



REPLICATED GRACE: Grace in Fear

1 Samuel 16:1-13

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Each week in this Season of Lent we are looking at stories of the scriptural narrative where, while perhaps unexpected, God's grace was made known. The scriptures offer us story after story of examples where God's grace is revealed, sometimes in life-changing and obvious ways; other times, God's grace is offered as nothing more than the hidden strength to move in challenging ways. In each case, the grace of God is offered to ensure the will of God is made manifest. In today's story of *Replicated Grace*, we focus in on the great prophet Samuel.

Samuel is considered the first of the major prophets in our Old Testament scriptures. It is under his tenure as prophet that God will call the first anointed king to lead the community of Israel. Samuel, aged in years, had named his own sons as judges over the people of Israel. However, his sons were not dedicated to God, nor did they follow in the faithful steps of Samuel, so the people of Israel demanded he remove his sons and put in place a king. The people Israel wanted someone to govern and rule over them, a model they had seen a successful for other nation-states in the surrounding region.

Samuel took their request to God, who suggested to Samuel and to the people Israel against putting a king in place. God reasoned: a king will take what doesn't belong to him; a king will take the best of your work animals, a tenth of your income, and he will take your best field servants. But the people insisted, and God acquiesced, saying to Samuel, "Listen to their voice and set a king over them."

In 1 Samuel, chapter 9, we find the first king. There was a man of great wealth who was of the tribe of Benjamin who had a son. This son, whose name was Saul, was a handsome man. "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else."¹ At God's bidding, Samuel anoints Saul to be the first institutional king of the people of Israel.

After putting Saul into place as king, Samuel, who is now really old in age, decides to step away from the role as such a vocal prophet. He says to Israel in 1 Samuel 12, "I have listened to you in all that you have said to me, and have set a king over you. It is the king who leads you now." With his farewell address, Samuel fully intends to be done with the work of prophet for the people of Israel, trusting them now into the hands of what he expected to be a capable king.

However, things did not go well for Saul as king. Saul's power did little more than stroke his narcissism and ego, and it is not long before God has regret for naming Saul as king. It's often debated if God can indeed make a mistake, but it seems here that God even names a mistake has been made. Samuel, who had dismissed himself from the public office, is sought once more

by God. Hear these words in 1 Samuel 15, “The word of the Lord came to Samuel, ‘I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.’” Samuel was devastated and he grieved over Saul. Then again, at the end of chapter 15, we read, “The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.”

Saul is still king; he is an anointed, chosen king, whose leadership was at one time blessed by God. Yet, while still sitting on the throne, he has lost favor with God for he no longer is faithful to God’s commands. He spoke and acted out of his own desire, with little regard for God or the people. He utilized destructive power instead of heavenly mercy. He built a monument to himself, instead of acknowledging the greatness of God.

Samuel, who had been the one to find and anoint Saul as king, who had stepped away from the public office, is now being called on by God to once more claim his role as leader and speak on behalf of God. Samuel goes to Saul and tells him God no longer wants him in the office of king. Yet, to the people, Saul remains king of Israel.

It is here in this situation that we encounter today’s text. Samuel continues to grieve over Saul, and God calls him to move beyond the blunder of anointing Saul as king and to go find a new king. Samuel is afraid. “How can I go?” Samuel asks. “If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.”

Samuel knows that Saul is a jealous man who acts out of his own interests and ego. Samuel knows that Saul will not take kindly to a new king being anointed while he still sits on the throne. Samuel has been something of a father figure to Saul – he anointed him as king, he coached him during his tenure as king, and he was the one to tell him God will reject him from continuing to be king. There is likely some grief Samuel experiences for his broken relationship with Saul. But there’s more than that: “To anoint a new king while the old one lives would have been seen by Saul as treason; consequently Samuel fears for his own life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Speaking out against a king who sits on the throne is never a favored situation. Much more so is this true when the king who is being spoken against is an egotistical maniac who has proven to turn from the will of God in favor of personal gain and empirical power. But God assures Samuel of his safety, scheming with Samuel to trick Saul and others into the true nature of his trip down to Bethlehem. God tells Samuel to take with him a cow, and to tell any who ask that he has gone to offer a sacrifice to God.

