

Providence Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. David Pettit

November 12, 2023

I Samuel 16: “Stewardship: Do not look down upon your ministry”

I was voted class quietest my senior year of high school. I was timid, quiet, once scrapped half of a speech in Mr. Vierhile’s junior-year English class just to make it end. I grew up in a cabinet shop. Knew how to work with my hands, how to hunt and fish. Had no place or ambition outside of those realities for the most part. But I also grew up in the church, and I realize now looking back, how much these biblical stories, such as this morning’s readings, influenced me in the years when my faith was becoming personal. Because stories like Moses, and David, and Timothy provided these narratives of God calling people forward who did not think themselves qualified, or who others did not think qualified, and yet God used each of them.

As I started to feel called to ministry there were many reasons to look down on such a prospect. What did I know? Who would listen to me? I was generally ignorant of the wider world and I knew it. I remember reading Paul’s words to Timothy to not let others, particularly the elders who had the respect and privilege of voice, to look down on him. Because if he did, if he operated under that weight, or let his insecurity get the best of him, he would pull back. He would step back from his ministry and stifle the teaching he had been given rather than step forward boldly fulfilling the ministry given to him. Paul tells him not to pull back but rather to set an example. Show yourself someone of the faith through speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity.

I certainly remember learning of my namesake’s stories of being selected, and of taking on the great warrior Goliath. Those stories empowered my struggling sense of calling but also gave me great fervor when I got in a fight with my older brother who usually had a couple inches and hundred pounds over me. He was my personal Goliath. I remember learning of Moses and his slowness of speech as God called him to lead God’s people out of captivity and through the desert. God found him in a deserted place and placed a call upon his life.

In this season of stewardship, I invite us to think about the call God places on each of us, and on us as a church. And what might cause you to shrink back from it? What might make you or others look down upon what you are able to do in God’s work? What might make you or others look down on the possibility that this small church has a legitimate place in God’s mission, in the great commission?

In our stewardship vocabulary, we have talked about legacy, and about thankfulness and opportunity, and this morning I want to add the word Call. As in Calling. Now Joseph Moore, our Presbyterian foundation advisor, did not recommend this word. I'm going off his script. But it seems to me that calling is essential to this. Why are we here considering what God would have us do with our time and talents and resources if not because God is still at work in the world through his followers and through the church and he has called us to be a part of that?

Now there is a reason that each of these biblical characters has a dramatic tale of calling and being pulled from obscurity, or exhorted and encouraged into leadership. Because they did not fit the look of a real leader, or of someone who God might use. They could easily be dismissed or looked down upon, or scoffed at, or passed over.

In David's own time, as we see in our I Samuel reading, no one would have ever considered him as a person God would choose, as a person God would use. Certainly not as a king, or a prominent leader.

Being forty-nine I am more likely to be honest about what I am and what I am not. And of the things I am not, I am not cool. Like Timothy, there are reasons my colleagues may look down on a small church pastor. Like Moses, I may still trail off on my sentences sometimes, and like David I may not be at the top of anybody's list. We live in a church culture that values the big and the flashy. Parker and the surrounding area is a good example. There are lots of churches that have new buildings and cool bands and their pastors wear polo shirts and skinny jeans. There are churches with kids programs and young families. Pastors get together for breakfast and read their resumes, all with a thin cloak of humility. And even among the traditional churches, there are some who have warded off the attrition of modern times and have big choirs and renovated buildings and youth and so on.

Why I am talking about all that. Because there are models and impressions of what a successful pastor looks like, what a prosperous church looks like, what the blessing of God looks like. The values at work are on the big and impressive-looking, or the new and up-and-coming, the fast-growing, or the well-established. And the tendency and expectation is often to reproduce it, or judge ourselves in light of it. And in such a culture of growth and success and appearance, we might be prone to look down upon our stature and opportunities. And amidst such expectations and standards, King David would *never* have been chosen.

