

## What Kind of Leader?

1 Samuel 16:1-13

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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In these stories in 1 & 2 Samuel, we find God's people living in the "Promised Land," the place God led our ancestors after their Exodus from Egypt. But as we find them, they are not experiencing strength and security in this land. Most of the time, they are afraid. Afraid of the stronger kingdoms and armies around them, and afraid that the grievances among them will fester and divide them. They're afraid. **Fear makes people do dumb things.**

Into this fearful state, comes Samuel to lead God's people. Mary Anona did a beautiful job highlighting Samuel's character. There's a sweetness to Samuel, an openness, a faithful obedience. "God, here I am," he says. But just because Samuel is faithful, it doesn't protect him from hard things. One of those hard things is that Samuel's sons are knuckleheads: corrupt and selfish. So Samuel can't pass on leadership of God's people to his sons. Instead, something so interesting happens in 1 Samuel 8. Will you turn there? Remember, they people are afraid; fear makes people do dumb things. This life that God has provided them in the Promised Land—it's not enough. The people want to be powerful just like the nations around them—they want a king of their own! Samuel hears them and he takes this request to God in prayer and God says, "Sam, tell the people they don't want a king. Kings are bad, corrupt, tyrants, and they will always lord power over you." Samuel tells the people, "God says, 'you really don't want a king.'" The people say, "psssh. Yeah, we do!" God says, "You want a king instead of me, you can have it."

Let's stop here. Did you learn this passage growing up? It's crazy to me is how badly we teach the Bible. How many of you grew up thinking that King David and King Solomon were Biblical heroes? They're lousy. These king stories are not "hero" stories. The point of these stories about kings is clear from this beginning: kingship is a bad idea. Putting too much power in any flawed person's hands is wrong. As 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings play out, you can read about hundreds of years in which God people are subjected to the leadership of doofuses. Kings who exploit people, hoard wealth, reject God. It leads to God's prophets and to what feels like the inevitable desolation of the Exile. The story says it's not God's fault. It's not even the kings' fault. It's ours. We asked for this. We were afraid. We wanted power instead of love. We wanted worldly security instead of God.

That's how you should approach today's story—this "origin story" of "the great" King David. As we begin, God has just rejected Samuel's first choice for king, Saul, because he didn't slaughter the cows of his enemies. Open-hearted Samuel must go looking for another king:

**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 (this will be for anointing the new king) and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." <sup>2</sup>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.’”<sup>3</sup> 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.” (so there’s kind a bait-and-switch going on here... Samuel’s going to pretend to invite everyone to a religious celebration, but really it’s the selection of a new monarch).<sup>4</sup> Samuel did what the Lord commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling (people in the countryside never want the agent of the king to show up—he’s either there to collect taxes or to enlist them in a conspiracy) and they said, “Do you come peaceably?”<sup>5</sup> He said, “Peaceably. I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And Samuel sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. (they’re willing to go along if it gets Samuel out of town)<sup>6</sup> When they came, Samuel looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely his anointed is now before the Lord.”<sup>7</sup> 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; mortals look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (this is super interesting, because God chose the last king, Saul, based on how much of a stud he was; but it is definitely true that God looks at our hearts).<sup>8</sup> Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.”<sup>9</sup> Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.”<sup>10</sup> Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.”<sup>11</sup> Samuel 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.”<sup>12</sup> He sent and brought him in. Now the boy was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. (God may look only at the heart, but it doesn’t hurt that David is kind of hunky, too) The Lord said, “Rise and anoint him, for this is the one.”<sup>13</sup> Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers, and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

### **What are we supposed to make of this story?**

The story of David—and the whole history of Israel in which this story is found—was written after the House of David had been crushed by the Babylonians—just before or during the Exile (587BCE). So what? It means these stories look back hundreds of years earlier to a bygone “glory days.” “Back in the day, there was a King with such a big heart for God, who led our people into greatness.” You can understand the value of such a story: for a people facing ruin, facing exile, a story like this might sustain you; you imagine a once and future king. We do the same thing: when our leaders fail, we imagine an even greater leader who will rise up and lift us from the mire of our present circumstances: *if only we had another David...* another FDR, another Lincoln. It’s the trap people fell into with Barack Obama. We look for saviors.

