

## God's Will and My Dreams

Eric Peterson  
I Samuel 16:1-13

February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
First Presbyterian Church-Bryan

We are all familiar with the old saying, "Looks can be deceiving." We say this in all sorts of surprising situations- the moments our expectations are upended and what we perceived to be true with our eyes isn't the full story. God's selection of David is a similar surprise- an upending of our expectations, a challenge to the world we see with our limited senses- and therefore a perfect story to examine in this Season of Lent. Our intention in Lent is to search our own hearts, our thoughts, our actions, our dreams- everything that makes us who we are, so that we can be more faithful to the one who created us. In Lent, we ask God to look at our hearts and clean up the mess. We reveal ourselves again and again to our God, who sees us in all senses of the word- past what we can see about one another and ourselves. And we trust that God will do this, will absolve the messiness of human hearts, because we believe that our God is a God of grace, who sees who we are, into the depths of our being, and offers mercy. We pray that God works in us to be beacons of light in what is so often a dark and tumultuous world.

One of the primary messages of this story is that God provides for the welfare of the people, just as God previously provided deliverance from Pharaoh; God provided manna water, and the law in the wilderness; a land during the settlement; and guidance and leadership during the period of the judges. As God did in the past, God was again venturing out ahead of the people, authoring the scroll of their story before it had yet been unrolled.

God's guidance is usually not as discernable in the moment as it is in hindsight. We may not ever be able to fully discern God's will or make sense of what God is doing in our midst or how God is leading us. As illustrated in this passage, even the great prophet Samuel did not know what God was doing. This story, as it is with so much of the Old Testament, affirms that God's "providence" operates beyond the spectrum in which our sight operates, but even so we remain within God's view. Note also that God's eye here is communal. In our age we tend to individualize so many of the messages of the Bible. Here, it is important to note that it is the *community of faith* that is under God's care. Neither Saul nor David's older brothers might have understood the way in which God was providing for Israel as a good way, God might not have been providing in accordance with their dreams or aspirations, but God's eyes were on the people as a whole and not merely the individuals.

The central drama in 1 Samuel 16 is a much-loved story. Jesse brings each of his first seven sons before Samuel to see which son would be anointed as king. There was one more son, but he was the youngest and of such little account that Jesse left him out in the field tending the sheep. In the ancient Near East, the shepherd was a symbol of the king. Ancient audiences would have been touched by the irony that the one who was thought too insignificant to be considered for the role of king was actually already fulfilling his future vocation: shepherding the flock. When David was brought forth, the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."

This brief narrative drama--beautiful in its use of irony, suspense, and reversal of expectations--plays upon the contrast between seeing and hearing. The chapter's key word "see" is again in play, especially in v. 7, where it occurs five times. The problem is that Samuel is relying on his human sense of vision, which will not do for the work of God. But as 1 Sam 16:3 emphasizes, Samuel's job was not so much to see as to listen: "you shall anoint for me the one whom I *name* to you." The message is rather clear. When dealing with matters of God's actions and will, human sight can be inadequate.

This dimension of the text rings out loudly in our cultural context. We rely for almost everything on our sight, but it often proves untrustworthy.

What a powerful, countercultural message that this text has to offer us and our times! How often do we overlook people or underestimate people based on their age or how they look?

In my work with youth, I've often heard the stereotypical challenges of working with this population- they don't care about anything other than their social media profiles, they crave "likes" and "tweets" more than human interaction, and the culture of celebrating small successes and "giving everyone a trophy" will impact their future potential for future growth and meaningful impact on our world. But contrary to all of that, I have so often found myself inspired by young people.

As a recent example, when our society is plagued by gun violence, we see how the tables turn and it is young people, not the adults, taking a united stand to work for the welfare of everyone. They use social media with great efficiency to plan and share advocacy opportunities and they bring their dreams together for a just purpose. Through horrific violence and despair, they rise to become advocates for peace and for justice. It moved me to tears to see these emerging adults being bold and

courageous in doing the hard work of making their dreams of a peaceful world a reality.

