

Sermon: God chooses us

[Readings: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17]

“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.”

I have titled this sermon: God chooses us, God chooses us.

Let's pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds, be acceptable to you O God, our rock and our liberator. Amen.

The events in the reading from 1 Samuel take place 1,000 years before Jesus. A few years before, Samuel who was a prophet as well as a high ranking priest, was guided by God, to anoint Saul as king. The Israelites had for the previous 250 years been governed well by a series of judges. But looking at the surrounding countries who were ruled by kings, the Israelites decided that they wanted a king too and Saul was chosen.

Things had started to go wrong for Saul. The reading says: “And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.” And, “I have rejected him from being king over Israel.” Earlier in Samuel chapter 15, Saul had been instructed by God to destroy the Amalekites and to keep fighting until they were all dead. Saul captured the Amalekite king and Saul's troops plundered the sheep and cattle of the Amalekites, but they didn't destroy them as God had instructed. So God, who had chosen Saul, then un-chose or rejected Saul.

Samuel was upset by these events. He grieved over Saul. He felt regret that what should have been a successful, blest reign, didn't in the end meet Samuel's and God's expectations. So a new king to replace Saul was needed.

God tells Samuel to go to Jesse in Bethlehem, because God has chosen one of his sons to be the new king. Samuel can see a problem. If he openly travels to Bethlehem to find the new king, Saul may hear about it and kill Samuel. Samuel the prophet and man of God, knows that Saul remains powerful, and he is afraid of what Saul might do. So God suggests subterfuge, a sneaky way for Samuel to disguise the true purpose of his trip. Samuel takes a heifer, so he can tell anyone that asks that he is going to Bethlehem to sacrifice it. The ruse works and Samuel meets up with Jesse and seven of his sons.

There is a surprise. Jesse's oldest son Eliab, who is handsome and tall comes before Samuel, who thinks to himself, ‘Yes he will do.’ But God has other ideas, and tells Samuel to reject Eliab. Remember that in those times the first born son was the most important child, the one who would inherit the family's property when his father died, and also take on responsibility for the family. So to reject Eliab is a shock.

It is explained that God doesn't judge people by their outward appearance but looks into their heart.

The next sons, Abinadab, Shammah and four more unnamed sons, come before Samuel. God tells Samuel to reject them all.

So Samuel asks Jesse if he has any other sons. Jesse says yes, David, but he is away keeping the sheep. Samuel instructs Jesse to bring him in. God selects David and Samuel anoints him (pours oil on his head). The Spirit of God is with David from then on. Samuel returns home.

What lessons can we find for ourselves in this story?

Samuel is so tuned into God that he can hear God's messages to him, as quickly and easily as speaking to God on a phone or by texting. Remember when Samuel was a young boy living in the temple with Eli, and he heard God calling to him three times in the night. From that day onwards Samuel has been close to God as a faithful servant and later as a powerful prophet speaking truth to the people of Israel.

In the service I took in May, we looked at the types of prayer. I suggested then that "We are always in God's presence – we just have to recognise it."

Joy Cowley's lovely poem "Beautiful Presence" that we used as our prayer of approach, celebrates this type of closeness to God. I suggest that you take today's order of service with you, and read her words each day during this coming week.

This story contains an uncomfortable reality, God made a mistake in having Samuel anoint Saul as king, and God later regretted that decision. How does this challenge our concept or idea of God, our theology? Can we worship a God who isn't perfect, who sometimes gets things wrong?

As I age and travel on my spiritual journey, I find that it is less important for me to see God as controlling and taking responsibility for our lives. I see God more as a force, an energy, that creates and sustains and connects us with each other and the earth.

Nonetheless, in the story, God has chosen David to be the new king. God has made a choice and communicated this through his servant Samuel. Note that David doesn't become king immediately. Samuel anoints David with oil as a sign of God's promise that David will become king at a later time. Neither Samuel nor David tell Saul about this. Samuel goes back to his home in Ramah, and David goes back to his sheep in the fields. The anointing is a secret for now, to be revealed later at the right time.

I can see parallels between David and Jesus here. The Hebrew word for 'anointing' is mishchah – [pronounced meesh-khaw] – from which we get the title Messiah or anointed one. And like David, Jesus came from a humble family and did lowly work in his early years. David as shepherd, Jesus as a carpenter like his father or maybe just a labourer. David ruled for 40 years and was the most successful of all Israel's kings. Jesus became a healer, a teacher and our saviour.

David looked after the family's sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

We turn now to the reading from Paul's second letter to the Christian faith community in Corinth, in Greece.

Marcus Borg suggests that this letter is actually a conflation or amalgamation of three letters that Paul wrote to them in the mid-50s of the first century. Paul established the group at Corinth in the early 50s and probably stayed with them for two years, before moving on to establish churches elsewhere.

In his letters Paul both encourages these churches and tells them off if he hears that are doing things he disagrees with.

Paul must have written a lot of letters to the churches, but only a few letters have survived and appear in the New Testament. I wonder what the other letters said and what wisdom we could have gleaned from them?

The first section of today's reading is a bit obscure. Paul is saying that he would preferred to have died and gone to heaven, rather than still being alive and living in his earthly body. He goes on to remind his readers that we will be judged at the seat of Christ in heaven, for the things we have done in this life. This gives rise to the fear of God that Paul speaks about.

There is some more difficult text, about Paul wanting the believers in Corinth to boast about him and his travelling missionary partner. Borg suggests that after Paul left Corinth, other missionaries visited the faith community there and taught them different ideas and ways of following Jesus. So Paul is pleading with the faithful at Corinth to put in a good word for him and defend Paul's teachings, in the face of the newcomers' challenge.

Here is a link with the reading from first Samuel. Paul is saying that the newcomers outward appearance may look good, but that what is in their hearts is more important.

Paul then moves on to a favourite theme that we should all be "in Christ." Just as Jesus died for us, we should leave our old lives behind and live only to serve him. Part of the meaning of the full emersion baptism ceremony in those days, was that our old life was drowned and has ended, and that we emerge to a new life "in Christ." We become a new creation.

Some comments on the reading from Pauls letter.

Paul's missionary work spread the good news about Jesus, and he had a vital role in the development of the early Christian church in the two or three decades after Jesus.

An overarching theme of Jesus teaching was the idea of the Kingdom of God, the realm of God, or the dream of God – and that the kingdom was here already, we just had to recognise and be open to living a new way, of worshipping God and loving our neighbours.

Paul didn't meet Jesus in person. So, a stronger focus for Paul was to be ready for Jesus' second coming, when the world would be put to rights, and we would then all go to heaven. Paul's fear or concern about the judgement day is part of this theology.

For me, Jesus' message is more compelling. It is how we live now that matters. How we treat, and serve, and support other people.

We know about Paul's ministry in his time. What will be our ministries today?

I want to suggest to you that God has chosen us and is still choosing all of us – all people everywhere.

Everyone is worthy. It is not for us to judge someone else.

We have the gospels, Paul's letters, and the other scriptures to show us a new way of living and being.

Let's honour God's faith in us.

Let's live faithfully and well, with love in our hearts.

Amen.