



WHEN GOD CHOOSES A LEADER

June 17, 2018, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13

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O LORD, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

In a few weeks, I'm headed to Harrisonburg, Virginia to keynote two of Massanetta Springs' middle school conferences. Massanetta Springs, a Presbyterian Conference Center, is a special place for me and I was thrilled, albeit quite nervous, to be asked to participate. The theme this year is from Isaiah 43, and it reminds young people that they are created, called and claimed by God. "Y'all are mine" God says in the New Revised Southern Version of the Bible; the prophet reminds us that God is with us through all the storms and fires of life. This, frankly, is a theme we all need to hear, young and old alike, and I look forward to teaching this to middle schoolers.

I mention this today because as I've been drafting my keynotes and sermons for these conferences, my main goal has been to remind 12, 13 and 14 year olds that God has created them beautiful and that God can use them in wonderful ways in this world. If you think back to your years as a middle schooler, this is an uplifting message to hear because we all felt so awkward and insecure during those years, at least I did. But the truth is, God uses all people in ministry, no matter their age, experience or ability. This truth is at the heart of our passage about David today.

As we enter into this narrative about the anointing of David, it shouldn't be overlooked that the text begins with sadness. Samuel is upset because Saul, the first king anointed by God, is not who God wants to lead Israel in the months and



years to come. Saul fit the image of a king: handsome, strong and a great military leader.¹ But as we enter the story today God has other plans for the future leadership of the tribes. So, Samuel, the judge and priest is sent on a clandestine mission to Bethlehem, no easy journey, to anoint a new king. God gives Samuel the advice he needs, and Samuel follows God in this transition of leadership.

Soon, on this Father's Day, we meet Jesse, the father of 8 boys. He is invited to the sacrifice, and Samuel waits to see just which one of Jesse's sons will be king. But God does not choose any of the obvious older, stronger and more handsome boys. The Scripture tell us that "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."² Samuel has come to anoint the king and yet the one that God wants is not even there ... because the one that God chooses is the youngest and he's out in the fields tending the sheep. Someone is sent to fetch him and David is then anointed, the youngest son of Jesse, to be the next king of Israel.

If you've studied David's journeys in I and II Samuel, you know that David is a dynamic and thoughtful spiritual king for Israel. He's by no means perfect, but there are several qualities that set him apart from the narcissistic Saul before him and the greedy Solomon after. First, David is the young shepherd boy in this story, the youngest of eight sons. He is charismatic and attractive, even as a child. We later find out he's a musician and poet. As King, David leads the people in prayer and sacrifice, and much of our book of Psalms is attributed to his voice. He is also an administrator and a military leader. God sees something in David from the very beginning that sets him apart. The text says that it's because God looks at the heart. And because of that God chooses David to be the king par excellence of Israel. "It's about the heart, although really, it's just about God choosing whom God chooses."³ And in the choice of David God breaks with tradition and makes a fresh start for Israel with new leadership.

¹ 1 Samuel 9:2.

² 1 Samuel 16:7.

³ James Howell, *Weak Enough to Lead: What the Bible Tells us about Powerful Leadership*. Abingdon Press, 2017, page 27.



Although I am a proud Presbyterian Christian, I do have an affinity for the Baptist church, especially the Baptist minister that I am married to. But not every Baptist preacher shares the same theological point of view as me. One of these is Rev. Dr. Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, whose sermon title I've borrowed today. He gave the sermon *When God Chooses a Leader*, inside St. John's Church, Washington, D.C. the morning of January 20, 2017. In that sermon he connected our nation's presidential inauguration with the leadership of Nehemiah in the Old Testament.⁴ I'm not sure I agree with his reading of the Nehemiah text nor the argument he makes that God chooses our nation's leaders. But, I've borrowed his sermon title today because I want to argue that God's choice of leadership is often much different than we humans might expect. In choosing David as the great king of Israel, God goes against any societal or cultural norm of leadership. One scholar, in fact, argues that God creates a "historical rupture"⁵ with the choice of David as king.

God is a choosing God, there is no doubt about that in Scripture. God, from the beginning of Genesis chose to be in relationship with us humans. Throughout history God chooses leaders to lead God's people, God calls prophets to remind them of God's law and grace, and God sends messengers to call God's people back into relationship. But God's choices for leadership are almost always surprising. In the Sunday School lesson for 6th and 7th grades on call and vocation, I provide a handout that reminds our youth of all the leaders God calls in the Bible. It says:

*"God doesn't wait until we are perfect to call us.
You're in good company when you remember that:
Abraham lied and Sarah laughed at God's promises.
Moses stuttered and David's armor didn't fit.
John Mark was rejected by Paul.
Timothy had ulcers.
Hosea's wife was a prostitute.*

⁴ <http://www.firstdallas.org/blog/when-god-chooses-a-leader-dr-jeffress-inauguration-day-message/>

⁵ Francesca Aran Murphy, I Samuel, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Brazos Press 2010, Page 163.