In our Samuel reading, we pick up at time when Israel has gone the direction of having a king. Saul was the first king, but both the people and God are not impressed on how it is going, so God is ready to choose another. And as Israel considers the next leader, what kind of candidates might they consider? What qualities might they be looking for? What were the marks of a real leader?

Well, we must remember that this is not the great city-states of Mesopotamia or Egypt or even Aram, where factors such as royal lineage might contribute to who becomes king. This is the hills and steppe land of Israel, loosely connected tribes who had always relied on the strength and charisma and resources of prominent figures. Words like judge, or savior or redeemer or warrior or champion, these terms referred to people of prominence who had either the physical stature or the connections to protect and aid their people. The people wanted a strong and imposing leader who could protect them in battle, who could bail them out when they default on their loans.

So why did they like Saul for their first king? Well, one significant factor is that while the average Israelite was around 5'3" to 5'6", Saul stood tall and strong and imposing. 1 Samuel 9:2 tells us: "There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else." Why did they like Saul for king? He came from wealth and resources, he was physically handsome and imposing, he was strong and able to defend his people.

That is what they looked for. If you are going to raise up one of these champions to King, Saul is what you are looking for. \*This is what contributes to the humor of the David and Goliath story. Even Saul pales in comparison to Goliath, a warrior of reknown of great size and strength and able to defend and fight for his people, the Philistines. And who do they send to be the champion for Israel? Saul shrinks back. And in his place, a little shepherd boy.

Well, that is getting ahead of ourselves. As we pick up our Samuel reading, Samuel is being asked by God to look for the next King. God is looking for someone who will be faithful to his voice, who will lead not according to the expectations of the world, or by his own certainty, but by his voice and leading.

So Samuel follows God's directive to go down to Bethlehem, and just as it was at a meal around the sacrifice when *Saul* had been identified as God's anointed, God says to invite Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice so that God might identify his

newly anointed one. \*At the sacrifice, a burnt offering is offered and then a portion of the offering is given back for a feast. So, there they are. And Samuel has this surge of encouragement; he sees the oldest son of Jesse, Eliab; he is tall and strong, and capable. He sees one of stature and who is handsome. This feeling of relief comes and he thinks to himself immediately, the Lord has provided. He says: "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." Surely this is the young man God will choose to lead, choose to be King. Samuel's eyes are drawn to Eliab the same way his eyes were drawn to Saul; he is tall, strong, a commanding presence; a person people would see as a judge, a redeemer, as a champion, someone who could defend, lead, and command respect.

You see, even though Samuel had always been reticent about this king direction, he still had impressions and expectations of who God would use. If you are going to compete on that stage, this is what you have to look like. But God speaks 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's instinct, mortals' instinct, is to look to the stature and see who is capable of filling our needs and expectations. But God looks to the heart to see, who is able to follow God's lead, and to listen to God's voice.

So Samuel looks to the next son, still strong and capable looking, though not quite as much as Eliab, but still God says to Samuel that "I have not chosen him." And on to the next and the next, each one a little shorter, a little less imposing, a little less commanding, a little less impressive. And finally he comes to the seventh son, but he too is rejected. What now? As it goes in good biblical story-telling, seven is one of those conventional numbers, that by the time you get to seven in the story, the resolution is supposed to have come, the story should have reached its pinnacle. But by the time Samuel has surveyed the seventh son, it is still unclear who it is that God has chosen. Now, a variation of the number seven in a story is seven plus one.

Samuel asked Jesse, are these all your sons? To which Jesse replies, well there is one more, but he's kind of a runt; he's the youngest and he is so young and insignificant, that we did not even think to invite him to this, after all someone has to do the chores. He is out in the hills tending to the sheep. Samuel sends for him. Someone has to go out to hillsides and find where David has the sheep pastured, walk him back down to the village; they must be standing there for some time, the brothers thinking what on earth is this about, why are we waiting for David? He comes finally, and a young David stands before Samuel. The shortest and the least

imposing and the least mature, and with the least status in the culture as he is the youngest.

