

Hespeler, 22 March 2020 © Scott McAndless – 4th Sunday in Lent
1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

The Prophet Samuel was just feeling so depressed. He wasn't sleeping, he hardly ate and he could hardly even work up the passion to punish any sinners or slaughter any foreigners. He had it in a bad way. And what was it that was depressing Samuel so much? Well, it was Saul. He just felt let down. He had invested so much in Saul. When Saul was just a young man, Samuel had found him and anointed him and made him king over Israel – the first king the nation had ever had. Saul had been so tall and so handsome – a good head taller than any other man in his tribe. He just really stood out from the crowd.

And what a king he had made! Saul had rescued the city of Jabesh and attacked the outpost of Geba. He had won at Gibeah and beaten the Moabites and the Ammonites and the Edomites and the kings of Zobah and the Amalakitites. There had been so much blood, so much death and mayhem. Ah, good times... good times.

But, all good things must come to an end sooner or later. Saul had messed up big-time. Samuel had told him that he had to do it – that he must kill all of the Amalekites and not leave one alive, but had Saul listened? No. He had gone and left one of them alive. So, Samuel really had no choice. He had to tell Saul that he was finished, that God had rejected him as king over Israel.

But Samuel just couldn't get over it. If he couldn't have Saul – could never enjoy the thrill of battle and the smell of blood at the side of that beautiful, tall man again – well then, what was the point of anything? What was the point of living!?

Those are the kind of dark thoughts that Samuel is dealing with in the opening of our reading this morning from the book that bears his name. That can be the only reason why God would come to him and say, **“How long will you grieve over Saul?”** Samuel was stuck. He couldn't get over what he had lost in Saul, something that had given meaning to his whole life. And he didn't know how to get past it.

And I've got to say that I've got all the sympathy in the world for Samuel here because we've all been there, haven't we? Every single one of us has lost something that mattered to us. I realize that there are some who have lost loved ones who have passed away and that loss can be tremendous. But even if you haven't suffered that, you no doubt know the meaning of losing, in some sense, someone or something that meant the world to you. We're probably also all struggling



today with the loss of things like social contact and even just good old-fashioned physical contact. It is really hard to get over any loss and, honestly, often the last thing you need to hear is someone saying to you, **“How long will you grieve?”**

There is an important place for grief – we should always allow the space and the time for the processing of it – but it can become a problem if we are failing to work through our grief and allow it cut off our own health and growth. I suspect that was what was happening to Samuel. And God called him on it. God called him on it because, as much as God does respect your grief, God is always interested in helping you to embrace a larger vision for your life.

God’s intervention with Samuel in this moment has a great deal to say to us as we deal with the challenges of life these days. I see a lot of grief in our world today – not just with people who have lost loved ones but also those who have lost in other ways. People are grieving the many changes in our world. Every time you hear somebody say, “Remember when...” or “Back in my day...” they are probably about to express their grief over a loss. It is especially something that we do in the church a lot. We love to talk about the church that used to be – the good old days when there were hundreds of kids in Sunday schools and the pews were packed. We have come to believe that that was the real church (even though, in many cases it was only a blip that lasted for a few decades) and that what we have in the church today just doesn’t measure up in comparison.

But what if God is saying to us in the church today, and sometimes in society today, “How long will you grieve?” How long will you grieve the loss of the church that used to be? How long will you grieve the changes of the modern world? How long will you grieve the loss of the power and influence that you once enjoyed? This is not because grief in itself is bad, but because God has some things for us to do: **“Fill your horn with oil and set out.”** God wants us to set out for new horizons and new beginnings but, so long as all we can do is grieve the loss of the way things used to be, it will prevent us from doing that.

Samuel was stuck. That much is clear, not only from what God says to him but also from what he does. Samuel does, perhaps reluctantly, do as God says. He takes a hollowed-out ram’s horn and he fills it up with oil and sets out. The meaning of this act is clear. They didn’t crown kings back then, what they did was anoint them with oil and the oil is to go on the head of a new king.