*Amos' only training was in the school of fig-tree pruning.
Jacob was a liar.
David had an affair.
Solomon was too rich.
Abraham was too old.
David was too young.
Peter was afraid of death.
Lazarus was dead.
John was self-righteous.
Naomi was a widow.
Paul was a murderer.
So was Moses.
Jonah ran from God.
Rahab had a suspicious profession.
Gideon and Thomas both doubted.
Jeremiah was depressed and suicidal.
Elijah was burned out.
John the Baptist was a loudmouth.
Martha was a worry-wort.
Mary may have been lazy.
Samson had long hair.
Noah got drunk.
Moses had a short fuse.
So did Peter, Paul and lots of folks.⁶*

Friends, these are the kinds of people God calls in the Bible.

As we digest this list and think about God's call of the shepherd boy David, I think it's worth noting that back in I Samuel 8, God made it pretty clear that God was not in favor of giving Israel a king. God's disappointment came from the fact that God knew the allegiance of the people would change when they had a king. God made this point clear saying, in desiring a king, my people have rejected my authority over their lives; "they have rejected me," God says, and God tells Samuel

⁶ <https://bible.org/illustration/god-can-use-us-all>, with my edits.



to warn the people what their precious king will take from them.⁷ God is the author of all creation, the ruler over all peoples, and the one who demands our loyalty. God knew a king would be problematic for the faith of God's people.

Because of the call of young David, I want to put forward two points this morning: #1, God can use anyone at any time to serve in ministry for God's purposes; God's call often goes beyond our imagination. #2, it's worth noting that God's call does not exist within societal norms. God does not elect leaders by ballot, God chooses them purposefully. And God's choices often stand against what is valued in our culture. Think back to the list I read. David was a young boy tending sheep in the field. Moses, before him, had a problem with public speaking. Ruth was a refugee and a foreigner, considered unclean by many in the Jewish faith. Jonah was really stubborn. Mary was a young teenager not even married to Joseph. And the disciples were mostly fishermen and tradesmen. Friends, if there is a theme to whom God calls—it's always a surprise. Moreover, because God's chosen are often unexpected, a common theme among their vocation is that they are humble to begin with or humbled in their service to God. Because at the end of the day, who God calls is up to God. God's ministry is all about God's choice.

One scholar notes that this anointing of David is “not just an ugly-duckling-into-swan fable, but [it] touches on God's freedom to overturn [traditions], since God is their author.” Therefore, “We need God because only God can enable us to rise above mere human political orders. God in I Samuel is not interested in political order but in individuals, whose hearts God can see. God is not the last link in the chain of the earthly political establishment. Rather, God is sovereignly free to upset it.”⁸

This past week Rachel Held Evan's new book *Inspired* came out and I haven't been able to put it down. She is a fascinating voice for Christians, a millennial theologian who straddles both the conservative and progressive sides of

⁷ I Samuel 8:7-9 (my paraphrase).

⁸ Francesca Aran Murphy, *I Samuel, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Brazos Press 2010, Page 168.



Christianity. In this book she dives into the complex, dynamic and beautifully intimate narrative of the Bible. She wrote this book for both those who have dismissed the stories of Scripture as mere fairy tales and those who ignore all the complexities of this ancient text. After a week where Christian Scripture has been horribly misquoted to defend tragedies at our border, I would encourage everyone to pick up this book.

In her book, Evans shares an insight from Biblical scholar N.T. Wright. He “compares the Bible to a five-act play, full of drama and surprise, wherein the people of God are invited into the story to improvise the [fifth, unfinished] act.”⁹ If this is the case, that the Church is in the middle of an improvised fifth act in God’s story, it’s worth looking back to the Biblical narrative for a pattern of leadership chosen by God. The story of David’s anointing reminds us to look for humble leaders, and seek humility ourselves. It cautions us that God can and will reject leadership similar to Saul’s—aggressive, obvious, and narcissistic. Furthermore, the scriptural narrative reminds us that we should be very careful in equating human choice to God’s choice. Remember when God chooses a leader it can come in a burning bush, an appearance by the Angel Gabriel, or in a blinding light on the Damascus Road. But it can also come from someone tapping a young child on the shoulder while he’s keeping sheep out in the fields. God calls and God chooses, and odds are God’s choices are almost always going to surprise us.

Thousands of years ago, in the tiny, humble town of Bethlehem, Samuel anointed the shepherd boy David to be the next King of Israel. Little did they know what we know now: thousands of years later, God would deliver a new king, in the line of David, in that same little town of Bethlehem. Not in Jerusalem. Not in Rome. But in a stable...behind an inn...to two poor, young parents. And they named him Jesus.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁹ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, Thomas Nelson (June 12, 2018), page xx.