

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
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"God's Choice"
I Samuel 15:34 - 16:13
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The Biblical story is not a winner's plot... not really. The script isn't about who wins and how to win... Or at the very least, it's always surprising in the bible who the winners are. Almost every story is a set up in that regard.

Our Old Testament story for today is that way. Maybe you remember it... Samuel was the prophet in town... and Samuel was in a bad situation. He had been moping around for months because his friend and Israel's first King, Saul, had fallen out of favor with God. God said do this and do that and Saul tweaked the orders a bit.

And Samuel had pretty much washed his hands of Saul but he couldn't quite turn loose of him emotionally. He knew it was time to get on with things but he couldn't. He missed his friend Saul.

And finally God poses the question to Samuel, **"How long are you going to grieve?"**

And God gives him some new marching orders... a new challenge. **"I've picked a new king, Samuel. It's one of Jesse's boys who lives down in that 'Little Town of Bethlehem.' I want you to fill that horn of yours up with oil and go anoint him."**

The assignment makes Samuel plenty nervous because he knows if Saul sees him headed out with a horn full of that king-anointing-oil that he'll assume Samuel's out shopping for a new king. **"He's liable to kill me, God."**

"Well," says God, **"Tell him that you're really going to Bethlehem to worship. Take a cow with you, he won't suspect a thing."**

So... it's the classic 'ole' "take a cow with you" ploy. God tells Samuel to, in effect, lie. There are times when telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth, doesn't fly. Honesty isn't the best policy when you have a jealous king about.

So Samuel pretends... he lies. **"Don't mind me, King. I'm just headed down south to Bethlehem to sacrifice this here holy cow. Yup, that's what I'm gonna do. Gonna sacrifice me a cow. Ought to be a real spiritual high. Revival's liable to break out."** And off he goes.

Of course, when Samuel arrives in Bethlehem, the folks there are scared to death because great prophets don't visit little one-horse towns for nothing. This is like the Pope going to Valley Mills.

They're pretty nervous when Samuel makes his way into town.

Something's up... it was the great prophet Samuel who anointed Saul and here he is sporting a horn full of oil. Something's up... and news spreads fast in a little town.

"Don't worry folks, 'I'm just here to worship.' Just think of me as a regular old visitor at church. And by the way Jesse, I wonder if you and your sons might join me," and he winked at him and looked down slyly at his horn.

It's not hard for Jesse to put two and two together.

Word's gotten out that Saul is in the doghouse with Yahweh.

Samuel and Saul haven't talked in months.

Samuel, the prophet that had anointed Israel's first king, shows up here in this little town of Bethlehem, "just to sacrifice a cow," right.

No doubt Jesse fills his boys in on the possibilities, as they get ready for worship. **"Look sharp fellas, this is going to be our big day."**

The boys have figured it out by church time. They'd all taken a bath and were decked out in their Sabbath best. They're grinning from ear to ear and as they file into church. Jesse has them all lined up. He's just so proud of all his boys...

and they're sucking in their guts

and sticking out their chest

and trying to look as regal as possible.

It reminds you of that scene in Cinderella when the prince shows up with the slipper and the stepsisters start primping. They just know they're the one.

Jesse had Eliab up in the front of the line because he figured if anyone had king potential it was Eliab. He was really impressive and he caught Samuel's eye and the old prophet's thinking, **“Now there's a king if I've ever seen one.”**

Then God whispers in his ear, **“This isn't a beauty pageant, Samuel, I'm looking at and for something deeper. I look on the heart.”** Which, by the way, is not always good news.

Samuel shakes his head "no" and as Eliab moves on by, the excitement of the remaining brothers grows. And you can imagine that, guys being guys, they are flexing some... maybe not like Hans and Frans... don't want to look too eager... just cool... and buff.

By now Samuel has dropped the scam that this is about worship and after each son struts by, Samuel says, **“Nope, he's not the one God has chosen.”** The slipper doesn't fit. **“Are these all the sons you have?”**

“Well, I just figured it couldn't be the youngest. I mean, he's not even old enough for big church. We don't even bring him to these real spiritual events, where we slaughter holy cows. He's not really ready for something like that. He's baby-sitting sheep like a good boy.”

Jesse's confused as he runs to get David. It was hard thinking of little David as king material, but he takes him so see Samuel just the same.

And there he stands... It's Opie... It's Dennis the Menace... Sling shot hanging out of his pants pocket... blowing a bubble... and Samuel says, **“He's our guy...”** and poured the entire horn of oil all over him. And just like that the shepherd boy was **“king of the world.”**

See the surprise ending?

The one chosen... the winner... is not the one anyone would have expected in the beginning. And that's why I think everyone loved hearing this story.

This little nation that was...

always picked on

and always taken for granted,

the brunt of a million jokes,

they loved this story where the little guys wins.

We all love stories like this one. We pull for the underdog... We want Cinderella's foot to fit into the slipper proving that she really is princess material.

We want Frodo and Bilbo, the two tiny hobbits, to make it up the huge, evil mountain and destroy it.

We want Rudy to get in the game and get carried off the field on everyone's shoulders.

We all love stories like this one, where the one on the bottom winds up on the top.

And it's sort of surprising, but... veterans of scripture aren't so surprised that the younger brother is chosen to be king. A quick glance at the best-known Old Testament dramas, show younger siblings fairing quite well.

The younger brother Abel finds his sacrifice more pleasing to God than Cain's.

Jacob swindles his older brother Esau out of blessing and birthright.

Joseph, who is number eleven in the pecking order, has a dream come true and all of his older brothers wind up knelling before him.

And now here, David, who isn't even invited to this great religious event, who's overlooked... David who is last in the pecking order... winds up first.

