

You Are Called

1 Samuel 16:1, 16:6-13

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When God calls a person, he doesn't use a lot of words. Instead, he gets right to the heart of the matter.

For most of the year I have been preaching on God's calling in our lives. I want to conclude this series by preaching for the next two months out of the story of David's life. That is because this story beautifully portrays God's calling in our own lives.

The Bible is filled with stories. In fact, it is a collection of great stories about ordinary men and women who get caught up in a sacred drama with God. We sometimes call the Gospel itself a story. For when God saved us, he didn't just drop a lot of religious proscriptions out of the sky. No, he came to us in the person of Jesus. In the story of his birth, life, death, and resurrection we find our salvation as well. That means the purpose of these great biblical stories is not to be relevant to us, but to make us relevant to them. Through the Holy Spirit of God, the little story of our own lives gets caught up in the great story of God's redemption of the world. So your life is never limited to car pools, fax machines, failed fitness programs, or late Social Security checks. Those are but minor details in a much greater drama that God is still writing with your life.

Now I know that all this talk about story sounds a bit too folksy for some of you. What you would prefer is that the Bible give you a few models. The purpose of a model is to show us what we have to become to meet the standard. Looking at a model in a magazine you could say, "That is what I have to look like to become beautiful." But that also means that models always judge you for what you are not. Similarly, if you had a spiritual model, you could try to emulate him or her, but that also would be only a judgment of what you have not yet become. The Bible has very few models and lots of stories: earthy stories, of men and women who were nothing special but who responded to the sacred calling to draw near to the heart of God. Then their lives became very special indeed.

This is how the story of David begins: When Israel was a young nation, it was governed by judges. These judges, including people like Samson, Gideon, and Deborah, were charismatic figures that God would raise up whenever there was a need for leadership. The last of the judges was an old man named Samuel who was clearly getting on in years, and all his sons were worthless. The people of Israel came to Samuel and said that they had outgrown government by judges. "We want to be like other nations and have a king." So Samuel went out and looked for a king.

The best candidate for the job appeared to be a man named Saul. He came from a good family, was very popular, and was the best looking man in the country. He was literally head and shoulders above the other candidates. But as time went by, it became clear that as a leader Saul was a disaster. He was an egomaniac and paranoid of losing power. He resorted to the counsel of witches. Worst of all, he simply had no character. Saul looked great on the outside, but like a large oak tree lying on the ground, it was clear that something rotten had eaten away his insides.

Under Saul's leadership the people entered a long drift from God. So it was not surprising that God rejected Saul and decided this time to select his own king for the people. As God told Samuel, "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look in the outward appearances, but the Lord looks on the heart" (16:7). When God examined the hearts of his people, he found David.

We aren't told much about the physical appearance of David. We do know that he was ruddy, which means red. He was a lot smaller than Saul, and looked ridiculous in Saul's armor. Scripture also says that he was handsome, but it says the same thing about Absalom's horse, so it's hard to know what that means. We know a lot more about David's position in life. He was a shepherd, which was the ancient equivalent of a parking lot attendant. And he was the youngest of eight sons, which in his day didn't mean much. David began with a lousy draw in life. He had a lousy job, lousy birthright, and a lousy bunch of brothers. He was

nothing special.

With Saul everything started right. He had the right family, background, friends, pedigree, wealth, and popularity. Saul had all the right appearances. But his life ended as a dismal failure in suicide. By contrast, with David everything started wrong. But he ended his life as the greatest king Israel has ever known. The only thing that made the difference was that David had a heart that God found irresistible. Now a person's heart is a hard thing to see. "But the Lord does not see as mortals see."

Maybe your life doesn't look like you had hoped it would by now. Few of us are Saul, and those who are seem to be the least happy among us. But when we look at Saul, and read about his life in the Style section of the paper, or when we watch his career flash past us at work like a meteor, it is tempting to think that if we just change our appearances, we'll have a better story. The advertizing industry realizes this, and keeps peddling one product after another knowing we are hooked on changing our outward appearances. But the Lord would tell us that if we really want to make some changes, the place to start is our hearts.