Samuel does as the Lord has commanded. He goes to Bethlehem to find and anoint a new king. Travelling to Bethlehem is an important and often overlooked detail. Bethlehem was in the region of the Kingdom of Israel that was maintained by the tribe of Judah. This offers a split from the family line of Saul, who was of the tribe of Benjamin.

Not only is Samuel going under the pretense of offering a sacrifice to God to find and anoint a new king, he is leaving the home region of Saul to find this new king in another land that is outside the reach of Saul’s northern kingdom. The new ruler will be chosen by the intention of God, “not by historical accident or political stratagem.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Samuel reaches Bethlehem and is greeted by the elders of the city. This was a welcoming party, who had come out to greet a prophet who held high office in the court of the king. The elders were trembling, likely scared of the purpose of his visit. “[High officials of the court] never come to give but always to take.”^{iv}

Samuel tells them to fear not, that he has come in peace to offer a sacrifice to God. There Samuel encounters Jesse. Preparing them and cleansing them for sacrifice, Samuel invites Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice. What ensues is the best biblical account of the team picking process at a pick-up game of basketball. You know what I’m talking about: the awkward waiting as the team captains look over the available selection and decide who will be chosen first and who will be chosen last. Perhaps you better relate to the middle school dance with the girls over here and the boys over here? One by one, after much encouraging and harassing by your friends, the girls and boys are asked to dance, hoping and wondering, *will I be asked? Will someone call my name?*

Jesse brings seven of his sons to Samuel for the sacrifice. Samuel starts judging them while they are still walking toward him; he doesn’t even wait for them to line up. He sees the eldest son, Eliab walking in the front of the line. Perhaps because of the cultural emphasis on the first born, or perhaps because Eliab was a tall and handsome man, Samuel assumes this will be the son of Jesse that God chooses as the new king.

“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.’”^v

Another example of where it appears God has had a change of heart. When Saul was chosen, the only criteria we were offered for his selection was his good looks and tall stature. He was, if you recall, head and shoulders above the rest. But God’s criterion has changed. God says the outward appearance is not what’s important; instead, the focus is on the heart.

“[The] heart was not the center of emotions for the ancients, although it was included. Heart was the center of one’s being: emotion, intelligence, discernment, wisdom, commitment, and character were all elements of heart – perhaps what we call soul.”^{vi} God tells Samuel, stop looking at their physical stature, and instead look into their soul – look at how their wisdom and character stack up with their commitment and discernment. All the things that Saul lacked, God is now calling out as being of utmost importance.

Hearing God, Samuel continues to judge the sons. One by one, he goes down the line, but having seen the seven sons who were presented, Samuel finds not one to be of proper caliber according to God’s standards to be anointed the new king. I imagine Samuel was confused, unsure of what God was doing. He stood here in a distant town, in sure fear of his own life at the hand of the unruly king, trying to carry out God’s bidding, and in these seven sons of Jesse, he has found not one of proper character to be named the new king. So Samuel says (with a

hint of hesitancy in his voice) to Jesse, “The Lord chooses none of these. Are all of your sons here?”

Jesse, likely caught of guard himself, thinking to himself, *how is it that none of these are of God’s election*, says, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.”

Jesse had not even invited the youngest to join the family for the expected sacrifice with the high prophet of the king’s court. The youngest son was seemingly not even considered mature enough to come for the supposed sacrifice that was to take place.^{vii} He’s the runt in the family, who was given the job that day of tending to the sheep (a most meaningless and demeaning job in the ancient days). “That [this youngest son] David has not even been included is an indication of his status within the family.”^{viii}

Samuel, perhaps offended that Jesse would thus waste his time, says, “I will not sit down until he comes; send and bring him.” The narrative is put on hold while we wait for this eighth son to be brought before Samuel. This is no short wait. Jesse must send someone out into the fields to find his son, and then bring him all the way back that Samuel may judge him on behalf of God.

