

**A sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on June 16, 2024.**

PERSPECTIVE

<1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20:1-8; Mark 4:26-34>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

“Oh! The places you’ll go! You’ll be on your way up! You’ll be seeing great sights! You’ll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.”

Samuel is on his way again, though he is not looking forward to the journey. A lot has happened in Samuel’s story as the prophet of God, and the story of the people of God, since our reading last Sunday. Last week, we read of how the people demanded a king, so that they might be akin to their neighboring countries, just like everyone else. It grieved Samuel that they were forsaking the ways in which they were set apart by God as a different people, as a different example for national identity and living. Nonetheless, God counseled Samuel to abide by their wishes and help guide them in the process of choosing a king.

Ultimately, with God’s guidance, they chose Saul to be king. And the experiment of a king went well enough, until it didn’t. For now Saul has begun to mislead the people, and has fallen out of favor with God. Samuel, who played a strong hand in helping to choose and anoint Saul, took this rather personally and was grieved, which is where we pick up the story this morning.

And in his grief and lament, God again speaks to Samuel, telling him to pick himself up and journey on to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse, where the next king will be found among Jesse’s sons. I think Samuel would have appreciated the words of Dr. Seuss, as well, in his current state of mind.

“Except when you *don’t*. Because, sometimes, you *won’t*. I’m sorry to say so but, sadly, it’s true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups *can* happen to you. You can get all hung up in a prickly perch. And your gang will fly on. You’ll be left in a Lurch.”

Samuel is now on a journey, and while it may not be the journey that he wanted, or expected, it is the one that is before him. Even the leaders of Bethlehem, as Samuel approaches the village, are nervous and uncertain as to his arrival: they “trembled when they met him, and they asked, ‘Do you come in peace?’” For Samuel, for the elders of Bethlehem and, though they might not yet fully know it, for the people of God, the journey they are about to undertake is not the one they anticipated or looked forward to.

Thankfully, that is not fully the case today. Today, as we recognize our soon-to-be high school graduates and celebrate not only what they have accomplished in school and life

up to this point, but also who they are and who they will continue to become, we know that the path before them is one that they have chosen.

But we will not do them the disservice of promising that the road will always be easy or joyous; we know better than to make promises that are not within our capability to keep. That is not to say, though, there is nothing we can offer them on such an occasion as this, something even more reassuring than the timeless and enduring words of Dr. Seuss.

And that is, simply, that God has a habit of surprising you with good things, even when those good things are not what you expected or looked for, and even when the road is not what you imagined.

Samuel arrived in Bethlehem in a slump, fearful for his life should Saul hear of what he was doing and why, grieved that he had to discern a new king at all, and less-than-joyously received by the town elders. And then he began to meet Jesse's sons. From the outset, with the very first son - Eliab - Samuel thought that the next king of Israel stood before him.

He thought that the next steps of his road were clearly in front of him and that he had it figured out. This is an easy and common situation and way of thinking to fall into. I've mentioned before that, going into college myself, I was certain of my path and future career, only to find that that couldn't be further from the truth. So it is with Samuel. Surely Eliab will be the next king of Israel; in Samuel's eyes this is precisely the right person.

Except that he isn't. As God discloses to Samuel, "The Lord does not look at the things people look at...the Lord looks at the heart." Eliab is not to be the next king. Nor is Abinadab nor any of the other sons of Jesse initially presented to Samuel. They may have been perfectly fine candidates to Samuel's eyes, but in the perspective of God, they were not the right ones.

Samuel expected one outcome, from his own perspective, and God had an even better outcome in mind to be realized, to Samuel's - and the people's - surprise. David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, is the one who will be the next king, and everyone underestimates him, as we'll particularly see in next week's reading as David faces Goliath on behalf of the entire army of Israel. But it is not about what we, on our own, may imagine our path and future to be; it is about what God imagines and envisions.

And I believe God imagines good things for us, for all of us around the world. Good things such as purpose and meaning, fulfillment and joy, even surprise and unexpected realizations. Not that it will always be easy, or be what we imagined, but it will be good.

Jesus offers a similar concept in the parables of our reading from Mark's gospel. The mustard seed, returning to us again this summer, is one which grows to be a massive bush. "In Palestine, these shrub trees grow well over fifteen feet tall; they have thick

branches and are an evergreen, keeping their leaves year-round” (Chelsea Harmon, Center for Excellence in Preaching). From the small mustard seed, blessing upon blessing comes into the world, providing shade and a home for all kinds of creatures.

Similarly, Jesus tells the parable of seed scattered by a man who, even when tending to the seed, cannot comprehend or determine how the seed will grow. That is a reality and a blessing of God alone. We can offer our work and our effort, and even when the result is not precisely what we might imagine, it is the result God intends, and it will just as likely have an un-looked for and unexpected outcome of blessing and joy.

In this, as Jesus emphasizes, is the nature of the Kingdom of God. And as Jesus points out with these parables, the Kingdom of God is constantly breaking into our world and our lives. Without comprehension or understanding. Without prediction or control. But in-breaking nonetheless. Even when it is not of our own perspective, it is of God’s perspective. And God’s perspective for us, for all of creation, is one of joy and abundant living. Of resurrection life and reconciled communities. The history of Scriptures consistently points toward this understanding, and invites the listener to reorient - time and again - our own perspective to the perspective of God.

This is perhaps the first and only way to faithfully approach the life that is still ahead of us - whether young or old, whether individual or community, whether one congregation, or an entire denomination, or every person of faith around the world. We are invited to orient ourselves, again and again, to the perspective of God which proclaims good things for all peoples, hope for all situations, and a way forward when the way seems to have ended. The seed of the Kingdom of God will never not grow. Samuel learns this, and we learn it alongside him. Jesus proclaims this, and we hear it again today. The kingdom of God, the perspective of God, is always going to be one of abundant and meaningful living, regardless of what we may face in this world.

“Congratulations! Today is your day. You’re off to Great Places! You’re off and away! Your mountain is waiting. So...*get on your way!*” Amen.

*All quotes, unless otherwise noted, taken from, “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!” Dr. Seuss, Random House New York, 1990.