

Explore the Bible: Anointed!

June 29, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 17 focuses on 1 Samuel 16.*

Next! (1 Samuel 16:1-5)

1 Samuel 15 ended with grief from Samuel and Yahweh over Saul's disobedience. The next chapter finds Samuel still mourning over Yahweh's decision to reject Saul's kingship. At this point, the crisis of leadership is known only to those three—Samuel, Saul and Yahweh. Yahweh is not stymied by the crisis, however, and already has chosen the next king of Israel. Yahweh is ready to act, and his instructions to Samuel are direct.

Samuel's grief over Saul has not clouded his perception of what Saul is capable. Samuel assumes if he is caught anointing another king, his life will be forfeit. Samuel's statement is the first indication of the danger that will continue through the rest of 1 Samuel. Saul, faced with God's judgment, will continue to try to destroy any threat to his own reign or that of his descendants. Samuel is convinced that includes any prophets who might get in the way.

Yahweh is sympathetic to Samuel's concern and suggests an additional activity. Samuel will be traveling to offer a sacrifice—and to anoint Israel's next king. He will just conveniently leave out that last bit of information for any who might question the purpose of his visit to Bethlehem.

The elders of Bethlehem are not excited to see Samuel. A man traveling alone with only a cow for company inspires trembling in the leaders of the city. Their fear is a reflection of the power and uncertainty that came with the role of prophet in Israel. What will the man of God do next? His last public action was hacking the Amalekite king Agag to death. Will his visit signal renewed hope or judgment? Samuel begins with his cover story, but then immediately invites the elders to participate in the sacrifice.

Credentialing with Yahweh (1 Samuel 16:6-10)

The scene is set. Jesse, his seven oldest sons and the elders of Bethlehem have consecrated themselves. They have set themselves apart through washing of purification or other similar ritual to prepare for a holy action. Thus far, Samuel has not revealed his larger purpose, except to offer sacrifice. No one present except Samuel has any reason to expect the anointing of a king, but expectation must have been great that something significant would happen for Bethlehem and for Jesse's family as a result of Samuel's visit.

With Samuel's look at Eliab, Jesse's eldest, he guesses he is seeing Israel's next king. Yahweh corrects that impression. It is not height or appearance Yahweh takes into consideration, but the heart. For the ancient Israelites, there was no separation between emotion, intellect, conscience, and moral action. All of these aspects and more were included in the image of "the heart." To the Hebrews, the heart meant who a person was in the deepest and most authentic way. Whatever lay in Eliab's heart, Yahweh rejected him for it. The same term used of Saul after his disobedience is used preemptively for Eliab, and for the other seven brothers. With the judgment, "The LORD has not chosen..." Samuel delivers another hint to the anxious family and elders. Samuel is here to select someone—but the purpose has not yet been revealed.

The Shepherd Who Would Be King

Jewish scholar Robert Alter suggests one way the Hebrew Scriptures lay the groundwork for understanding the characters in the narrative is through their first actions and their first words. David first appears in the biblical narrative tending his father's sheep. The human figure whose name appears most frequently in Scripture is introduced first by his action, then, ironically, by his appearance, and finally by name in 1 Samuel 16:13.

His action is one of faithful service to his family. He alone is tasked with continuing to work while the rest of the family and the town's leaders gather for a special ceremony with Samuel. The description of his appearance is ironic, given Yahweh's instructions to Samuel in verse 7, but Yahweh's judgment, at least, has nothing to do with David's attractiveness. His appearance does feature in other ways in his life, but it is not one of Yahweh's considerations, much less a priority.

Although David has been introduced decisively as the anointed one, God's chosen successor to Israel's throne, we do not hear his first words in Scripture until the next chapter. David maintains a canny silence in the face of being anointed in front of his father, brothers and the elders of Bethlehem. He stands out in this regard from Jacob, Joseph and other younger brothers of Scripture who supplanted their elders in authority. From the outset, David reveals a wisdom concerning when to act and speak and when not to—which sets him apart from Saul, who seemed to have a gift for saying and doing the wrong thing.

Robert Alter also points out the readers of 1 Samuel will almost exclusively hear David's words in a public setting. Even though Yahweh has chosen him for his heart, we readers very rarely get a glimpse of David's private thoughts. Instead, we hear his public proclamations and see his public actions.

It is a question worth considering: If all you were known by was your action, what would it reveal about your heart? Would it reveal a heart of wisdom, humility, and faithfulness? These are the qualities revealed in David's heart by his action in his first appearance in Scripture.