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The National Presbyterian Church

## **Life of King David: “Out of Obscurity”**

1 Samuel 16:1-13

David A. Renwick

During month of August our sermons going to focus on the life of the greatest king Ancient Israel ever had: KING DAVID – who lived about 1000 years before Christ.

In some ways David is a prototype for our Savior Jesus Christ. While David was far from perfect, at his best, he frequently showed a Christ-like passion for God and a Christ-like passion to build God’s Kingdom (God’s Community) here on earth. So Jesus was sometimes called the “Son of David.”

Over the next three Sundays we will be thinking about his life and, in particular, about

1. His path to success (with all its ups and downs)
2. His poor choices (frequently Self-Defeating)
3. And his poetry and songs (filled with faith)

But today, I want us to begin, by thinking about his rise out of obscurity.

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Let me set the scene. David lived at a time of massive change in the ancient Near East.

We know all about this kind of significant change in western world.

- Think of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the impact of the printing press
- Or stay in our own era, the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the rise of the digital revolution and the computer age.

At such times, forces are unleashed and new technologies appear, with incredible new benefits – as well as new dangers, that change life – (whether we want life to change or not). This was true in ancient world too, especially around the time just preceding David, the 12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

For 200 years, the 12 tribes of Israel had been settling into their own land after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. As they did this, there was *no need for a central government*. In fact all they had was *a loose confederation of the tribes* bound together only by promise (or covenant) to each other, and by their common allegiance to God as their King (there was no human king).

So, whenever they had skirmishes with neighbors, the ties of kinship and promise would lead the tribes to rally round and support each other. And this *loosey goosey* way of running things worked fairly well until the day world changed, which it did with the rise of a people known as the Philistines. The Philistines became a new great power in the Mediterranean world, greater than anything the Hebrew tribes had previously faced.

In particular the Philistines had new technology: weapons made of iron, and they were out to conquer their region and anyone who stood in their way.

**The Israelites simply couldn't compete.** Not only because they lacked the technology and weaponry. But more than that – they couldn't even get themselves unified and organized because of their lack of a central government.

So, just as a common enemy brought the *13 loosely-knit colonies* together, in the 1700's, so too, back in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century BC, the presence of the Philistines and their weapons forced the Israelite tribal confederation to re-think *role of their own form of government* and led them to call on God through his prophet Samuel to give them a King, a central authority, to whom they could submit and give their allegiance, and who could make them strong together.

But it wasn't that easy. God's prophet Samuel, who was the nominal leader of the tribes, though he had no legal authority, had mixed feelings about this move which he saw not only as the end of a wonderful era, but as a potential rejection of God himself.

Samuel was scared to death that allegiance to *a human king-in-flesh-and-blood* would take the place of allegiance to God himself – the only true King, the one who'd brought them out of slavery, who had "done it once" and could do it again!

And not only that, but he was scared to death as well, that the wrong person would get into power and become corrupted by the power that was put in his hands. So in 1 Samuel 8, we find him warning the people that they needed to think twice: "Are you sure you want to do this?"

<sup>14</sup>Your king will take the best of your fields and give them to his courtiers.

<sup>15</sup>He will take one-tenth of your grain and give it to his officers

<sup>16</sup>He will take the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to *his* work.

<sup>17</sup>He will take one-tenth of your flocks, -- and you shall be his slaves.

Are you sure you want to do this? He asked poignantly. To which the people still said "Yes!" despite the danger. And Samuel gave in to their request. In fact, as the people persisted, God himself let Samuel know that this was the right course at that time.

So Samuel began looking for a king to take the lead, though within a fairly short span of time it began to look as if the decision to make these changes wasn't a good one at all: the first King didn't work out too well. His name was Saul, and while he had some success at first against the arch-enemy Philistines the sad truth was that

- his willingness to usurp power (that was not his)
- and his own mental instability,
- and his envy of others -- his inability to share the limelight profoundly damaged his ability *to bind the tribes together* and to rule them effectively.

And that's where we pick up the story in 1 Samuel 16, our scripture reading – with Samuel secretly going (without King Saul's knowledge) to look for a new king in the small town of Bethlehem, a rather unlikely place to go looking for a king! Bethlehem was more like Poughkeepsie than New York. It was more like Leesburg than DC! But for all that, God's message to Samuel was clear: *this* was the place that God had sent him, and *one of the sons* of Jesse – a man from Bethlehem – would undoubtedly become the king God had in mind.

In fact, even though Samuel probably had no knowledge of it, God had been at work in Jesse's family for a couple of generations: Jesse's grandmother was a woman named Ruth, a foreigner, an immigrant, from the land of Moab. Ruth was a woman who had shown remarkable courage and trust in the God of Israel at a time when death and devastation had hit her life and God had

blessed her faithfulness with a husband and children. *Read the short Book of Ruth in our Old Testament!*

So God knew what he was doing, and faithful Samuel trusts God and turns up in Bethlehem and (so that King Saul or his spies would not become suspicious!) asks Jesse to come with his sons to a religious ceremony of purification. When they arrive, Samuel checks out each of the sons one by one starting with the older ones thinking each time that *this might be the one*, until a total of seven sons have been reviewed. And each time, Samuel has no sense of assurance at all that any of the seven was *the one* chosen to be king.

Samuel at that point, of course, could easily have given up his search and said to himself that he'd simply made a mistake: "*Wrong place, wrong family, wrong insight into character.*" But he didn't. In fact *he was so convinced* that he was in the right place, and with the right family that he turned to Jesse and *asked him if he had any more sons*. At which point the truth came out! Jesse says "Well, Yes indeed! One more son, David, the youngest, keeping the sheep – with the implication that he's the most insignificant, of no account, probably lazing away the day in the sun.

