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1 Samuel 16:1-13

The Path to Repair and Restoration: Discernment In Decision Making

Our scripture this morning comes from the book of First Samuel, one of the books that tells of the history of the Hebrew people. While the book of Ruth comes between the book of Judges and 1 Samuel, Samuel picks up the story where Judges leaves off. Judges 21 ends with these words: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did as right in their own eyes." Thus, the books of First and Second Samuel tell of the rise of kings as the leaders of the Hebrew people.

Instrumental in the calling of the kings was Samuel, one of the most pivotal figures in the Old Testament. Samuel served as the bridge between the era of judges and the establishment of the monarchy. He held a unique combination of roles as a prophet, priest, and the last judge of Israel. He was a trusted political and military leader. The first king God chose through Samuel. And while Saul initially had promise as a king, he was a deeply flawed character, which led to his downfall¹. In our passage this morning, Samuel is back on the hunt again for a king for Israel. Hear now the word of God from 1 Samuel 16:1-13.

The 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." Samuel 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.' Invite 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." Samuel 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?" He 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.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely his anointed is now before the Lord." 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." Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel

¹For a good overview of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, check out the Bible Project at <https://bibleproject.com/guides/books-of-samuel/> Some material for this message is adapted from this site.

said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he 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.” He 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.”

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. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

I distinctly remember the first time I experienced “choice overload” sometimes referred to as “overchoice.” It was the mid-late 1980’s and I was a college student. A group of us were having a big night on the town at the Chi Chi’s in the Lehigh Valley Mall. Chi Chi’s was one of the first restaurants I had visited with a menu that more closely resembled a telephone directory (remember those!) than the one-pagers of the restaurants my family frequented. So many choices. And I was paralyzed, unable to make a decision about what I should order in this – what was to me – exotic restaurant.

Researchers have long studied this paradox of choice, the phenomenon that our brains can get overwhelmed when we are presented with too many options. We think we want more choices, and then we find ourselves staring at 15 kinds of apples and 30 types of cereal and don’t get me started on the apparently over 87,000 different drink combinations at Starbucks.²

Choice overload, also known as overchoice, choice paralysis, or the paradox of choice, describes how people get overwhelmed when they are presented with many options. While we tend to assume that more choice is a good thing, research has shown that, in many cases, we have a harder time choosing from a larger array of options than we do from a smaller array. Having too many options can actually make us feel less in control and can lead us to make the default choice (what we have always done before) or end up making no decision at all. Choice overload can cause us to delay decision-making, and interestingly decreases our satisfaction, lowers confidence in our choices, and leads to a higher chance that we will regret our decisions.³

When I first read our scripture for this week, I wondered to myself if Samuel had “choice overload.” Jesse paraded seven sons in front of Samuel, seven sons with attributes that would make them attractive selections to be the next king of Israel, yet Samuel rejected them all. Or actually the Lord rejected them all through Samuel.

² <https://www.starbucks.co.id/menu/beverage-list/espresso-beverages>

³ <https://thedeclarationlab.com/biases/choice-overload-bias>

Our passage of scripture this morning is typically labeled in Bibles as “David Anointed as King” or the “Calling of David.” David – young and handsome – is seen as the star of the show. Plucked from fields where he was tending the sheep, most likely bit dirty and smelly after a long day with the sheep. He wasn’t initially invited to the line-up as a possibility, and yet he was chosen instead of his seven older brothers. Chosen for some hefty work in the service of the Lord – so much so that the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

Yet at its heart, this is really a story about Samuel. And Samuel’s trust in God as he listens for God’s voice amongst the chatter and background noise of the world in which he lives. In a world where a path to repair and restoration was desperately needed. In a world where God showed up and chose an unexpected young man to serve as the king. How does Samuel get to this place of discernment - this place of hearing God’s voice? The term “discernment” is often used in church circles for the ability to perceive, understand, and judge situations or truths clearly – truths that reflect God’s will for a situation.

So a bit of the back story on Samuel might be helpful as we consider our scripture today. The book of 1 Samuel opens with the story of Samuel’s mother Hannah, who was unable to conceive a child. Hannah prayed fervently for the Lord to bless her and when she conceived, she sang a powerful song of gratitude and dedicated her son to the work of the Lord. She names her son Shemu’el or Samuel meaning “God hears,” reflecting her belief that God heard her prayer for a child. Hannah goes on to have three more sons and two daughters (1 Samuel 2:21).

