. But God wanted even more for them than they could imagine, and so it is for us. God wants more for us than we can imagine, because unlike us, **God knows what's truly possible** if we live according to God's word.

Our notion of what's possible in life is based too much on our own perceptions and too little on God's promises. We see this in God's selection of David the shepherd boy to be the next king of Israel. God shows us that God's values are not our values.

Samuel goes through seven of Jesse's sons before coming to David, before seeing the promise and virtue of David as the next king of Israel. The first son that Samuel examines is Eliab, the eldest; a tall, good looking man. But God says to Samuel, “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 it was the same with Abinadab and Shammah and all the others. Samuel examines all the sons that Jesse has gathered before him, and not one is acceptable. He has looked at the situation every which way and still not landed upon a solution in keeping with God's will.

We can relate to that, can't we? We rarely choose instinctively the most faithful path or make the most virtuous decision. Most often, we need to work at it a bit, don't we? We need to go through a little trial and error in coming to live our lives as God would have us live, and thus, enjoy the assurance of God's blessing. Trial and error is how God teaches us, by the grace of God, to see things God's way and to make choices in keeping with God's will, choices that reflect our lives as covenant people.

How else can the Lord ensure the blessings he has in store for us unless we are taught to better discern God's will, to know what's truly possible and come to expect it for ourselves as God's faithful people?

David was not the king Israel expected. But David was the one God chose. God chose a shepherd boy, placed within that boy the divine hopes and dreams of God's people. And through Samuel, God anointed David with “the spirit of the Lord,” knowing what's possible with God.

Next week, we conclude our journey alongside the Israelites as they grow into a mighty nation, a nation seeking God's will and striving to live under God's rule. Join us, won't you, in seeing how God uses the shepherd boy David to accomplish one of God's greatest feats – bringing down tyranny and terror through the power of courage and faithfulness.

And for now, know that as followers of Christ, we like David have been given the Holy Spirit to guide and protect us. We have been shown what's possible with God. So let's look for that this week and beyond, looking at our challenges and our opportunities as God's way of directing us and shaping us. And let us realize that as long as we stand up to life's challenges with courage and faith, God will bless us at just the right time and in just the right way. Because, God knows better than we do, God knows what's truly possible more than we do, and **God knows how to bless us** better than we do.

**Amen.**

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Almighty God, we thank you that you never ask us to do anything without equipping us to respond in obedience. Through the gift of your Spirit, we receive the grace of your constant and faithful presence. And yet, still we fail to act when you call us to service, or to see a way forward when you stand ready to lead us.

Instill within us, O Lord, the faith to trust you rather than our circumstances. Help us to turn to you for the light to illuminate our path. Let us open ourselves to your guidance and claim for ourselves the power and wisdom of a people of the covenant.

Living in your Spirit, following your direction, and embracing your ways, we are enabled to overcome all obstacles, endure any struggle, and triumph over the toughest circumstances. So empower your people, God, that those who are suffering hunger – both actual and spiritual – may be fed; that those who are ill may be healed; that those who grieve may be comforted.

For you did not come to us in failure but in triumph, not in want but in plenty, not in sadness but in joy. Through you, O Lord, is the pathway to a peace more powerful than war, a healing stronger than any frailty, and a Word able to lay low the most destructive thoughts or actions. And so it is to your word that we know turn, repeating together the prayer that you taught us saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

**Amen.**