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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Out of the Ordinary

(Before the reading)

This is the story of Samuel anointing David to be king of Israel. As I read this text, I invite you to put aside any images that come to mind when you hear the name of David. If your mind brings up images of grand palaces and mighty battles, put those images aside. That all comes much later. If your mind brings up images of a restless man with wandering eyes or a grieving father crying out in anguish, put those images aside. That all comes later. If your mind brings up images of a stone flung from a sling bringing down the giant Goliath, put that image aside. That too comes later.

I invite you to picture a boy—maybe 15, maybe younger—out on the hills outside of Bethlehem. His hand-me-down robe hangs loosely on his body and he tucks it into his belt so that it doesn't trip him up. His skin is ruddy from long days in the sun. His hair is long and unruly from months of inattention. He's got a skinned knee and a bruised elbow from where he slid into a crevasse to rescue a fallen lamb. He is accustomed to being alone out in the hills—just him, his father's sheep, and God.

Notice when the boy first enters this account. Notice how he is called. Notice where he is. Listen for his name. Through most of the story, he has no name. He is not named until the very last verse.

What the Apostle Paul described in his Letter to the Corinthians is not new. It has always been the nature of our God to “choose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” and to choose “the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”

It was a tense time in the history of Israel.

It was a time of transition. Samuel the prophet was the last judge of Israel, the last of the era of the judges. Saul was the first king of Israel.

For generations, the people of Israel had been a coalition of loosely affiliated tribes with little or no central government. They had no king but God. When need arose—such as the threat of invasion by the armies of a neighboring king—the Lord would raise up a leader who would rule for a while and hold this king-less nation together. This period in Israel's history is known as the time of the judges. The time of the judges ended because the people of Israel grew increasingly unsatisfied with this arrangement. They grew envious of neighboring nations who seemed stronger and wealthier and more modern. They called upon the Lord in ever more strident tones to grant them a king so that they could be like other nations. Finally, the Lord granted their request. Some three hundred and fifty years after they first crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the last judge, Samuel, anointed the first king, Saul.

As we enter chapter 16 of 1 Samuel, Saul has been king for about 25 years. That is not a very long time, considering the massive transition in self-understanding and identity that the people of Israel are experiencing. As a people, they are still adjusting. Their instincts are still shaped by their history as a loose affiliation of tribes. Their expectations and hopes are still shaped by the legacy of their ancestors and their memories going back generations. They have not yet fully realized that everything is different now that they are a monarchy. They do not yet understand that their children's experiences, though built on the legacy of their ancestors, will be entirely different because everything has changed. It is no small thing to move from a loose coalition of tribes to a dynastic monarchy.

Saul has proven to be an able warrior. He has battled the Philistines and the Ammonites and been victorious. But Saul has not been so good at supporting and maintaining Israel's covenant relationship with God. It seems that he does not fully understand or fully accept his role as a king who is NOT like the kings of other nations. The king of Israel was never meant to be supreme in power and authority. The king of Israel was always meant to remain subject to another king...a divine king...God. From time to time Saul has neglected God's commands and asserted his own plans. Though Saul was the first king, he was not the prototype king. That role would fall to David.

As we enter chapter 16 of 1 Samuel, Samuel has finally realized that Saul is never going to be the king that Israel needs. He is sad. He is sad for Saul, because Samuel really cared for Saul and Saul has never been able to live up to his potential. He is sad for Israel, because Israel is facing a crisis of leadership. He is sad for himself, because for 25 years he has totally invested himself in supporting Saul and guiding Israel through this time of massive transition and it appears that all his efforts are coming to naught.

“The Lord said to Samuel, ‘How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.’”

God tells Samuel to quit looking backward, to quit longing for the future that he wanted--a future that will never be. God tells Samuel to start looking forward and to focus on the future that God will bring about, because God knows what he’s doing and he already has a plan.

Samuel’s response reveals his anxiety. He can’t quite focus on what God is telling him about the future because he’s caught up in his anxiety about what is going on in the present. Samuel is afraid of Saul. Saul has already shown signs of the paranoid rage that will dominate his later years, and Samuel does not want to become a target of Saul’s rage. You can be sure that Samuel doesn’t make a move that Saul doesn’t hear about. Samuel answers God, “How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.”

One of the reasons I love the Bible—God’s Word—is that the people in it are so very real. The people in the Bible are not one-dimensional paste-up characters who are nothing like the people I meet in my world. They are not more holy than the people I know. They are not more courageous than the people I know. They do not model unattainably perfect behavior. They are real people. They model real, imperfect human lives that are wrapped up in God. And, being real, some of the people in the Bible model real, imperfect human lives that are not wrapped up in God. The people in the Bible invite me to let my life—as imperfect as it is—to become wrapped up in God.

