

“Do Not Pass Us By”

I Samuel 16:1-13

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

May 30, 2021

University Baptist Church

Minneapolis, MN

“Savior, Savior, Hear my humble cry. While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by.” So goes the old Gospel song. It’s a longing for someone to recognize you. It’s a plea that even though I am the last on everyone’s list, I’d like to be recognized. Do not pass me by.

Like many other kids, I grew up loving baseball. My dad and I bonded by listening to the hapless Cleveland Indians all summer long. I learned to admire certain players. I collected baseball cards and could recite the stats of my diamond heroes.

Our street had a baseball team. We called ourselves the Dellwood Devils and our nemesis was the Scarborough Skyhawks from two streets over. We gathered at the local elementary school field and honed our craft over years of big-league fantasies.

Everyone was about the same age and we kept statistics of our escapades on the diamond. One of the rules was that the pitching had to be slow—a great equalizer. When we got to playing in little league, my confidence and ability diminished in exact correlation to the faster pitching. When we would pick sides, I was always picked last. I was a liability. My last year in little league I batted .000 either striking out or walking every single time. It was a great triumph that on my last at bat around 13 years old, I hit a ball in play, right at Mark Okin who snagged it in mid-air from his third-base position. The teams erupted in cheers, not because of Mark’s catch, but because I finally hit something playable.

David is the patron saint of all those who have been passed over.

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The two books of Samuel contain all of the intrigue, plot twists of a Netflix Series. It’s the story of a people’s identity crisis and the way they move toward and away from God. There are prophets, kings, enemies, giants, dreams of conquest and even a love story or two. It’s Israel’s game of thrones.

Before we get to the 16th chapter the people demand that they have a king. I mean all the other nations do, why not us? God was content to have a theocracy instead of a monarchy. But the people continued to make their case. Once people get a king, they will be disappointed. They will try to overthrow him. They will wonder if his rulings are just. God was plenty happy with people being mobile. If they wanted to move because of weather or plague or drought they could. The ark was something they carried and where they camped it would become a tent of meeting. But if there was a kingdom, there would eventually be a temple. Israel got into wars with itself about the best place to put the temple, in Shechem or in Jerusalem. Guess which one won? The people staged their own little civil war over it.

Reluctantly, God said, Okay, you want to be like other nations, fine. Just don’t blame me when it all goes to hell.

The inaugural king was Saul.

The first half of first Samuel depicts Saul’s hopeful leadership. He was tall and handsome. He prevailed in battle until he didn’t. Sure enough, as he failed to win and keep the trust of his people, he lashed out. He was a tormented leader. Trying to exorcise demons of his

own making. He even employed the musical skills of his later rival and successor David to soothe his tortured soul.

Samuel had been somewhat of a father figure to Saul. He tried to point him in the right direction. He gave wise counsel to Israel's first king. He tried to help him overcome his demons. But there was only so much he can do.

At the end of the 15th chapter, Samuel needs to break the news to Saul that he has fallen out of favor by God. Samuel believed in Saul, and grieved at his downfall. The people hung on Samuel's words, for if he anointed Saul king, he could certainly anoint his successor. And they feared being on Saul's wrong side.

As today's scripture opens, Samuel is afraid because Kings usually don't like it when another King gets anointed while the present king is still alive. It's like treason. The elders tremble at his presence. "Do you come peacefully?" they ask him. Yes, he answers, but he obfuscates.

Samuel has a cover story for the people. He's just in town to conduct a sacrifice. Meaning a ritual offering to God. Nothing to see here.

Samuel has been told in secret that there is to be a new king and he is among Jesse's offspring.

Jesse lines up his sons, we imagine. Samuel looks them over. He's impressed with Eliab's good looks and height. But then he remembered how that didn't work for Saul. Abinadab was next followed by Shammah. They all walked by Samuel and he was unimpressed. What did he see in them that disqualified them? Good looks? Arrogance? Narcissism? Timidity? Dishonesty? After sizing up the family, the shoots from the stump of Jesse, as it were, Samuel is unimpressed. He then asks if anyone is missing. They mumble we're all here except for that annoying musician brother of ours. We've left him with the sheep. He can annoy them for all we care.

Samuel asked God how to choose, God answered: "*the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.*" (v.7) In other words, this is not a beauty nor popularity contest. David, the Cinderella of the story ends up being anointed the unlikely king in front of his disbelieving brothers. Ironically, David is introduced as ruddy or dark-skinned, probably from being out in the desert sun. Surprisingly he was handsome and had beautiful eyes (or was it that he saw beauty with those eyes—something that would eventually cause his downfall). Samuel did not pass him by.

Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed David, ruddy, sweaty, smelly, young David "in the midst of his brothers". In their faces. In other words, Samuel defied the birth order. Jesus would later say the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

David is selected as Saul's successor in the 16th chapter, but Saul lives until the 31st chapter. Some scholars say that the books of Samuel were written to establish the divine sanction of David's leadership.

In the second book, David's anointed by the "men of Judah" 2:4, and the "elders of Israel" (5:3).

David was a different kind of leader. Small in stature. A shepherd musician. Perhaps the first music therapist who soothed mighty Saul with his sweet songs.

David the diminutive leader who eschewed weapons of war and slew Goliath with cunning, five smooth stones and the fact that the mighty disregarded him.

David started off with such promise, but who got corrupted by his own lust for power.

The Bible is nothing if it is not a cautionary lesson about systems of power and domination that can turn on themselves.

Perhaps that's why Jesus depicts the best parts of David, and none of his Achilles heel tendencies.

By the 12th chapter, David receives both human and divine disapproval.

But for today, let's celebrate a God who takes a chance on the least likely of us. God looks at our heart and sees our potential.

As the Apostle Paul said,

'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;

Perplexed but not driven to despair;

Persecuted but not forsaken;

Struck down but not destroyed;

Always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus,

So that the life of Jesus might be manifest in our bodies.' (2Cor 4:8-10)

On this Memorial Day weekend, we consider those whom too many have passed by.

We stop and consider the saints who have gone before.

We put spring flowers on the graves of the fallen.

We visit George Floyd Square and remember the year we have had and the reckoning that it brought.

In a nearby makeshift graveyard we see the names of those who have died at the hands of 'law enforcement' and resist the urge to pass by without a prayer and a reflection on how their lives mattered.

We remember the destruction of people's words and deeds that we are so good at ignoring. And we wonder what they would have us do, how they would have us be.

I imagine that Samuel knew that David would disappoint him and God.

But the point of the story is not about David or Samuel's obedience or even Saul's disobedience.

It's about how we find the heartbeat that moves us forward. That helps us breathe deeply and go on for another day.

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