Don’t. Don’t read about King David and think that the point is that “once upon a time our leaders were good and all we need is another “great” leader like David.” David’s no hero. “David... is cunning, mocking, self-serving (*David’s Truth*, 10)” —that’s not me, that’s Walter Brueggemann. David’s more of a “trickster” than a “great man”—he survives by his wits and cleverness, not because he was virtuous, or even good.

Some people think David’s story gets preserved not as a prototype for a future great king, but his story encodes something revolutionary into the political DNA of God’s people. Think of David as less FDR and more Che Guevara. Brueggemann says that this story authorizes:

the marginal ones to become the legitimate holders of power.... David is a model for the last becoming first, and his story should only be told when we intend to make that subversive claim” (13)

Eugene Peterson, the great spiritual writer, makes a similar claim about this David story: the story is not about a great king, but about what a great God can do with anyone of us—maybe even knuckleheads. Peterson writes:

Throughout my childhood, in my mother's telling of the story, I *became* David. I was always David. I'm still David. It's the intent and skill of this scriptural storyteller to turn everyone who reads or hears the story into realizing something essentially Davidic about him or herself: 'In my insignificant, sheep-keeping obscurity, I am chosen.' ...The choice of David, the runt and the shepherd, to be the anointed, to be a sign and representative of God's working presence in human life and history, is surely intended to convey a sense of inclusion to all ordinary men and women... Which is to say the overwhelming majority of all who have lived on this old planet earth.

Election into God's purposes isn't by popular vote. It's God's decision. God can choose any of us. Perhaps the David story shows that God does exactly that.

Are you seeing it? These stories aren't "great man" stories about how God raises up leaders to bring a nation power and strength. They are stories about how greatness lies in everyone of us, mixed up with all of our faults. Greatness—which in our frame of reference is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—is poured out on all flesh. All of us are leaders-in-waiting.

**There's one more thing I think this story wants to tell us about leadership.**

Whenever we see an institution in crisis—government, business, church—you often hear the diagnosis: it's a failure of leadership.

Yes, leadership matters. Leaders can inspire and motivate, create good cultures, and help navigate change. Poor leadership can destroy people, families, organizations, and nations.

I think the claim from this story is that leaders are inseparable from followers. Show me a great leader and I will claim the great followers came first. Show me a poor leader, and I will say it's just a person who embodies the flaws of those who made them a leader in the first place. Greatness is not something that happens in an individual and flows out to the community. Greatness comes from the community first and flows eventually through an individual chosen to lead.

Want better institutions? Want a stronger, more just society? Don't look for a leader who will get you there. Make the organization or community better and stronger yourself. Grow yourself. Take responsibility for your part of God's garden. Build relationships with kindred spirits. Work together, solve problems. Don't wait for a leader to do it. Never trust an organization that relies too heavily on one person; it will always fail. Our Presbyterian system is marvelous because it honors the truth that our God works in every person. We have no need for heroic leadership. God gives the body all the gifts that it needs.

In this church, there's no one leader. There are dozens; hundreds, even. Each of us is called to lead in different ways at different times. When we are called, this shared system frees

each of us from any delusions of grandeur, and any idea that God's future is up to us. Our leadership philosophy in this place should be the same as our discipleship philosophy: every one of us is called to love God and neighbor with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and help each other do the same.

Great followers make great leaders.

As I read the story of David, and as I think about the mess that our nation is in today, I keep going back to 1 Samuel 8, and remark how afraid everyone was. How we make such dumb decisions when we are afraid. Only fearful people want a king.

Remember how often and how consistently scripture tells us "do not be afraid." 145 times, give or take.

What kind of leader do we look for when we are not afraid anymore? I think when love is in us, when we trust in that love, we see leaders everywhere; even when we look at the face in the mirror. God calls all of us to follow and to lead.