Finally, after some time, the youngest son appears in the distance. Our narrator seems to have forgotten God’s instruction, for we have these notes offered that ‘he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.’ How quickly we forget that God has called us not to judge by physical appearance. None-the-less, God says to Samuel, “This is the one; rise and anoint him.” This son was David, to be the next king of Israel.

In a day and an age when the king wielded extreme power, when fear of consequence for speaking against the king was validated, when even high prophets in the court of the king feared for their life when trying to carry out the will of God, the Lord still offered his grace in the assurance of his will and support for his faithful servants.

Perhaps the challenge in this text isn’t that we can’t easily connect this Biblical story line with our national story line today. Perhaps the challenge isn’t in connecting the lack of mercy and humble leadership of Saul to the apparent lack of humbleness in our own national leaders. Perhaps the challenge of this text isn’t in naming that God is still trying to raise up leaders within the king’s court to speak prophetically about how far we have fallen from keeping God’s will as the driving force in our national forecast. Perhaps the challenge of this text isn’t that we can use it to justify our own dissent from the leaders of our nation when we find them to be contradicting our own conviction of God’s will for our country. These connections and leaps are perhaps far too easy to make.

What if ... what if the challenge of this text is that too often we use it to justify our judgment of those in national public leadership without applying the message of the text to our own shortcomings. What if the conviction of this text is not to allow for judgment on people like Saul, but is instead intended to be offered in support of people like David?

Perhaps the selection process of David is a call to each of us to empower and offer strength to those who have been considered the least, the lost, the forgotten, and the left out. Perhaps the story of David's selection by the Lord should stand as a reminder that in a first-century culture where first-born status offered all the privilege one needed to be loved in society, God somehow kept choosing the younger brother as the care-taker of God's will. From David to Moses, Joseph to Jacob, and even Isaac, God keeps choosing the ones who would not have been expected to lead.

Perhaps, albeit one pretty direct urging of this text may demand us to speak and act out against the kingly figure who goes against the will of God, the more poignant message of the text is that we consider who we expect to be leaders in our own lives – in our businesses, in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our nation, and in our church. In our top executive positions across our nation, from business to politics to the church, we see plenty of telegenic people leading us, but to where? God says we need to stop following people who have claimed leadership simply because of their visible appearance, and to focus in on the heart of the person we choose to follow.

Maybe, just maybe, the story of David's anointing is not about our rebellion toward big brother, but is instead about the empowering grace of God that gives us liberty to look beyond the ways of the elite and the powerful to find faithful leadership in the foreigner – the one from the small town – the youngest son – the sheep herder – the one left out even by his own family.

For in the election of David, in the anointing of the new king, God reminds us that faithfulness doesn't come just in those who *seem* to have their act together and are praised and hailed as king. But instead, the salvation of humanity comes from the manger, in the weak and lowly, in the one who was called a servant, in the one who was willing to risk his life for the lives of all humanity.

So this day may we be challenged by the good news of God's great grace, and hear as the Word of God promises to sustain us and give us strength not just to go against the powerful in the hierarchy, but to see in the foreigner, the shepherd, the weak, and the left out the image of God, who calls us to great love. May all we do be empowered and driven by the will and strength of God. Amen.

ⁱ 1 Samuel 9:2. NRSV

ⁱⁱ Carol A. Newsome. . *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 2*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann. *First and Second Samuel: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v 1 Samuel 16:7. NRSV.

^{vi} Donald P. Olsen. . *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 2*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

^{vii} David H. Jensen. *1 & 2 Samuel: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

^{viii} Carol A. Newsome.