

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Anointed Vision

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Ask someone to tell you the names of some of the most famous people in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, and David will probably show up on their list. It's impossible to tell the story of how God formed, led, and governed the life of his people Israel without talking about David. He towers among Israel's rulers and holds a unique place in the story of God's dealings with not only his chosen people but with all humankind. After all, as Christians, we view David as the ancestor and foreshadower of Jesus the Messiah, the one we call "King of kings and Lord of lords," the one who rules the whole creation and whose coming will bring in God's reign of justice and peace. So as followers of Jesus, as God's people in Christ called the church, we can't tell our own story without also telling the story of David.

But we're so used to the David whose face could be on the Mount Rushmore of biblical heroes that we lose sight of the very ordinary and unexceptional life he was living before God chose him to be Israel's king. That's where we meet David in today's Scripture passage from 1 Samuel. God tells the prophet Samuel that it's time for him to bring his season of grief to a close. Instead of continuing to mourn the fact that Saul can no longer be Israel's king, Samuel needs to start doing what God is already doing, namely, looking to the future. In other words, at this point in the story, Samuel is dwelling on what might have been, while God is focused on what can be, indeed, will be, with someone else as Israel's ruler. And that someone else is David.

God has already made his pick. Samuel's God-given assignment is to go and let God show him the one who has been selected. So Samuel fills his horn with oil, a sure sign that there's an anointing ceremony on the agenda. Now it's just a matter of finding the one who's going to get the oil, and the Spirit of God, poured on him.

When it comes to planning, at least God has narrowed things down for Samuel, who's told that the king-to-be is one of Jesse's boys, in the town of Bethlehem. But how will the village elders react? If Samuel shows up at Jesse's front door saying, "Hi, I'm here to anoint a new king for our nation," Jesse might respond, "No, I don't think so. We already have a king. His name is Saul, and I have a good mind to report you for treason." So God tells Samuel that since sacrifices and eating together are usually part of an anointing ceremony to begin with, he should just tell everyone that he's there to offer a sacrifice, and would like to have Jesse and his sons attend the service. Then Samuel can just work the anointing ceremony into the other stuff that's already going on. As you can tell, this whole situation is going to require some careful maneuvering.

Soon things are underway. One at a time, Jesse brings several of his sons by Samuel for a look-see. Eliab, the oldest, gets to go first. Samuel begins with a visual evaluation. Well, he's tall and handsome. So was Saul. That's what the people are used to in a leader. They like someone who's physically attractive, someone who conveys a sense of youthfulness and energy, someone who's appealing to look at when he's in front of the camera addressing the nation.

During the 1976 presidential campaign, there was a series of debates between Republican incumbent Gerald Ford and Democratic challenger Jimmy Carter. The two sides had to negotiate in order to work out many of the details. In this case, one of the issues was height. Even though President Ford was only three and a half inches taller than Jimmy Carter, Carter's representatives wanted something to compensate for the disadvantage. So the two sides reached what eventually became known as the "belt buckle compromise." Under the agreement, Ford's lectern was built to intersect his torso two and a half inches above his belt buckle, while Carter's podium intersected an inch and a half below his belt buckle. But President Ford got something out of the deal as well. Carter's camp agreed to let the Ford team choose the color of the backdrop, something the Republicans wanted as a means of diminishing the impact of the President's thinning hair. As one Carter aide told a magazine reporter, "We worried about the height, they worried about the hair."¹

For Eliab, neither height nor hair was an issue. He had plenty of both. But unfortunately, that's about all Samuel noticed. Based on what he sees, this quest for a monarch is over. Eliab is the one. But then God inserts his opinion. "Wo, wo, wo," the Lord says to Samuel. Then comes one of those quotations from God that never loses its impact: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (v. 7). And with that single declaration, God rebukes Samuel for his faulty vision, and tells him to continue the search. Next candidate, step forward.

Jesse parades two more sons, Abinadab and Shammah, before Samuel. This time Samuel pays more attention to what God tells him than to what his eyes tell him. And God says that neither of these is the chosen one. So Jesse brings forward four more sons, but none of these would get to wear the crown either.

Turns out there was one more son, but he was the youngest and was still out in the field taking care of the sheep. Better to let him just stay out there and do his job. After all, he clearly wasn't royal material, and thus wasn't even in the running. At least that's the way Jesse saw things. But in this story we've already begun to learn that human vision can be very flawed. No one knows that better than Samuel, who refuses to accept Jesse's reluctance. "Bring the boy here," says Samuel.

