

## OPEN TO THE UNEXPECTED

I Samuel 16:1-13; Fourth Sunday in Lent, a

March 4, 2008

Stephen R. Montgomery

*Prayer: Eye-opening God, your thoughts are not our thoughts; your ways are not our ways. So help us, in the next few minutes to hear something new, something startling, so that we might witness to your truth and walk in your ways, so that others, even those we tend to ignore, might be drawn into your circle of discipleship. Amen.*

I remember some years ago learning a new word. It wasn't the last time I learned a new word, but this one caught my attention and has stayed with me. I was going through a ritual that many people my age go through...getting bifocals. And there at the optometrist's office was a brochure with the headline in oversized letters shouting "Presbyopia."

"My, my," I thought to myself. "I know that our denomination is having its problems, but I didn't realize that we have become a disease!"

I read the small print (as best I could!): Presbyopia — a condition common to middle age in which the declining flexibility of the lens makes it increasingly difficult to see what is right under your nose. Solution: bi-focals.

The inability to see what is right under your nose. Still sounds like a Presbyterian disease to me, but certainly not limited to us.

Presbyopia — like Samuel. Samuel was charged by God to go out and find a new king. He thought he knew what a king should look like, because he remembered what Saul looked like when he was first tapped to be king by Samuel, the prophet. Listen to the way Saul was described just a few chapters earlier: "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than Saul; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people." (I Sam. 9:2) Head and shoulders above everybody else, both literally and figuratively. Now that's what a king looks like.

And it started out well enough for Saul, but it didn't last long. It turned sour. As a king, Saul bombed out. And now, now he was just a shadow of himself. A pathetic sight, really.

So Samuel was told by God to go out and find a king. Your heart has to go out to him, because he was right in the middle. He had to anoint a new king while there was still a king. There was no vacancy in the office! He stood for the old ways and traditions, but he was learning that they hadn't worked, so he was now involved in the transition to new ways. He had reached retirement age, and he wanted to turn things over to his sons, but "they were a bunch of crooks, who sold justice to the highest bidder."<sup>1</sup>

Samuel doesn't have a lot of enthusiasm or motivation for what he is doing. He had become tired and out of step with those around him.

But this was his task, the Lord told him, so he got out his files from his last search and pulled out his check list of qualities that were needed for a king: First born son (that was the tradition, they were superior and would inherit the lion's share of the father's property, power, and prestige.). Handsome. Towering stature would demand respect.

And he is told by God to go to Bethlehem, a two-bit city if there ever was one. But that's where Jesse lived. Samuel had to know that there would be tension as soon as he appeared, because whenever a high official of the court came to the village, there would be trouble. They never came to give, but only to take. In the eyes of the villagers, either Samuel is Saul's man, coming to forage in the unclaimed south; or he is not Saul's man, thus putting them at risk with Saul.<sup>2</sup> "Do you come in peace?" they asked. "Oh, I'm just here to praise the Lord!" Samuel said. "Just want to have a little sacrifice. That's all." "Great," they say. "Let's go."

And so began the parade of sons. There's Eliab. The eldest (check) and tallest (check), good-looking (check). So Samuel thinks "This was easy as pie. Surely the Lord's anointed is before me, ah, that is, before the Lord." But (and deep down you knew this was going to happen!) the Lord said to Samuel, "Beauty is only skin deep, Samuel. Don't fall for appearance again as you did with Saul. Eliab might look like a king, but I am looking at the inward person. And I do not see a king there, not in his heart."

Samuel knew right then he was in trouble. This whole thing was getting out of hand. So he had each of the sons of Jesse parade before him, flex their muscles, swing their swords, do whatever kings-to-be have to do. And with each one Samuel's hopes rose and fell. "This one?" he wondered. But each time Yahweh said, "Nope! Not that one!" And each time they got smaller and younger, less kingly in appearance. And then there were none left. Kind of like the Hebrew version of the tv show "Survivor," God had voted them all off the island.

"So is that it?" Samuel asked. "Any other boys around the place?" "Not really," Jesse started to respond. "Well, there is one, but he's out watching the sheep. And he's the youngest. Just a pip-squeak of a kid." "Might as well go get him," Samuel said. "We can't eat supper until he gets here, anyway."

And there he is. The runt of the family. The caboose. A mere shepherd boy. Samuel is already trying to think of the press release he'll have to write justifying this choice. He looks at the shepherd boy (we still don't even know his name!), and sighs, "Well, he does have nice eyes; kind of ruddy looking." And Yahweh says "Arise, anoint this boy with pretty eyes, for this is he."

Presbyopia: the inability to see what is right under your nose. Sometimes caused by succumbing to the standards and values of the world. Sometimes caused by prejudice or unexamined opinion. Sometimes caused by unwavering obedience to tradition. Sometimes caused by religious certainty. Most often caused by an inability to be open to the unexpected.

God seems to relish the unexpected! Almost every character in scripture that comes to faith, in one way or another seems unsuited to be called by God. The one who is barren delivers a child. The one who cannot speak is chosen to present God's case. The outsider saves God's people. The meek inherit the earth. The weakest becomes the leader. The blind see most clearly.

And it seems to me that a chief danger for those of us who inhabit the mainstream Protestant tradition is our rational faith that expects God to follow a certain logic—and therefore confines God to boundaries of our own making. For over and over again the people of God find that faith in God cannot rest on the obvious or predictable or verifiable. When we think we have God all figured out, we learn that God works in *mysterious* ways. So for those of us who consider ourselves “seekers,” seeking to understand God better, we'd better prepare for a large dose of improbability, and not be so certain we have God figured out.