And Samuel told Jesse to send for him. And when he came, Samuel immediately knew that he was the one chosen by God. So, Samuel took a horn of olive oil and in the presence of the family poured the oil on David as a sign of God's blessing – and David became a "*meshiach*," Hebrew for "an anointed person." It's from the Hebrew word "meshiach" that we get our word "messiah."

And from that day on, God's Spirit became the source of his power. And while it would be some years before David would become king, *it was this moment and event* that was the beginning of his rise to power – a true "rising from obscurity," from nowhere, to become the greatest leader of God's people: on a level with Moses in the past and greater than any in the future, for the next 1000 years.

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And that's the story. And from it, at least two major lessons emerge and both are about pride and humility (and only indirectly re David)

1. The first is more about Samuel than David: **about Samuel's ability to go with the change** to find a king; to soften his stance, to compromise and even change his mind.

This is not always easy. In fact, in this case, it was downright hard. It was not as if Samuel's choice between something that he had previously thought was clearly wrong, and something that now he thought was clearly right. The choice remained between options that were somewhat murky and gray and uncertain!

Samuel's initial concerns were perfectly legitimate: a human king would almost inevitably abuse power and command an allegiance that would usurp God's role as the ultimate ruler of people's lives. Samuel's concern was legitimate, and in time the abuse of power that he feared would certainly happen.

BUT what he had to wrestle with was that at *this* moment in time something new was demanded, and to cling to the old wouldn't do.

At *this* moment in time, the very existence of the tribes was at stake, and their unity and power was contingent on the presence of a unified front, a unifying leader, a king in flesh and blood.

And after wrestling with himself, with the people, and with God, *Samuel backed down, and changed his mind.*

What we need to note was that *this was NOT* just a bending to pressure, but a careful, prayerful assessment that this was the right thing to do. And *that kind of change* takes humility and courage; eating humble pie!

- It takes courage to stand one's ground
- But so too, on occasion, it takes courage to change one's mind.

I suppose my model in this is my doctoral professor -- the late Dr. Paul Achtemeier whose nickname was *Bullet Bud*, a name given because of his strongly held and expressed opinions.

In our seminars with him, the doctoral students saw something in Bullet Bud that the Masters students rarely saw. What we saw was that when we argued our case (as we were obligated to do), there was no pride him. If we argued well we, his lowly students, could actually get him to change his mind – not lightly, or frivolously, but thoughtfully and deliberately. *And experiencing this had a profound impact on my life*

There's a time to stand firm; and a time to change, and Samuel did both.

So there's a word here about Samuel: about courage, and pride, and humility; about holding on and letting go.

2. But there's also, of course, a word about David. Or, more particularly, **about David's God and God's Choice of David** – God's choice to accomplish his purpose through the least obvious; the youngest; the most insignificant; the person nobody else seems to notice or care about.

In fact this is a theme that runs throughout Scripture

- Deceitful Jacob the younger brother *supplants* his older brother Esau as leader of the tribe (Genesis 27)
- Arrogant Joseph the 2<sup>nd</sup> youngest of 12, *saves* his family from starvation (Genesis 37-50)
- Esther the orphan *saves* her people from genocide (Book of Esther)
- Ruth the foreign immigrant becomes the great grandmother of Israel's greatest king (Book of Ruth)
- Mary the young girl from Nazareth becomes the human mother of the Son of God (Luke 1)
- A little boy is the channel through whom Jesus feeds thousands (John 6:9)
- Peter the coward becomes the leader of Jesus' disciples (John 21:15-19)

God, it seems, notices and loves the under-dog. As 1 Peter 5 says, "*God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble*"; to the one who thinks they're nothing and can never be used by God.

Just this past week, I finished reading a 2014 best-selling book called *Just Mercy*. It's about an attorney, Bryan Stevenson who attended Harvard Law School, before moving south to Atlanta and Montgomery in 1985 to spend his career representing the poor and the wrongfully accused (often the same).

The book is page turner about the people he's met, and the prisons he's visited, the humiliations and threats he's faced over a period of 30 years. And it's also about his discovery of the abuse of the incarcerated who are mentally ill, and the numerous prisoners who are innocent, but on death row; and about life sentences without parole or review given to children (mainly poor and black). This is a world within our nation that I (and probably many of us) have had no clue about at all.

BUT Stevenson's and his growing team of attorneys have persistently surfaced these issues, and have argued their cases, and won some land mark ones along the way, all the way up to (and including) the Supreme Court.

His achievements and his accomplishments by any standard are remarkable *but they are all the more remarkable when you know where he comes from and what he escaped.*

- A childhood in rural Delaware,
- the son of a worker at a food processing plant,
- the first black child in a white school in early '60's,
- whose Junior High school teachers encouraged and urged him to settle for vocational school.

He grew up in the equivalent of Bethlehem. He had a life of obscurity. BUT not to God who noticed him long ago in his small AME. Church where he learned that Christ notices all people (victims and victimizers – Stevenson's obvious love for the victimizers as well as the victims is stunning) – because all are broken and in need of his grace.

AND GOD NOTICES US TOO!!

And says: "Pssst . . . I've got something I want you to do."

And we say: "Who Me?"

And God says: "Yes, You! I need you to rise to the challenge, to carry the responsibility, to step out in faith, to play your part."

And we say: "Not qualified! Too busy! Prefer my obscurity! Leave me alone! Let me hide!"

But God says: "That's not what I do – I notice people, and I pursue them, and I don't make mistakes. It's you I want. Like David – and countless others . . . Jacob, Joseph, Ruth, Esther. And Samuel too. Remember: there were times when *even he* didn't want to do what I wanted him to do. But he, at least had the humility and the courage to listen and think and pray and change. So, you too?"

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**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800