

1 Samuel 16:1–13

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.” 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.’ 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.” Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab 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.” Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.” 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.” He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Psalm 51:10–14

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.  
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing  
aloud of your deliverance.

When last we left Samuel, he was a young man being called by God. After that, he served God and served the Hebrew people as Judge and priest and leader for most of his life. He tried to set up his sons to follow in his footsteps, but they were not really judge material. They took bribes and perverted justice.

The Hebrew people responded to Samuel's sons not being judge material by calling for a king. All the other peoples around them had kings, why not them?

Samuel tried to warn the people that a king was a bad idea. He told them that a king would draft their children into government service, which was really serving the king. He told them that a king would tax them and that those taxes would pay the king's courtiers. But the people insisted.

So, God said, "Okay, okay. I'll give you a king."<sup>1</sup> God gave them exactly what they were asking for. God chose the biggest, strongest, most handsome young man of the tribe of Benjamin, a man named Saul, and had Samuel anoint him as king.<sup>2</sup>

At first, Saul was a great king. He was successful in battle. He was wise. He obeyed God, if not in everything he did, at least in most things.

But then Saul started doing things less and less God's way, and more and more Saul's way. He did all the things that Samuel had told the Hebrew people a king would do, and more besides. He destroyed things that God had told him to leave alone, and he took plunder that God had told him to destroy. It got to the point where he was simply ignoring God's commands. Finally, Samuel had to tell King Saul, "You have sinned too grievously, and God is taking the kingship away from you."

Samuel did not kill Saul. He told Saul that God was taking it away from him. Saul remained king for years, until he died in battle.

The story I read this morning takes place during that intervening time. Samuel grieved for Saul. He grieved for what had been and for what could have been. A kingdom united with a

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 8.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 9-10.

strong leader, truly in obedience to God's commands...Saul would have been such a simple, silver-bullet solution for the Hebrew people. But it was not to be.

“And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.” Yes, this is rare, but the Scriptures say that God regretted what God had done in making Saul king.<sup>3</sup>

God sends Samuel to anoint a new king, from among the sons of Jesse, in Bethlehem. You may remember the little town of Bethlehem from another point in this epic story, much later. This story this morning, the founder of the dynasty of Israel's kings coming from Bethlehem, is why the Messiah is born there a thousand years later.

Samuel comes to Bethlehem and talks with Jesse. Jesse brings Samuel his oldest son, Eliab. Eliab is a tall, broad-shouldered, attractive guy. He's like Saul -- he looks like a king. But the Lord tells Samuel, “Don't look at his height or his appearance. The Lord looks on the heart.” God says this is not the man.

Jesse calls in his number two son, Abinadab. He, too, looks like a king. But the Lord says no. It's the same story with Shammah, and then with four more sons. The Lord does not choose any of them.

Samuel is starting to think that he might have misunderstood what God was saying to him. “Jesse, God has truly blessed you. I mean, a family with seven sons is impressive. But do you have any more?”

Jesse says, “Well, yeah, there's David, the youngest, but he's keeping the sheep. He wasn't really old enough for this.”

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 15:35.

So, they send one of the other sons for David, and, when this slight little guy comes in, the Lord says to Samuel, “That’s the one.” Samuel anoints David as king, in front of his brothers.

The story of David is complicated.

He is a mighty warrior for the Lord.<sup>4</sup> He slays the giant Goliath.<sup>5</sup> He loves Saul’s son, Jonathon, even while feuding with Saul himself.<sup>6</sup> He marries Saul’s daughter Michal, and many other women besides.<sup>7</sup> He writes many of the psalms in our Bibles.

He conquers Jerusalem, and makes it the capital of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup> He would have built a temple for the Lord, but the Lord told him not to -- that was a job for a man without quite so much blood on his hands.

David also commits adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Her consent or lack thereof is not noted in the Scriptures, which indicates to me that it was not really a factor in what was happening here. When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, David first tries to convince Uriah that the child is Uriah’s. When that doesn’t work, he has Uriah killed through deception, then quietly marries Bathsheba.<sup>9</sup>

To say that the Lord is not pleased by this adultery and murder is like describing Hurricane Ophelia as a windy day. God sends the prophet Nathan to condemn David face to face. Bathsheba has her son, but the boy dies after a few days. David is absolutely devastated.<sup>10</sup> He

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Samuel 8, among others.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 17.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 18, 19:1-7, 20:1-42.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 18, 25:42-44, 2 Samuel 5:13-15.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Samuel 5:1-10.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Samuel 11.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Samuel 11-12.

writes the psalm that we read from twice this morning, in our confession of sins and in our second Scripture reading.<sup>11</sup>

Let's go back to our story here. God looks not on a person's appearance, but on the heart. God knows what kind of a heart is in David, before God has Samuel anoint him. God knows what kind of a man David is, and what kind of a man he will become, and God loves David anyway.

That does not make the bad things that David did acceptable. Generations of male leaders have pointed to David as some kind of an excuse for their own sins. Usually those sins are sexual in their surface nature. But the root of those sins, like David's with Bathsheba, is viewing someone less powerful than you as being less than fully human.

Every human being is created in God's own image. Every human being is worthy of being treated as their own human being, with the right, within the limits of their ability, to make their own choices, free of coercion.

That includes Bathsheba.

That includes her husband Uriah.

That includes subordinates.

That includes you.

Jesus said that whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to "hashtag me too."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> We used Psalm 51:1-9 as our confession of sins this morning.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 25: 35-45. The reference to the sexual-harassment- and sexual-assault-related #metoo movement on social media is entirely intentional.

Bathsheba and her husband Uriah are victims here. But they are David's victims, not God's. God did not set them up. God did not plan what would happen to them. God did not make it happen. And God does not give David a pass. God is extremely angry about what David does.

There are two truths to take from this story this morning, and they are linked together.

God knew what was in David's heart. God knows what is in your heart. And mine.<sup>13</sup>

If you are honest with yourself about what is in your heart, that should be terrifying.

There is not one of us who is truly worthy to stand before God. There is not a single human being who does not need to ask God for forgiveness for the things that we have said and done.

This applies even to the things we have said or done only in our hearts, things that no one else knows about.<sup>14</sup>

It is not merely an empty tradition that we confess our sins and receive an assurance of pardon every Sunday. It reflects a recognition of the reality of who and what we are.

This is Truth. But there is another truth that is linked to it, and they cannot be separated.

God knew what was in David's heart. And God loved David. God loved Bathsheba, too.

God knows what is in your heart. And God loves you.

God knows that you are a flawed human being.

Every one of us is.

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 16:15

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 5:21-22, 28.

One of the most amazing things about how God accomplishes things in the world is that God does it all through flawed human beings like me. And like David. And like you.

Confess your sins to God, and accept forgiveness. Then strive your hardest to do better.<sup>15</sup> And keep doing what God has called you to do. David and Bathsheba's son died. But they had another son whose name you might recognize. His name was Solomon,<sup>16</sup> and we will pick up the story with him next week.<sup>17</sup>

God calls the unworthy, and equips them to do God's work in the world.

People like Abraham, and Jacob.

People like Moses and Eli.

People like David.

People like me, and people like you.

Thank God!

Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." – Maya Angelou.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Samuel 12: 24-25, Matthew 1:6.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Kings 5:1-5, 8:1-13, if you want to read ahead.