As one theologian once said “The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty.”

There is an awful lot of absolute certainty that has pushed its way into Christianity lately, and I must add, from the right and from the left. It's as though some folks know that God is on their side, as if they were the sole proprietors of the divine will. But you see what that posture does? It makes it hard on those who might look for the biblical God in the unexpected and uncontrollable. If the case for God is locked up in airtight, dogmatic formulas as defined by one camp or another, then faith will be reduced to lifeless propositions.

This week some of you might have seen another study by the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life that confirmed what many of us have known to be true. The religious marketplace in our country is extremely volatile these days, with all denominations gaining members and losing members. According to the study, Catholics have experienced the largest number of members who have left their church, followed by Jehovah's Witnesses and then mainstream denominations like Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians.<sup>3</sup> It has caused much hand-wringing, of course, and books have been written trying to provide answers as to why the decline. Fingers, of course, are pointed in all directions.

The church is too liberal. The church is too conservative.

The church has abandoned its traditions. The church is too tied to its traditions.

The church isn't concerned with justice. The church is too concerned with justice.

And on and on it goes.

I'm sure that each of us has our own theories, I certainly have mine, which is much more complex than just pointing fingers. (Among other things, we have demographics going against us. Presbyterians aren't having as many babies as we used to!) But I do wonder if some of this has to do with the way we have domesticated God; we have developed dazzling theologies that explain a lot, but perhaps too much, leaving no room for wonder and awe and mystery. I wonder

if we have been co-opted by the world's values, and have deceived ourselves by judging things on their appearance. You come to church and you just get a warmed up version of our culture and its values.

In 1805, a French journalist named Alexis de Toqueville came over to America to travel around and record his impressions on this new country and to figure out what was distinctly American. It became a classic and is still used by historians today. Three years ago, in 2005, to observe the bi-centennial of that journey, the Atlantic Monthly sent another French journalist, Benard Henri-Levy to travel around this country and record *his* observations. What interested me was his reflection on the religious scene after visiting a large mega-church, the Willow Creek church, outside of Chicago. He wrote "Here they worship a God without mystery, a good-guy God, almost a human being, a good American."<sup>4</sup>

Willow Creek is certainly a model for church growth, and you have to applaud what they have done to reach out to the unchurched, but I wonder at what cost? I personally want, and need, more than just a "good buddy" as my God. I want, and need, the kind of experience we will have in just a little while, during the offertory. The anthem is one in which John Rutter took the familiar words to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and with the help of an oboe, an organ, and a powerful choir, invoked a sense of wonder...of awe and majesty ... transcendence, to what could easily be domesticated and sentimentalized.

So I wonder at what cost churches go to fill the pews. But you know what? The good folks at Willow Creek are wondering the same thing. Just a few weeks ago another study was released by Willow Creek about their church and 23 other mega-churches on the same model. The study said that for all the good work they have done, they could find no appreciable spiritual growth, which they defined as "increasing love for God and others." Many were leaving as a result.<sup>5</sup>

All of which is to say none of us have it absolutely right! We all need each other, because God is a much bigger God, a much more expansive God, a much more unpredictable God than our airtight, dogmatic, boxed-in God that we have molded in our own image. And perhaps ts means taking a lesson from Samuel's search for a king. He had an image of what a king looked like, what the world would expect, but God did the unexpected and chose the least likely.

So I, for one, don't despair much at all about our beloved church or denomination. Partly because our church here at Idlewild defied those trends, and is a vibrant and alive church by virtually any standard. But I also don't despair because God is bigger than any church, denomination, or faith. If the Presbyterian Church ceased to exist, God would still be God!

And that's good enough for me!

But there is another reason for my insatiable hope. And this is that there is a chance that our marginalization from the mainstream of power in our society might just enable us to be more open to the Spirit of God in the marginalized, the powerless, the least likely, the little ones. For you know now, of course, who that little shepherd boy was. We often think of him as a mighty ruler of Israel, King David, but this story that introduces him describes him as one of the

marginal people. Walter Brueggemann writes “He is uncredentialed and has no social claim to make. And those who have fastened on to this story through the years are those who, like David, were marginal with no social claims to make. For such people it would be important to assert and celebrate that among the marginal there are beautiful people, that among the little ones there is potential for greatness. In this there are the seeds of hope.”<sup>6</sup>

Samuel was about to miss what was right under his nose. But God did the unexpected. If God can work through a little country kid who didn't have a thing going for him except his pretty eyes, who became the key figure in the lineage that culminated in the birth of a Savior in the city of David, think of what God might be able to do through you, and through this church. But that's if, and only if, we are open to the Spirit of God doing the unexpected.

Amen.

© 2008 Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

[return to top](#)

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> These insights come from Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* in the Interpretation series, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, pp. 119-122.

<sup>3</sup> “Poll Finds a Fluid Religious Life in the U.S.” Neela Banerjee, *New York Times*, February 26, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Benard Henri-Levy, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2005, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> “Willow Creek Finds Limits to its Model,” *The Christian Century*, January 29, 2008, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, op.cit, p. 124.

## **I Samuel 16:1-13 NRSV**

**1** The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” **2** Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the Lord said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’” **3** Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” **4** Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” **5** He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

**6** When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the Lord.” **7** But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” **8** Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” **9** Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” **10** Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.” **11** Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” **12** He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” **13** 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. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

[return to top](#)