Hannah keeps her promise to the Lord and Samuel is raised in the Temple at Shiloh, under the tutelage of Eli the High Priest. While still a young boy, Samuel is called by God during the night. Initially mistaking the voice for Eli’s, he eventually responded, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” Then the Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.” The Lord tells Samuel about the judgement that house of his mentor, the High Priest Eli, will face because of the disobedience of Eli’s sons. The next morning after Samuel receives this message from God, he has to decide whether to share the news with Eli or keep silent. And Samuel shares the news. The scriptures tell us that as Samuel grew up the Lord was with him and that the “Lord let none of his words fall to the ground.” This curious phrase meant that everything Samuel said came to pass. The author goes on to share that everyone in Israel – from north to south – knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord (1 Samuel 3: 10-18).

So from Samuel’s earliest days, Samuel had the gift of discernment, the gift of being able to hear God speak and to pronounce God’s message to the community. Samuel served as an important political leader, urging the people to put away foreign idols and return to worship of the one Lord God. Under his military leadership, the Israelites achieved a significant victory over the Philistines at Mizpah. Samuel memorialized this event by setting up a stone called

Ebenezer ("Stone of Help"). Little trivia fact: In the song *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, verse two begins with the words: *Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come; and I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home*. Ebenezer does not refer to Ebenezer Scrooge, as I thought for many years, rather it is a reminder of Samuel's "stone of help."⁴

One of the major discernment roles that Samuel played was in the transition to the monarchy. When Samuel grew old, the elders of Israel demanded a king to lead them. Samuel did not think that having a king besides the Lord God was a good idea and he went to God in prayer. And while God instructed Samuel to grant the people's request, God acknowledged that the people were rejecting God, and not Samuel's wisdom. Samuel was directed by God to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel. However, Saul's subsequent disobedience led Samuel to pronounce God's rejection of his kingship and Samuel had to inform Saul that God is going to raise up a new king to replace him (1 Samuel 15).

Throughout Samuel's story, there is a consistent theme – one that harkens back to his birth and his earliest days. When there are decisions to be made, when there are choices a plenty, Samuel turns to God for wisdom and God responds. Samuel has a strong trust in God as he listens for God's voice amongst the chatter and background noise of the world in which he lives. As he listens for God's voice amongst the people clamoring for a king. As he listened to for God's voice when Saul failed as a king and a new king was needed. And as he listened for God's voice in the choice of David as the king, an unlikely and unexpected choice.

Samuel trusted that through prayer, he would hear God's voice and wisdom. That the spirit of God would speak into a world that was unpredictable and that he would discern God's will. That what God spoke would matter and would make a difference in a messy and chaotic world. And that the question "why David?" would be answered in due time. Samuel did not get bogged down in the how this would happen. How was young, inexperienced, shepherd David going to become the King of Israel and fend off the attacks from hostile neighbors? How was David going to unite and inspire the people, who were reeling from the failed reign of Saul? There were so many "how" questions that Samuel could have asked that could have blocked his work.

Author Peter Block in his book *The Answer to How is Yes* argues that our obsession with asking "how" things will happen, how things will play out that prevent us from acting on what truly matters. Block suggests replacing "how" with "yes," meaning we should first commit to our values and what we believe is important, and then figure out the "how" as a necessity, not a prerequisite. He says, "Choosing to act on "what matters" is the choice to live a passionate existence, which is anything but controlled and predictable. Acting on what matters is, ultimately, a political stance, one whereby we declare we are accountable for the world

⁴ Robert Robinson. *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. #475 Glory to God Hymnal. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

around us and are willing to pursue what we define as important, independent of whether it is in demand, or has market value.”⁵

What Block is asking us to do is to follow Samuel’s lead and have discernment in our decision making. To recognize that there are many choices set before us as we travel a path of repair and restoration during this season of Lent. And rather than having choice overload or choosing what we have always done before or becoming paralyzed and doing nothing, we listen for the voice of the Spirit to guide us, especially if the choices are unexpected or we feel unprepared.

I believe the Holy Spirit is God still speaking in the world today, meeting us in the messy world in which we live. The work of the Holy Spirit is not easy work. The challenge we all have is to recognize the still small voice of the Spirit amidst the noise and busyness of life. When I was spending my days in the lab as a neuroscientist, one of the biggest challenges I faced was detecting a small change in a protein level or electrical activity in the brain after some manipulation. It was a constant battle of signal to noise ratio. And honestly this a pretty fair representation of my life on a lot of days – maybe your life to. Careening from one activity to the next, the busyness of life providing so much background chatter that the Holy Spirit barely has room to get a word in edgewise. As we draw closer to Holy Week, to the walk to the cross and the walk to the empty tomb, where are we being called to discern God’s voice? What might we be invited to say “yes” to that seems unexpected and foolish to the world around us and yet is in keeping with God’s plans for us and the world. Join me in prayer.

⁵ Peter Block. *The Answer to How is Yes. Acting on What Matters*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003. P7. You can read an excerpt online at https://www.uua.org/sites/livenew.uua.org/files/the_answer_to_how_is_yes_excerpt.pdf