

*Not Even in the Room*

A Sermon on 1 Samuel 16:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major

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Our understanding of the world is often very far from the truth. We are often not headed in the right direction. Many times we aren't even looking in the right room, so to speak. We need God's vision. We need God's vision if we have any hope of living in goodness, living in love, living in truth.

There is a big difference between our vision and God's vision. This is one of the main ideas of the story of Samuel and the sons of Jesse from the Book of Samuel. Let's take a few minutes to remember some of the context for this story.

Let's recall that in chapter eight, Samuel and the Lord responded to the demands of the people of Israel to have a king rule over them, like other nations. Through Samuel, the Lord had warned the people that in the end, they would become slaves of any king who would rule over them, a particularly poignant warning to people whose relatives had been slaves in Egypt. Nonetheless, the people demanded to have a king. So Samuel anointed Saul as the first King of Israel in chapters nine and ten. Saul had a movie star kind of appeal. He was tall, standing head and shoulders above everyone else. Everyone was impressed with his appearance, and they all shouted "Long live the king!"

Saul brought significant military successes to the nation, but he didn't follow the directions given by the Lord. Saul also lacked wisdom and consideration for the people he was leading. His concern was to consolidate his own power rather than respecting the commandments of the Lord. Saul's story is the bedrock of the idea that, for God's people, it's not acceptable to break the rules to accomplish our goals. God's people are not to pursue victory with no concern for the harms they are bringing.

Saul showed his lack of faithfulness by constantly pretending the rules did not apply to him and by violating basic standards of decency. In today's passage we see the effects this had on the loose collection of tribes that would become the nation of Israel under King David. By the end of chapter fifteen Samuel grieved over Saul, and the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. In our passage from chapter sixteen, the elders of the town are fearful and trembling when Samuel approaches Bethlehem. They don't want to have any controversy related to the king or other leaders, like Samuel.

In the beginning of chapter sixteen, *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 provided for myself a king among his sons."*

Then we hear the story of Saul anointing the next king of Israel. You and I know the end of the story, which is that Jesse's youngest son, David, will be anointed king. You and I know that one of David's first deeds as the anointed one will be to kill Goliath, the most deadly, fearsome warrior of the Philistines. You and I also remember some of David's great mistakes. We should also remember that, when all was said and done, David was the greatest king of Israel, in spite of his mistakes.

With all of these ideas as the context for today's reading, let's focus our attention on two verses in the middle of the passage. *When Jesse's sons came, Samuel looked on Eliab, the eldest, and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD." But 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."*

David was not even in the room as Samuel was looking for the one who will be the next king of the nation. Samuel was carrying with him a horn of oil for anointing the next king. All of

the adults in the room could see the true purpose for Samuel's visit. Jesse had not even considered that his youngest son, not yet a man, might be chosen as the next king of Israel.

It's often the same way for us. We are often ignorant or blind to God's intentions, to the ways that will bring goodness to our lives. We desperately need God's vision to guide us. We get into the greatest amount of trouble when we are most confident that we are right and that our opponents are wrong. People are constantly turning away from God's vision because they are so very sure of their own vision of the world.

Today let's consider one particular form of blindness that has had a direct effect on half the members of our congregation in some way, large or small. I am speaking of the decisions of most Christian churches to permit girls and women to participate, but only in secondary, subordinate ways.

Of course, we could go back and look at centuries of blindness in the church, but we don't have to look back that far. In our own church, at St. Paul's, women have not been permitted to serve on the vestry for most of our 197 years of existence. In our own church, the Episcopal Church, the ordination of women as priests and bishops was not permitted until 1977.

This mistake was clearly the result of our own blindness about God's intentions. God's intention is for there to be more love among us. Love is promoted by simple things, such as that we are all equal in God's eyes and that telling the truth is the basis for relationships of respect. We have been blind to the truth that girls and women bring equal gifts of intelligence, wisdom, and leadership and are to be accorded equal rights and responsibilities.

I was particularly struck by a story shared by one of the priests in our diocese recently. She recalled that, as a girl growing up in a conservative church, she constantly had to lie about her grades in school, because it was not acceptable for girls to appear to be more intelligent or capable than boys. She recalled that during youth Sunday services she was permitted to sing in the choir but never to read a scripture lesson, serve communion, or preach a sermon. She had decided, by the age of fifteen, that God certainly did not love her, because if God really loved her, God would have either made her a boy, or would have made her not so smart. A God who loved her would never have done anything so cruel as to give life to a girl who was more intelligent than all of the boys. Many of the women sitting here today could share a similar sort of story.

Our blindness continues to endanger the lives and the well-being of women and girls. Women and girls in the United States suffer because we are deliberately making health care worse for them. Women in America have been in greater danger of dying during and after giving birth than any other advanced nation for many years. The tragedy is that most of these deaths could be prevented with better health care. During the past twenty years the maternal mortality rate in almost every nation in the world has fallen, except in the United States, where it has risen dramatically. Giving birth is more dangerous for women in the United States, than it is for women in Bulgaria, Hungary, Iran or about 70 other countries. The dangers of poor health care for women and girls in America have only increased since last June. In 2023, in America, pregnant girls and women in dangerous healthcare situations are prevented from receiving essential medical care in fourteen states.

Our blindness leads to tragic loss of life and tragic loss of love. We are like Samuel, standing in Jesse's house, not even considering that the one he is looking for isn't even in the room. The solutions and the vision we need, are often not even in the room, since women are often not even in the room when decisions are being made about their healthcare.

This is a personal issue, and a societal issue, and a spiritual issue. So, we confess our blindness, and the tragic results of our self-confidence. We make a sort of ritual out of asking one another, "what is it that we are not seeing in this situation?" We commit ourselves to working together in faith and in mutuality. And we pray God's vision will be in the center of our lives.