

## **The Potential for Greatness**

**1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-32**

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Some stories have predictable plot lines and follow familiar paths. Other stories take surprising turns that result in a different ending than we might have guessed or hoped for. For instance, during the primaries for our last national election, there were a lot of worthy candidates. People with age and experience we find helpful in a leader. You know, someone who has been “tested” and is ready for that “3 a.m. emergency phone call.” One of the likely candidates had proved himself in war; another was noted for his financial acumen *and* good looks; yet another brought experience as a senator from a complex state, not to mention a colorful husband and colorful pantsuits. Their names were well-known and their long records of leadership were impressive as they paraded past us, one after another after another.

But were in for a surprise, weren't we? An unlikely candidate appeared on the scene. A relative unknown surfaced with a limited resumé. Someone from an out-of-the-way state and with an out-of-the-norm family story. Attractive enough...but heck, most of us had never heard the name—and weren't even sure how to pronounce it. Was it Pah-lin? Pay-lin? I mean...Bárrack? Or Bah-rock?

That story is still being written, of course. Time will tell what sort of President he will be...the kinds of decisions he'll make and their effects. At this point, it is still too early to know. We have a lot of hopes pinned on him because there are a lot of problems to be addressed. We hope he will be wise. We hope he will be strong, but not a bully. We hope will be fair. We hope...we hope for so much.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are also about people who have a lot of hopes and a lot of problems, too. And these two books are examples of the most artful storytelling you'll find anywhere in the Bible. The story does not always go the way you think it will—or even wish it would, but takes some surprising turns along the way. The twists and turns make all the difference in the world in how things turn out. This summer the lectionary offers us an opportunity to hear a more sustained telling than is often the case. There is a little background that might be helpful as we begin:

Israel was not like other nations. They had no king, but they had something—someone—much better, they had God as their Sovereign. And while they loved God, they couldn't help but feel they were missing out. They had no one to lead them in battle wearing an impressive crown...no one to negotiate with competitors from a mighty throne. The people wanted a king. They demanded a king. God felt rejected and tried to warn Israel they were making a bad trade off. A human king, unlike their divine one, would use the people for his own gain and comforts. But still, Israel persisted. They demanded a king so they could be like everyone else. God gave them an impressive one—King Saul who by all outward appearances fit the bill. He was cultured, from a wealthy family with a stellar lineage. And he was handsome, really handsome and really tall. He looked like exactly the sort of king they had in mind. (See 1 Samuel 8 and 9.)

However, God's warnings became their reality. With a king, they had lots enemies and lots of battles. And some of Saul's decisions and actions were small-minded for such a big man. Now the people regretted having a king, but there was no going back. True to God's nature, though they had rejected God, God would not reject them. God said it was time for a new king.

That's where our story today comes in. God sends Samuel to anoint a new king of Israel. This was a pretty dangerous assignment since the first king was still very much alive! But Samuel went, in obedience to the true Sovereign of Israel...the Lord.

Samuel went to a little unimpressive town down south—way outside the northern beltway of the political elite. He went to Bethlehem and then went to Jesse’s house...a man whose family tree was squirrely compared to the fair Saul. It included an immigrant woman—a Moabite of all things—named Ruth on his grandmother’s side, and a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab on his grandfather’s side. But at least Jesse had a lot of sons who could be the next king of Israel. Seven of them paraded in front of Samuel and Samuel was impressed...one by one they went past...handsome, tall, smart, skilled...just pick one. But not once did God whisper in Samuel’s ear. There was only silence. Then Samuel said, “Um...are you sure these are all your sons?” “Well,” Jesse replied as if he had forgotten the 8<sup>th</sup> one altogether, “there is one more. The baby of the family. We just keep him out our hair by sending him to watch the sheep.” “Get him,” Samuel said. “We’ll wait.”

And they did...waited for this last, least, after-thought of a son and brother to get home. When he walked in, this handsome boy with the beautiful eyes, God said to Samuel: “This is the one. Anoint him.” And this skillful storyteller has waited until the last verse of this exquisite moment to utter his name: David. “And the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” Though it will take about twelve more years for anyone else to know it, David is already the king in God’s mind and heart and will.