Samuel—faithful old Samuel who has been a model of obedience since he was a little boy—responds to God: “How can I do what you’re asking me to do, Lord? If I do what you tell me, Saul will kill me.”

It is not the absence of fear that is the first measure of trust in the Lord. The first measure of trust in the Lord is the willingness to step out on the path he sets before us, despite our fear. Samuel steps out as the Lord leads, not because he has no fear, but because his is a life that is wrapped up in God.

God is aware of Saul's temper. He has a plan—a plan that will give Samuel a plausible reason for being in Bethlehem. If Samuel brings a cow with him to sacrifice and organizes a public worship service, Saul need not infer any deeper significance to Samuel's travels than religious pilgrimage.

God's plan paves the way for Samuel in other ways too. If Samuel brings a cow with him to sacrifice and organizes a public worship service, he can invite the whole town. His invitation to Jesse—a small-town farmer who has no prior connection to Samuel—is then just one invitation among many. No reason for Saul to get suspicious. Also, no reason for Jesse's neighbors to gossip.

When Samuel arrives in Bethlehem, the elders of the town respond predictably: they are worried. After all, what possible reason would bring the last judge of Israel—the prophet and priest of God, the number one advisor to the king—to their little town? Uncertainty leads to anxiety, and the elders of the town tremble when they meet Samuel at the town gate. They hold their breath, waiting for some great, unknown transgression of the townspeople to be revealed.

They share a collective sigh of relief when Samuel tells them he has come only to worship. Invitations go out to all the families in town, including the family of Jesse.

Can you imagine the excitement that surges through Jesse when Samuel takes him aside and asks to meet his sons? Can you imagine how he must have glanced all around, hoping against hope that in the midst of the festivities some of his neighbors might notice the extra attention his family is getting?

First there is Eliab, the eldest. He is a tall, strong young man, the apple of his father's eye and already being trained to take over the leadership of Jesse's household and landholdings some day.

Even Samuel is impressed by Eliab. He is reaching for his horn of anointing oil when the Lord interrupts him. “Do not consider his appearance or his height, Samuel, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” Samuel slowly draws his empty hand back. This is not the one.

Then the second son, Abinadab, is called forward. He isn’t the one either.

Then Shammah steps up. No, not him either.

One-by-one four more sons of Jesse come forward. As each son is presented, Samuel waits for the Lord to signal approval; he’s not making any more assumptions. But the approval does not come. The Lord remains silent.

An awkward pause ensues. The Lord had been quite clear to Samuel that he had already chosen one of the sons of Jesse to be king after Saul. Yet, seven sons had passed by, and the Lord had spoken no word of affirmation.

Can you imagine how Jesse’s glances must have become more furtive as he began to hope against hope that none of his neighbors would notice the extra attention his family was getting?

Samuel waits. Then, as the awkwardness of the moment intensifies, he asks Jesse: “Are these all the sons you have?”

Jesse pauses, and then answers: “There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep.” It never occurred to Jesse to send for his youngest boy.

Of course, nothing about this really made any sense.

Why Bethlehem? Bethlehem was entirely ordinary.

Why Jesse’s family? Jesse’s family was entirely ordinary.

Why the youngest son? He barely rated recall within his own family. He was the shepherd of the family. His brothers had probably all taken a hand at that task too, but each one had happily passed the task on to the next brother in line. The youngest had no one to relieve him of this task. The job of taking care of the sheep was his to keep. The youngest son was entirely ordinary.

God saw in the youngest son—David—something that no one else yet saw. Something Samuel could not yet see. Something that would develop more and more in the decades to come. Something that would eventually make visible the truth of the statement that David was ‘a man after God’s own heart.’ God saw one who, though ordinary and imperfect, was already living a life wrapped up in God—a life that would, over time, grow more and more wrapped up in God.

Why would God choose someone so entirely ordinary?

Well, why not?

It has always been the nature of our God to “choose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” and to choose “the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”

It has always been the nature of our God to have a plan, so that times of transition for God’s people are not only about mourning the past that is being left behind but also celebrating the future that will be better than ever.

It has always been the nature of our God to call his people into their new future one step at a time, asking from them only the courage to trust him and go. It is not their task to figure it all out. It is only their task to live their lives wrapped up in God.

Thanks be to God.