Now the irony is that when David appears, he too is handsome. Appearances may not be what counts most with God, but the fact that David is good looking can't be denied. And yet, for God, matters of the heart still take priority. He looks beyond a photogenic face, and sees a person's will and character. "Rise and anoint him," says the Lord. "He is the one" (v. 12). This time, Samuel acted based on what he heard, not just what he saw.

Preacher Tom Long tells about an episode during the Reagan Administration when a CBS reporter named Leslie Stahl was writing a piece critical of the President. But she ran out of time. So instead of getting a film crew to come in and do the visuals, she borrowed some stock footage from the White House Office of Communications. As Stahl narrated her critique of the President, what viewers saw were images of Reagan chopping wood, exercising, and standing in front of an American flag.

The next morning, Michael Deaver, head of the communications office, called Leslie Stahl and thanked her profusely for her report. Naturally she was a little stunned. "I appreciate the praise," she said, "but I was being critical. Why are you praising me?" "Oh, your words were critical," said Deaver, "but the pictures were mine. And in the battle between the eye and the ear, the eye wins every time."

Our vision is so critical in forming our sense of reality. The way that we literally see ourselves, see others, and see the world, shapes our attitudes, our outlook, and our

behavior. Clearly, our eyes are a gift from God, to be used for God's will and purposes. But there's more to us than just our eyes. And there's more to reality than just what we have in our field of vision.

And yet we remain active participants in a culture where image is everything. Too often, we rush to reach conclusions and make decisions based primarily on what we see. The color of someone's skin. Their age. The language they speak. The way they dress. Their physical condition. And in particular, physical beauty. Studies have in fact shown that we have an inherent bias to view attractive people as better, smarter, and more socially competent. This strong attractiveness bias affects all kinds of things, like hiring decisions, the television shows we watch, or how students rate professors. And with the pervasiveness of the internet, so saturated with images, the bias toward attractiveness has an even greater pull on the perceptions we form of others.

Take the online dating scene as an example. Comedy writer Ali Reed once created a fake profile on the dating site OkCupid. She called herself "AaronCarterFan" (Aaron Carter is the younger brother of one of the Backstreet Boys). Then Reed loaded her profile with all sorts of despicable traits, such as "enjoys kicking cups out of homeless people's hands," and "my parents think I'm in law school so they pay all my bills—LOL," and "you should message me if ur rich." But for her online photo Reed used the real photo of a friend who's a professional model. And how did others respond to the beautiful but decadent "AaronCarterFan"? Reed said that in the first 24 hours she got 150 messages, and after the profile had been up for two or three weeks, she had close to 1,000 men message her. According to Reed, the fake profile got approximately 10 times the number of messages that her real profile got.²

Maybe Samuel could have saved himself some travel time if he had just asked Jesse to post pictures of each of his sons on his Facebook page. That way Samuel could have done an online assessment of each one, to see if he looked like a potential royal, using either a thumbs up or a thumbs down, a like or a dislike. What a contrast to the way that God looks beyond appearances and deep into the matters of the heart. And what is true of God should also be true of us, God's people. We must learn to see as God sees. I don't mean having the capacity to know everything that's in someone's heart in the same way that God knows. But we are supposed to look beyond appearances, and see past the preoccupation with image, focusing instead on the needs of the human heart, as God does. In fact, that's part of what the church is supposed to be, a community of people in which matters of the heart take priority over matters of appearance, image, or impressions. A fellowship where we take the time to get to know one another beyond just the surface level, to form bonds that go deep into the heart.

Today's Scripture passage reminds us that what we need is anointed vision. We need God to pour the oil of his Spirit upon our sight, giving us spiritual perception. I mean that capacity to see God's presence and work in what appear to human eyes as unimpressive places and unexpected people. And yet, God's word tells us over and over that it's frequently among those who seem the least powerful and influential, those who are easily invisible to merely human vision—someone like the young David—that God is present and moving. It's in these unlikely places and through the most unlikely people that divine grace finds the greatest possibilities, and the power of God is revealed. May God anoint our vision, and give us eyes to see.

¹ Alan Shroeder, *Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-Risk TV* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 31-32.

² "Woman's Awful Fake Dating Profile Attracts Men." PreachingToday website. Accessed June 13, 2015 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/september/8090114.html>>.