But even as, in outer form, Samuel obeys, it is clear enough that he is still mourning for the past. How do I know that? I know that because when he arrives at the home of Jesse, the family to which he has been directed, his eye immediately falls on Jesse’s eldest son, Eliab. And what is it that attracts Samuel’s attention to Eliab? Well, this is what God says when he notices

Samuel looking at the boy, **“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature.”**

Clearly, Samuel had noticed two things about the boy: he was really, really good looking and he was tall. That’s what made him think that Eliab would make a good king. Hmm, can you remember anybody else who’s most distinguishing feature that he was really tall and good-looking? Oh yeah, that was Saul, wasn’t it? Clearly, Samuel maybe looking for another king, but he’s looking for a king just like the one that just got away. *He* might say he’s over Saul, but he’s not over Saul because clearly the only new king that he can imagine looks a whole lot like the old king.

That is the danger when we do not process our grief or loss in the ways that we ought to. It is alright to feel the ache of loss, it is alright to miss what you miss and it is alright to remember with sadness, but if you can only manage to imagine a successful future as basically a rerun of the past, then you have a problem.

I know that this is a problem that we run into in the life of the church all the time. I don’t know how many times I have walked into a different church and had somebody tell me, almost within the first minute, everything about how things used to be in that church. “Well you know,” they’ll say, “fifty years ago, they used to have to bring in extra chairs and have people sit in the aisle because there were so many people here for some services!” “Forty years ago, our youth group was so big that we had twenty weddings in the space of two years.” “And thirty years ago, there were so many kids in that Sunday school that we used to have to hold a class in the Men’s room!”

Oh, you give me ten minutes with most church people and I’ll be able to tell you everything about their church several decades ago, but almost nothing about how it is now. (And, by the way, I have learned that, if you say to them, “Wow, you had that many kids in Sunday school thirty years ago you must have so many people in their thirties and forties now, they tend to get really quiet.”) They just aren’t as excited about talking about what is going on now.

And it is not even because there aren’t exciting things about their church now. There are often some pretty wonderful things going on now but, because they still define success in terms of that past and the exciting things that are happening there now don’t really fit with that definition of success, they don’t quite know how to talk about that. “Oh church, how long will you grieve over Saul? Fill your horn with oil and set out.” God has a new adventure for you.

Samuel doesn’t anoint Eliab, the new Saul; he ends up anointing David who is kind of the opposite of Saul. Where Saul was the tallest, David is the smallest of Jesse’s children. Where Saul had a noble bearing that immediately made the people hail him as kinglike, David was ruddy which probably meant that he looked kind of rustic and common. The future was going to look very different from the past but that didn’t mean that there would not be success in that future, it just might look very different from the success that they had

known in the past. So it will be for the church. God is giving the church success and will give it, I believe, even more abundantly in the future. But if we don't stop grieving for Saul, for the church that used to be, we will probably miss it.

All of this seems very relevant today, doesn't it? There is a lot of change in the air. This virus has so disrupted everything that, not only is it going to take a long time for things to go back to normal, I'm beginning to suspect that "back to normal" is not really going to be possible. At the very least, today I am probably as far as I ever have been from being able to say that I have the faintest idea of what the future might look like. That is a scary thought. It is a scary thought for the church, and it is a scary thought in a lot of other ways. But should we be scared? No, the future is in the best place that it could possibly be – in the hands of God. Just because the future is different, doesn't mean that God can't be in it. In fact, as many of the illusions of this world and how it worked fall away, it might even be possible that the kingdom of God is closer now than it has ever been before.

But do you know what might make us miss out on whatever new thing God is doing among us? We might miss it if all we can do is imagine the future in terms of the past. We might miss it if we define the success of the future in terms of what seemed like success in the past and we will especially miss it if we are looking for a new Saul and God is putting a David in front of us.

Grief has its place and you may well find yourself in the coming times looking back and missing things that you loved and that you liked and that made your life easier. That is fine and don't be afraid to express that grief. But when God comes to you and says **"fill your horn with oil and set out,"** you had better get ready to believe that the future success that he wants you to anoint will be something different from what it might have looked in the past – not Saul but David – and that is a good thing.