If you want your life to make a difference in this world, or even in your little part of it, don't start by applying to grad school, or volunteering for a new ministry. Start by choosing to love God. Continue by loving God. It is the only thing that really matters to him. Everything else, like work, relationships, and opportunities are in God's hands anyway. The only choice you really have that matters is not what you will do, but to whom you will give your heart. With your heart in God's hands, anything can happen. Even a shepherd boy can be transformed into a king.

You can imagine the scene in Bethlehem when old Samuel came to visit in search of the new king. As soon as he arrived the elders of the town were all aflutter and asked what he wanted. All that Samuel said was that he would be making a sacrifice to God, which is an interesting description of what it means to pick a new leader. He told the elders to invite everyone to the sacrifice, especially Jesse and his sons.

When the sons of Jesse appeared before Samuel, the first one in line was Eliab who was tall and the eldest son. Samuel took one look at him and thought, "Surely this is the Lord's anointed." Those of you who are dating know about this. You begin a date thinking, surely this is the Lord's anointed, but halfway through dinner you realize, "Nope, I'll have to keep looking." When God saw Eliab, he told Samuel, "No, you're looking on the outward appearances again." Next Jesse brings out his number two son. "No," God says. "This isn't the one either." Then the number three son. "No." Then out came the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh sons. Samuel kept saying, "No." "No." "No." "No. This is not the one God has chosen."²

Now let's think about the story from Father Jesse's perspective. He hears from Samuel that God wants a son sacrificed from his house to lead the people. He brings what from all outward appearances are the best he has to offer God, only to have seven of his sons rejected. How many times do we have to hear God's "no" before we finally hear a "yes"? Well according to our text, the ratio is about seven "no's" to every "yes." Like Jesse, you may hear no a lot from God before he says yes to what you offer. But that is only because there is something you haven't yet offered to God. Something close to your heart, which is all that God is really wants.

We don't know that David was kept out of the line-up of sons because Jesse had discarded him. Maybe it was because little Davy was the favorite, the one closest to his father's heart. He was just a shepherd boy. Nothing special to anyone but a parent. Surely, Jesse must have thought, he could keep the youngest child at home.

"Are all your sons here?" Samuel asked Jesse. "Well, there is the baby of the family who is out watching the sheep." And Samuel says, "Go get him." When David walks in, still brushing the dirt off his robe, God says to Samuel, "Arise and anoint him for this is the one."

Maybe as he poured the anointing oil on David's head, the old judge whispered in his ear, "Thou art the one." As those confusing words were still ringing in his ears, Scripture tells us the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David. The word for spirit in Hebrew is the same as the word for wind. So we could also tell the story to say that the mighty wind from heaven rushed down upon the shepherd boy propelling him to the center stage of Israel's history.

Do you see what is happening in this story? Do you see how the same thing is happening in God's great drama in your life?

There is the public, linear, or horizontal, drama that everyone can see. This public drama is so predictable. Another choice is being made just like so many other choices we have all witnessed. It looks at first like just another beauty pageant. It looks like Eliab will be chosen just as all the Sauls before him. But there is also a sacred, vertical, drama playing out that is harder to see. This sacred drama is never predictable. For the wind from heaven, the sacred wind that actually drives our history, is about the push an ordinary person like you into an extraordinary calling. "Thou art the one!" If you are ever going to find God's calling in your life, you have to pay attention to the vertical drama going on above you that proclaims, "You have been chosen!"

Do you remember how wonderful it felt when you were chosen? When the kids were picking sides for a game of baseball, and you were chosen. Or when the phone rang and someone asked you to the prom? Or when the letter finally came from a college saying you had been chosen for admission? Or when the prospective employer said, "We had a lot of candidates, but we chose you"? You were chosen. That is also at the beginning of your story with God.

You can never forget that. You can never forget that ordinary you were chosen by God to play an extraordinary role in his drama on earth. And you can never forget that the reason you were chosen was never because you looked good. Your calling has nothing to do with your talents and resume. God already has all of the talent he needs. He has already passed up all of David's talented brothers on his way to find you.

So why were you chosen? Only because God wants your heart.

Our hearts are the hardest things to give you, O God, and yet what you most want. We are hesitant not because we think our hearts too precious, but because we do not value them as much as you do. So teach us first to receive your heart, that we may find the courage to give you ours as well. Amen.