In Lent, we are preparing ourselves for the good news that through Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and freed from all that would hold us back from our relationship with God. Our text from 1 Samuel reminds us that rather than keeping a chart of our good and bad deeds, or looking at our appearances, God judges by looking at our hearts. God calls us because God knows our deepest dreams and desires to do good – to do what is right. Perhaps this is because, as those God has created, we are close to God's heart. And that's good news.

In Ephesians, Paul writes about what it means to be close to God, as beloved children who have been claimed by Christ. He speaks about the importance of living into the covenant relationship God intends, as understood in God's commandments. To love God and love others as we love God. Then, we're presented with the verses we read today, a clear distinction of how we have been chosen by God, and brought into the light. God looks beyond popularity and physical prowess and sees into the prowess of the heart.

In Lent, we in our self-reflection can often feel that there are others around us who we might think are more capable or qualified. But God's will for us is bigger than that. God accepts us. God knows us. God works through us to have us be active participants in this redeeming world. This is the gift our texts reveal today. The gift is that God accepts us, and loves us beyond measure. We are children of light, now, claimed and loved by God-called to live out what God intends for us. For all of us, this moment was signified with our baptisms. Sometimes it happened so long ago that we may have forgotten what it means to be a part of God's team. Lent is about recovering that basic identity, which includes returning our hearts to God in humility and faith. There, we will find acceptance beyond compare.

This is a gift, though, with some pretty big implications for those of us who have received it. As children of light, we are called to live like it. We are called to trust in God, in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit to work through us and guide us to fulfill our dreams and desires that God has for us..

It starts by trying to see others the way God sees them. This means letting go of our pre-conceived notions about who is favored, or who God loves, and instead try to look beyond the superficial and see into the heart. Scholar David Hester says that:

"This, I suggest, is the logic of seeing through the eyes of faith and a logic that participates in the divine point of view. Christians practicing faith by this logic of "heart-seeing" are looking at others and at life through a storied perspective that pays special attention to the heart of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. Such "heart-seeing,"

conversely, pays less attention to wondering about the character and behavior of others in the human community and the created order, to who we are sent as Christ's disciples" (*Interpretation Bible Studies: First and Second Samuel*).

This is what God called Samuel to do. To let go of what he had done and seen in the past with his false dreams and instead pay attention to how God's will and how God saw the world. He did this from a position of grief, and perhaps from a place where he felt totally unqualified. After all, the one that he had sought out and stood beside, Saul, had not worked out. I wonder if Samuel doubted his ability to even see or hear anything God was calling him to do. But God promises to sit alongside him, if he will be open enough to let his eyes be God's eyes. And he does, and in that allows God to point him to the most unlikely scenario. Samuel is presented with the opportunity to practice God's gift of acceptance, extending that to David, the youngest son, the shepherd, and the unlikely king.

We are called, like Samuel, to listen and discern where God is leading us, ready to offer acceptance ourselves to others that we may meet. Stories like David's selection as king remind us that there is more to success than meets the eye. We've been reminded of this watching the Olympics these past few weeks- just because a team is bigger, literally taller, or stronger or more experienced doesn't mean they will be victorious. The chosen part by God part has to do with far more than outward appearances. Given this, we must look beyond the superficial and use different criteria than the world would otherwise demand.

We have to look with our hearts and see with our hearts our dreams of the kin-dom world that God intends for us. Then, we might also be able to find our own place in God's story, hearing our own name called and taking our place alongside others who are children of light. In both, we might begin to understand the radical nature of God's gift of grace and love. Our dreams as a faith filled people are what God's purpose is for us. To be a people working to make peaceful and just world and striving for that continually in our future. Just as another inspiring young person whose name may be familiar. Malala Yousafzai is an extraordinary young person who is the youngest Nobel laureate, and a tireless advocate for the right for girls to have their dreams fulfilled through equal access to education. Malala's youth and inexperience and dangerous environment didn't distract her from working to reconcile our world with God's vision for it. She professed to humanity to, "make our future now, and let us make our dreams tomorrow's reality."

So while the intersection of God's will or purpose and our dreams may not be easy to discern, our God's expansive love will broaden our sight to respond with that same expansive love. All honor and praise be to God.