Younger brothers do quite well, thank you very much. And even in a culture where birth order was everything. Remember that... first-born wins the blessing lotto.

Isn't that interesting? The biblical narrative over and over again drives home the point that God isn't operating by our protocol or playing by our rules.

The first-born first was entitled. This is the way it was, the way they saw things. But in story after story, God drives home the point... **“I don't see the world the way you do”** – drives home the point, **“I don't even see you the way you do.”**

And then along comes the incarnation, and God becomes the point. Emptied... born to peasant parents in this same little town of Bethlehem, who grows up and affirms that in God's Kingdom...

the last always come in first,

and those who are least, are the greatest,
and the poor, who are blessed, waltz into heaven,
while the rich barely squeeze through.

Jesus walked into the world bearing glass slippers for all those who were forgotten and down in life's dungeons. He came to anoint those of no account and, in the same way we cheer for David, we cheer for Jesus. **“Go Jesus.”**

We love it when he blesses the woman caught in adultery and when he goes to lunch with Zacchaeus. We like the stories where Jesus takes up for the underdog... some leprous outcast or prostitute.

And then later Paul's trying to explain that. Remember what we just read. **“God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong... God chose the lowly and despised...”**

Paul would say later, **“I boast in my weakness... for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties...”**

And all the people said? That's much more difficult to cheer, isn't it.

It's one thing to affirm that God enjoys turning the tables on our elder brother customs and cheer the selection of David.

It's one thing to amen Jesus as he talks about servants being the greatest in the kingdom, but it's quite another to echo Paul and take delight in our weakness.

That's not generally what I do, delight in my weakness... **“Oh Boy... look at all my weaknesses... how delightful!”**

I think, rather, it is our tendency to do as Jesse did. We line up our stuff before God for inspection... we line them all up...

talents and gifts,
resources,

circumstances where we have life under control...

We line up all the good stuff... the strengths... and we say, **“Now, God, aren't these impressive. Wouldn't you like to use some of these?”**

And in my mind, I picture that we have our weaknesses shut off in some basement like dirty Cinderella or out to pasture in some harmless meadow like little David. **“Surely, God has no interest in these things.”**

And like Paul did with his “thorn”, we pray again and again for God to change us or our circumstances... to yank the thorn from our flesh...

to smooth out the rough places...

and do away with the difficulties and make us strong.

Change things so that we feel in control... not so exposed.

You've prayed those prayers haven't you? You've prayed about that part of you that **you** don't like or that part of **your life** you don't like, that you've stuck off ashamedly into some dark basement.

I have... do...

I catch myself wishing often that my mind would work better... I can't remember much of what I read... just can't, and find myself feeling embarrassed.

“What are you reading?”

“Oh, I don't know... something about Jesus, I think.”

Often I'm aware of how easily intimidated I am... and I hate that. Can't think of anything to say around certain people... or at least anything to say in the right moment that sounds intelligent or cool or funny.

I hate my fear of technology and how stupid I feel when I can't use it.

I wish I didn't get grumpy so often.

I wish I were better at small talk... I'm shy, really.

“Take this away God.... I'm tired of that God.”

“Change me God... Change my circumstances.”

“Do something Lord... my life's too hard... my life's not fair.”

“Three times?” Paul, is that all? For me it's more like 3 x 300.

“Three times, I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, *‘I don't see it that way. I don't play by those rules. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’*”

So, Paul boast and takes delight in his weaknesses because that's when the power of Christ will come to rest on him... When he isn't so impressed with himself. Not when he is strong and self-sufficient and in control of everything... but rather when he is weak and in need of grace.

The Bible is not a winner's script. It is a story about God being revealed in and made known by what is broken.

It's no accident that the first teaching at the Sermon on the Mount is “**Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**” That's first... it's the first thing we have to get.

And it's backwards thinking... to us... counter intuitive... but every spiritual tradition teaches that in order to progress you've got to get to this... your own poverty... your emptiness... your need and nothingness... Nada.

Your blessed... if you are spiritually poor.

That's just not the way we think... and so we live in critique and we live in judgment and not just or even primarily of others... but of ourselves.... Wishing we weren't the way we are...

Hating this or that about our selves or our stories...

Denying our own darkness.

And it gets us nowhere.

The biblical story, from beginning to end, invites us to something different... and the clearest invitation to us is in the cross.

The cross... is the vulnerable name for God (Richard Rohr, I think). We are saved by a God becoming weak... for our sakes, became weak.

He became the Vulnerable One and showed us the way to salvation. “**By his stripes we are healed.**” And please don't turn that into something macho... where someone bleeds and hurts enough to get you through the *Pearly gates*. What kind of God would need that?

It's a different path, a different story... and it teaches us to look in the broken places for God's greatest work.

To take note of what is insignificant.

Be awake in and to weakness...

Not to judge and shame what is small.

To quit hating what is broken and all that cripples us...

Because every thorn is occasion for grace.

A spiritual teacher I like says that we should pray for one great humiliation a day (R. Rohr). ... Because until we are humbled, grace is only a doctrine. It won't be the reality flowing through and empowering your being. ... Just something you sing about on Sundays.

So, I invite you to this meal today as one who knows, as a humble one. Warts... weakness... brokenness.... Badness and all. To take this bread and take this cup... to receive it is to confess... “**I am in need and that's okay...**” To accept this meal is to accept God's grace. And to accept God's grace is to accept yourself. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus... not of you... not from you... your life, the way it is. Thanks be to God.

This is the Body of Christ, broken... that you might be whole.

This is the Cup of the New Covenant of grace... poured out for us all.

Take all of it.