There is not much mystery to the point this story is making...especially when paired with the parable Jesus tells of the mustard seed. A small boy, the least, last son is the one to be the greatest king of Israel. The least, smallest mustard seed is the one chosen to describe the great kingdom God is bringing. We can miss the wonder of what God is doing if we look only at what seems splashiest or biggest or most impressive. God is at work in the biblical story, in the world, in the church, in our very own lives in ways that may seem small, humble, unimpressive, overlooked. So we do well not to look on outward things, but to look at the heart of things...and try to see the surprising choices and ways God can

turn the story of the Bible, the world, the church, our very own lives into more and other than has yet been.

Such a way of seeing requires us to pay attention...to God, to each other, to every little thing. It requires of us what one Biblical scholar says David had that made him God's perfect choice: openness...a spirit of adventure; a delight in trying new things; a willingness to let God work through us; a heart that is not closed because our mind is not made up. David made no claim to having everything figured out. David seemed open to the future, to new possibilities; open to mystery and therefore open to the spirit of God.

This does not mean David was perfect and in lockstep with God. He wasn't. He made mistakes, terrible ones. He acted rashly, sometimes with deadly consequences. But God, who knew David's heart, knew all of that and was willing to work through him, with him, for a greater good for a new future than might otherwise have been. As Walter Brueggemann put it, God saw in David the potential for greatness. Not perfection, of course, but the potential for greatness in serving God as he served God's people faithfully.

I've been thinking about this story in relation to you as a congregation. It started on Tuesday when I attended a called Presbytery meeting where the future of one of our churches is in jeopardy. That church, like Emory Presbyterian, is one of seven churches in which our Presbytery has invested much hope and resources. The seven of you are part of the Macedonia Project. You were deemed to be a church that was at a crossroads in terms of your future. You are small and struggling in some ways, but you have enormous potential! Dare we say the potential for greatness?! So, your pastor, your Session, and you as a congregation agreed to see what great things God might do through you, small but mighty as you are! You have agreed to be open, to have a spirit of adventure, to delight in trying new things, to let God work through you. To have hearts that are not closed because your minds are not made up. You are willing to say you don't have it all figured out...and so are open to new

possibilities...to mystery, to the *Spirit*. To a future that is not determined by your past.

The church that was the subject of the meeting on Tuesday seems to have taken this Macedonia Project seriously and joyously. They are thinking in new ways about who they are and who they want to be and the mission and programming that will get them there. They've prayed and discussed and even voted on it. But there is a small group in the church that does not want to go where the majority is headed. They've objected and have turned now to lawsuits to stop it all. Attempts at reconciliation have failed...and now the Pastor and Session have requested Presbytery's help and guidance and leadership. We voted unanimously to give it. It remains to be seen how that story will turn out. We may hope and pray with them and for them that God is in all the twists and turns and will use it for good.

But I left that day thinking about you...how you are just getting started on a new vision for Emory Presbyterian Church; a vision for how you might reach out to more people and invite them into the caring fellowship you have found here. And I've been thinking about how those new people and their new perspectives might bring new life to you, too. I've been thinking about the amazing neighborhood that surrounds you...this university and hospital...places open to mystery and dedicated to learning and healing and wholeness—and thinking that this is what the church is also dedicated to. And I've been imagining that the diverse neighborhoods are full of diverse people who are looking for meaning purpose and hope. Why, think of it! God has given *you* meaning and purpose and hope in generous enough provision to share! In you is the potential for greatness not because you will do everything perfectly or always get it exactly right. God knows that already. But God is with you and you have the potential to be faithful to the new thing God can do with you and through you.

I don't know how your story with God is going to proceed, of course. I picked up one of your brief history brochures yesterday and noted that things have not always gone the way you thought or hoped...like those wonderful plans that were made in November of 1945 to build a huge Gothic-style sanctuary with a bell tower. Instead, you faithfully built what you could...a gorgeous "chapel" that is as big as a lot of sanctuaries! And what a gift it is, this building, these beautiful grounds that offer sanctuary from the rush of traffic and life all around.

So I'm hoping you will not miss the kingdom because you are obsessing over how small your mustard seed is. I'm hoping you are willing to go to the effort Samuel did to discern what God is saying about your future and then find the energy and courage to see it through. Apparently, you're one of seven churches that the Presbytery thinks has that kind of spirit of adventure and enormous potential. And since God is the most gifted Storyteller of all, there can be wonderful surprises as it all unfolds.

Amen.