

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 19, 2023

Anointed Sight

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Author Sam Anderson once wrote about a trip to Florence, Italy, where he saw Michelangelo's statue of David. He describes his visit as "the most powerful experience I had ever had with a work of art."¹ Beholding the artist's masterpiece, Anderson says the word that kept coming to mind was "perfect." He wrote:

He towered over me in his iconic pose: back foot flat, front foot tipped, shoulders cocked, left arm raised to hold the sling, huge right hand hanging down by his side, head turned fiercely toward the glorious future. He was a giant marble god, except he wasn't a god; he was a man, but then of course he wasn't a man either; he was white stone—but the stone looked somehow soft, like flesh, and the hard-soft marble curved and rippled into muscles and veins, tiny and large, subtle and blunt, each feature easing inevitably into the next, all the way around. My eye kept roaming, looking for imperfections, not finding any. My mind ran in silly loops. The only word it would settle on, again and again, was "perfect."

But during the course of his article, Anderson actually highlights and details some of the statue's flaws and weaknesses. The marble of David's face was pocked with holes, which restorers had filled in. Small chips of stone were missing from one of his lower eyelids. His right little toe had been lost more than once. And most of all, there were cracks in David's ankles, which might expose the statue to the risk of collapse.

About 20 years ago, two professors who used computer measurements discovered that on the right side of David's back, between the spine and the shoulder blade, there's a hollow where there should actually be a muscle. It wasn't Michelangelo's mistake though. According to the researchers, "In one of his letters, he wrote that a defect in the marble block made it impossible to reproduce the muscle."²

Long before he became a marble depiction of male physical perfection, David was living a very ordinary, unimpressive, and obscure life. That's where we meet him 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 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."³

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 appealing to the eyes. Appearances may not be what counts most with God, but the fact that David is good looking can't be denied. Our text says, "He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features" (v. 12). 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 plays a critical role 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. Organizations, corporations, and agencies devote huge amounts of time and money to managing their public image. And at the individual, personal level, we're constantly trying to make a good impression and present ourselves in the best light. The rise of social media has only intensified the pressure to put forth an image of attractiveness and success. If young David had posted a picture of himself on Instagram, leaving out any reference to his lowly work status, that alone would have attracted who knows how many followers. How often we rush to reach conclusions and make decisions based primarily on what we see. The color of someone's skin. Their age. The way they dress. Their physical condition. In particular, physical beauty and visual appeal.

Sometimes we the people of God succumb to this temptation to focus on appearance alone, to come across as a successful church. We become preoccupied with the image we're projecting to others through the way we dress, the look and feel of our worship, the polished look of our website, the scale of our programs, the impressiveness of our facilities. I'm not saying that we shouldn't work to make our churches attractive to our communities and to the larger world. Those things are certainly important. I'm simply saying we need to take a hard look at our priorities, remembering that appearance alone is no substitute for matters of the heart. That's where God looks.

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.

To do that, we need 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, among the least impressive people, in very unattractive circumstances, that divine grace finds the greatest possibilities, and the power of God is revealed, opening the way to a different future.

This is what we see in our Savior's suffering and death. There's a description of him in a forged document, allegedly written by the governor who succeeded Pontius Pilate. The document was actually written by someone else about 1500 years later. It says of Jesus:

He is a tall man, well shaped, and of an amiable and reverend aspect; his hair is of a color that can hardly be matched, falling into graceful curls ... parted on the crown of his head, running as a stream to the front after the fashion of the Nazarites; his forehead high, large and imposing, his cheeks without spot or wrinkle, beautiful with a lovely red; his nose and mouth formed with exquisite symmetry; his beard of a color suitable to his hair, reaching below his chin and parted in the middle like a fork; his eyes bright blue and serene.⁴

One person has noted that this description conjures up the image of a charismatic candidate for president. In reality, we don't know what Jesus looked like. The Scriptures don't tell us. But we would be wise to listen to Isaiah, whose words were applied to the life and mission of our Lord: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hid their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (53:2b-3). This was what God's mercy and salvation looked like, most of all at the cross.

May God anoint our vision, and give us eyes to see as he sees, so that we'll be careful not to confuse appearance with reality. The reality of matters of the heart. The reality of God's sovereign love and presence. And most of all, the reality of his grace, in all it's beauty and perfection, in Christ.

¹ Sam Anderson, "David's Ankles: How Imperfections Could Bring Down the World's Most Perfect Statue." New York Times Magazine. August 17, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/magazine/davids-ankles-how-imperfections-could-bring-down-the-worlds-most-perfect-statue.html> (March 15, 2023).

² Rossella Lorenzi, "Michelangelo's David is missing a muscle." ABC Science. October 18, 2004. <https://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2004/10/18/1222193.htm> (March 15, 2023).

³ Alan Shroeder, *Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-Risk TV* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 31-32.

⁴ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 86.