

First Readings – Proverbs 3:5-6, 22:6, and 4:23

^{3:5-6} Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge God,
and God will make straight your paths.

^{22:6} Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray.

^{4:23} Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.

Before I read our passage from 1st Samuel, I want to give you some context. You might remember Samuel's parents: Elkanah and Hannah. Hannah longed for a child, but for years she was childless. She went to pray on the steps of the Temple and the priest, Eli, witnessed her prayers. He said to her, "May the God of Israel grant the petition you have prayed." Hannah conceived and gave birth to Samuel. When Samuel was still very young, Hannah lent Samuel to the Lord, where he served the Lord under the guidance of Eli, the priest. As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him, and all Israel knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. During this time, you might also remember that the people of God were rebellious, rejecting God as their king and demanding a human king like all the other nations.

[So,] "Samuel summoned the people to the LORD at Mizpah and said to them, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.' But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, 'No! but set a king over us.'"

And so, God spoke through Samuel and anointed Saul King, only to later regret the decision, for the word of the Lord came to Samuel saying, "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands." Samuel was angry with God, but also grieved. This is where we enter the story of our faith today.

As you hear God's word read, imagine yourself in the story... you could be Samuel or Jesse, one of Jesse's eight sons, or the people of the town who feared Samuel's presence, or maybe even Saul. Listen for God's word to you this morning.

Second Reading – 1 Samuel 16:1-13

¹The 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." ²Samuel 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.' ³Invite 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." ⁴Samuel 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?" ⁵He 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.

⁶ When they came, Samuel looked on **Eliab** and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.” ⁷ 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.***” ⁸ Then Jesse called **Abinadab** and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ⁹ Then Jesse made **Shammah** pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰ Jesse made **seven of his sons** pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” ¹¹ Samuel said to Jesse, “**Are all your sons here?**” And Jesse 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.” ¹² Jesse 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.” ¹³ 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.

Given that I am the fourth of five children, I didn’t imagine myself as the eldest son of Jesse, the one who would have anticipated being chosen if there was something to be chosen for. The first born had all the rights, all the privileges and so even though Jesse was blessed with a multitude of sons he wasn’t troubled that his youngest was not brought before Samuel. His youngest son would have been inconsequential to the reason that Samuel had come to town or so Jesse thought.

I didn’t think of myself as the youngest either, as that was my sister. As I listened to this story I was one of the unnamed brothers and I couldn’t believe my ears when Samuel said the Lord rejected my eldest brother, Eliab. At first, I thought, finally someone else gets a chance. But, then Abinadab and Shammah was passed by too and so was I eventually. All seven of us stood there dumbfounded. But, then we heard Samuel’s incredulous question, “Are all your sons here?” All the ones that count I thought to myself! The youngest is only good for watching sheep and I know this because when I was the youngest, I did just that! What could Samuel possibly want with my baby brother David?

Yet, God doesn’t choose as mortals choose. God doesn’t see as mortals see. God doesn’t look at outward appearance or height of stature. That is, God doesn’t conform to cultural norms or customs when choosing.

But, we certainly do and it starts early as kids sort themselves into groups leaving some kids standing at the sidelines. It happens because a kid is too tall or too big, too shy or too different. Outward appearance is often a discriminating factor for kids on the playground. Of course, adults do this as well too, we are just a bit subtler most of the time. In the work place, outward appearance often impacts employability whether it’s the number of tattoos one has or one’s weight. In the Church, with a capital C, we have predominately sorted ourselves ethnically or socioeconomically, judging others based on their outward appearance. The way we look impacts the way we are accepted by others, just ask the man with unruly hair standing on the street corner with his worldly possessions and two dogs.

We are culturally conditioned to look at outward appearances and I’ll be first to admit that is hard to break this habit. Our instant judgments happen based on years of conditioning, often without conscious effort. Although, at times it is intentional. Like the group of

construction workers, I witnessed, holding up numbered signs from 1 to 10, as women came up an escalator to a garden patio in downtown L.A.

Eliab met every cultural category, yet he was not the one chosen and anointed. Neither was Abinadab or Shammah or the other four unnamed sons. In placing ourselves in the story, we might be able to experience some of the shock, some of the indignation, some of the anger beginning to seethe within the hearts of David's brothers.

Were you ever passed over for promotion even though your credentials made you the top candidate or so you thought? Were you passed by for an opportunity to lead something big by somebody much younger? Or maybe as a parent, your most talented child was passed over for someone with far less capabilities. Often our biblical stories might seem a bit flat, because the thoughts and feelings of all the characters are not recorded for us. There is no mention of what was swirling in the minds and hearts of Jesse and his seven sons. The only clue is this, "the Lord looks upon the heart."

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight," says the writers of Proverbs. It seems to me that Jesse was relying on his own insights, shaped by his culture. If the prophet known throughout all of Israel came to town, Jesse thought, surely, Samuel wants my eldest son for an assignment. I imagine Eliab was relying on his own insights, too, thinking I've been chosen. Yet, we are cautioned by the writer of Proverbs, "In all your ways acknowledge God."

Acknowledging God, means we don't assume we know the answer. We don't assume we know what God wants, without offering ourselves before God in prayer. Or the prophet Isaiah reminds us, saying, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

And so, Samuel had to ask Jesse, "Are all you sons here?"

For God doesn't look at outward appearance or height of stature, God looks into the heart. And God saw something in David, the youngest of eight sons, that God didn't see in the others.

I wonder what God sees when God looks into our hearts? Are we like the eldest brother expecting to be chosen? Are we like the successive brothers in line who think finally it's my turn to shine. Or we busy doing tending the sheep that need to be cared for, trusting in God's provision. What is the condition of our hearts?

This text has a way of uncovering our motives. Asking us why do we do what we do? As Mother Teresa reminds us, "It is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the doing that matters." Our outward behavior, our outward appearance, our outward effort doesn't ever tell the whole story, but our heart does. And God knows our hearts, individually and communally, often better than we do.

And so, we need to heed the advice from Proverbs: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Yes, "Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life." David's whole story reminds us that even those who are chosen can falter and fall. David's heart strayed, for he committed adultery and sanctioned murder. And so, David cried out to God saying, "Create in me a clean heart."

I don't know the condition of your heart and why you do what you do. But, I do know the condition of my heart. And from experience, I know how important it is to stay vigilant. A

stray thought or a quick judgement can easily tarnish what I do. When I forget to acknowledge the Lord and humble myself in prayer before serving others, ulterior motives can surface where recognition or reward is expected. Or even resentment has been known to set in, as I wonder why others don't step up to the plate.

The condition of my heart, the condition of your heart, the condition of all of our hearts together is what concerns God. I pray that as we work together as a church to nurture one another in faith and impact our community with God's love that our hearts will be centered on God.

God looks into our hearts, so may God find pure motives of love. Amen.