This is who God has chosen. Samuel would never have chosen him on his own. But in a bit of humor, even though David is puny in stature, Samuel is still looking for those old qualities, looking for some identifiable reason why God has chosen him. And so, what does Samuel notice first? He is ruddy, referring to his complexion, suggesting this is not a child of means and influence, this is a young working boy who has been baked in the sun out there caring for the sheep. Nonetheless, Samuel is looking at his appearance. David is ruddy, lacking the appearance of wealth, lacking stature, but he has beautiful eyes, and is generally handsome.

It is interesting that Samuel is listening to the Lord, following God's direction regarding who God has chosen, and yet Samuel is still caught by these old standards, still caught by appearances. He is struck by David's complexion and overall appeal. In fact, the Hebrew idiom that is translated "man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart," the Hebrew reads literally "man looks upon the eyes, God looks upon the heart." The writer is making a link here for us. What does Samuel notice about David? He has beautiful eyes. And the Hebrew reads literally, he is good for the looking – meaning, he is handsome, same way Saul was described. It is hard to break free from old ways of seeing things, old reflexes to determining who God has blessed.

Wow, he's a runt, doesn't have the stature, but he has beautiful eyes! God has chosen David for other reasons, however, for God looks on the heart. And will David be described? A man after God's own heart. That's what God is looking for – people who will not assume that what our culture values is what God values, and who will instead have their hearts set on God, hearts open to God's voice, to God's leading. God chooses David, one who does not have his own strength to lean on, one who is not as tempted to think of himself as God's gift to the world. And God will set his chosen one, little shepherd boy David, against the great champions of the world, like Goliath.

In this season of stewardship, we too live with expectations. We live with standards out there. Most people are looking for stature and size and resources and programs and bands and flare. And it is easy to think that a small church with an un-cool pastor has little role to play on such a stage. And yet, it has always been the least that God has chosen to be the greatest, the foolish to shame the wise. God is not interested in the biggest and the coolest and the most cock-sure. He wants to know who is after his own heart, that he can use and lead.

Timothy was looked down on, maybe timid, maybe pushed to the side because he was young in a society that valued age. We are old in a society that values the young and the up and coming. David was passed over because they were looking for the strong and mighty, the big and powerful, the well-connected and accomplished. And yet, God chose David, and used David.

In this season of Stewardship, part of our work is to de-program our minds from the assumptions and expectations we have accepted as self-evident. To de-program our instincts from being good capitalists, to being people called upon by God to be faithful to him, to be of use to him. This is true of us as individuals and true of us as a church. And we might want to let that call pass over us, thinking it is other people God wants to use, not us. It is other churches, that God will work through, not us.

And surely, we find ourselves in seasons when our challenges may feel Goliath-size. But if we are inclined to pull away from Goliath, it is probably not the voice of the Lord. And we might go back to biblical stories to remind us of those things, the things I learned in a white clapboard church in the hills of the finger lakes. That God always seems to call people forward who did not think themselves qualified, or who others do not think qualified, and yet God uses each of them. In fact, it is those that think themselves qualified, those like Saul, that are the ones who get off track.

And the reason why we might shy away from the language of calling is that it puts a responsibility on us. We are not just free to do whatever seems best for us as individuals. God has a role, a ministry, work for us to do.

So let us not look upon outward appearances and judge what is possible according to such rubrics. Let us instead give our hearts, have hearts after God's own heart, and believe that God has always chosen the least to best the strong, and the foolish to shame the wise.

And all God's people said... Amen.

## I Samuel 15: 34-16:13

34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.  
35 Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

### David Anointed as King

16 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.’<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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?”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the Lord.”<sup>a</sup><sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.”<sup>9</sup> Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.”<sup>10</sup> Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.

