

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – March 6, 2005
“Take a Good Look”

I Samuel 16: 1-13. Ephesians 5: 8-14

Lent 4/A

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Seeing and knowing, trusting and believing. Seeing not as we see, but what God sees. Knowing not what the world has taught us, but what God teaches. Trusting not in what we think we see, but what God would have us see. Believing not in our own power, but in God’s power to transform even what we can still not fully comprehend. This is what I hear God teaching us through Samuel’s story is all about. This episode from the Hebrew Scriptures has all the makings of a good political intrigue. Saul failed to meet God’s expectations as a spiritual leader, and was rejected in favor of an unexpected new ruler that would have been on no one’s short list. Using a ritual sacrifice as a ruse the king’s prophet/political advisor anoints an unknown as the next king of Israel in a secret ceremony to which the would be king was not even invited.

Samuel has the unenviable task to find and anoint a new king. Whether Saul likes it or not, his rule is over. It is time to move on. We meet Samuel in the middle of his own pity party, hoping he can avoid what he knows God is sending him to do. He worries that if Saul finds out what he is up to, he will kill him. Nevertheless, God sits Samuel down and gives him a pep talk, or better his marching orders. Samuel could sit around complaining and grieving about Saul, or he could show faith in what he knows to be true, that God will never fail him—and strike out into the unknown to do as God commands. Samuel has no idea what will happen next. We know God chooses David to be king. We know this is essential for the rest of salvation history. *We* know the role David plays, but Samuel and the others are still in the dark.

Sometimes we just have to move on. God has chosen a new ruler, a Bethlehemite, a son of Jesse. God tells Samuel to fill his horn and find this new king. Samuel is naturally apprehensive so God devises a plan. If anyone asks why Samuel is in Bethlehem, he is to tell him he has come to make a sacrifice. The plan seems to work. When nervously ask whether he comes peaceably, Samuel assures the elders he is there to make a sacrifice and summons Jesse to meet him.

Dutifully he sanctifies Jesse and his seven sons. They are not aware of the true nature of Samuel’s visit. When Jesse’s sons arrive, Samuel starts sizing them up, wondering which one God has chosen. First there is Eliab. He is strong and good-looking. Samuel assumes he must be the one. But the Lord says 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.” Samuel soon realizes this is not going to be as easy as he had hoped. Thus the scene continues, with Abinadab and Shammah and the rest of Jesse’s sons. All are as handsome and seemingly capable as the next yet all are rejected by God. Now Samuel is perplexed. God would not have sent him on this mission only to return empty handed. He asks Jesse if there are any other sons. “Well,” Jesse replies, “only our youngest son, David, who is out back tending the sheep. You couldn’t possibly have been sent here for him.” David is the youngest, the smallest, and in the wrong line of work. What could God possibly want with him? Still, when David arrives, Samuel is relieved to observe that he is just as handsome as the seven brothers before him. God assures Samuel that David is the one God has chosen. How difficult it is for even Samuel to change his ways and to see with the heart of God.

God’s choices confound us. God sees with the heart. God sets a different standard. God works in mysterious ways. God fashions a plan for our lives that we don’t always understand. The late Rabbi Abraham Heschel used to say that the function of the prophets is **interference**, that God’s message through the prophets will not leave us to our own devices. We don’t understand God’s choice because we still do not see as God sees. “Why David,” we ask. This makes no sense. What about the elder brothers? This hardly seems fair to them. This story is not about fairness, it is not about our sense of who is worthy. This story is about what God sees, what God deems worthy, how God decides to intervene and interfere in our lives. It is about *what* God sees and *how* God sees that is completely different from our way of seeing. Samuel’s story is about letting go of his notions of worthiness to see a different way, to look not on the outward appearances, but to see with the heart.

Seeing and knowing, trusting and believing. This is how we see with the heart. We know how Samuel might have felt. We know his resistance to move on, to want to wallow in the moment even if that moment is less than perfect. We understand his confusion. We can’t move forward until we are willing to put the past behind us and trust in God’s leading. Where have you been stuck? What has that been like? Samuel reminds us how quickly we seek to come up with a whole host of reasons why we can not do some new thing. Sometimes we think we ought to leave well enough alone and let things work themselves out. However, deep in our hearts, we know this is not what God has in mind for us. God would not have sent Samuel to find a new king if God were satisfied to leave well enough alone. “Fill your horn with oil and go,” the Lord tells Samuel. Fill your horn and go.

God promises to anoint a new leader, initiate a new beginning, lead us beyond what has been. One preacher comments that “the will of the Lord may only be visible to those

who are blind enough to see it, and only discovered by those willing to ask if there is yet another alternative.” Seeing and knowing, trusting and believing. This is how God leads us into the future, by seeing and knowing, trusting and believing. It is true. We don’t have all the answers. It is true we don’t always know why God is leading us in any particular direction. It is true that we will grumble and moan and wonder why in the world we are doing it this way. It is true that God’s way may not always make sense to us. But God has a plan for us, just as he had a plan for Samuel and the people of Israel. Saying no to God was not an option for Samuel nor is it an option for us. It is time to move on. It is time to fill our horns with oil.

What is God leading you to see differently in your life? At South Church, God has not sent us to anoint a new king, but a new vision. We have heard the call to move on yet, we can so easily get stuck. Perhaps the most obvious way is not God’s way. Perhaps the most obvious leader is not the one God has chosen. Perhaps the one that God intends to lead us into our future is still out back tending the sheep. What is obvious to us is not always what God intends. Perhaps it is time for us to seek another alternative. In order to see with the heart we must first prayerfully and intentionally seek to discern God’s will. Not what makes us feel safe or comfortable, but what God is calling us to be and do.

David had no idea what he was in for when he was called in from the pasture that day. If we are to see as God sees, to see with the heart, then like David, we must be ready to be plucked unexpectedly out of our safe and humble life to go wherever God sends us. I invite you to keep your eyes open in the weeks ahead. The United Church of Christ is running a second national advertisement as part of the God is Still Speaking campaign called “all the people.” In the a little girl is doing the hand game that we all learned in Sunday School, you know...“here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and see all the people.” She reminds us in a simple yet powerful way that God intends for ALL the people to be welcome in God’s house; not only the well dressed or the socially acceptable people, but all the people. This is our hope too, that all people would find a welcome in the house of God. However, we know that this is not always true. We wonder what would it be like to welcome the outcast, to sit next to the sinner, the socially dysfunctional, the one whom others have turned away. What would it be like to welcome one who has risen from his bed on the street to worship here. What if there were no dress codes (explicit or implicit). What if you could squirm or laugh or shout alleluia without anyone to make you feel uncomfortable. Is worship a place where we come to feel comfortable or where we know we will be comforted? Do we see the outward appearances or do we see one another with the heart of God?

Samuel’s journey teaches us something about our own journey. Seeing and knowing, trusting and believing. We can only do this with eyes and hearts of faith. The answers

do not lie in bylaws or annual reports. The answers are revealed in those moments when we are willing to look beyond the surface, beyond the outward appearances, to see instead with our heart. The answers will come to us, as they did to Samuel, from the least likely places and the unlikeliest faces. Only when we set aside our fears and apprehension to allow the spirit of God to dwell richly within us, can we step out into the unknown. Then we will see as God sees and become true children and servants of this still speaking God. May it be so. Amen