

Little David

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 2, 1991. Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3-6.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

1. One of the most important events in the life of a nation may be the selection of its leaders. What would our nation be like if someone other than George Washington had been selected as our first president? What kind of a nation would we be living in today if Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt had not been elected?

If anyone wants to know what all of this has to do with the Christian faith, I like the answer once given by John Mackay, one of the past presidents of Princeton Seminary. "It's not the business of the Church to create a new social order, but to create the creators of that new social order."

2. Now, with this in mind, let's turn our thoughts to the story of how David the shepherd ^{was selected as} ~~became~~ Israel's second king. For many years before Saul was anointed as the first king of Israel, the tribes of Israel had been ruled by judges, but the elders of Israel came together and asked the prophet Samuel to choose a king to rule over them. The most advanced nations all around them had kings and Israel didn't want to be different.

The Lord didn't approve. The Lord knew it would be very difficult for the people to distinguish between the political king and the King of heaven. They'd come to believe that anyone who disagreed with the king was really disagreeing with God. The Lord knew that a king would also bring increasingly centralized political power, the growth of an unresponsive beauracracy, ever increasing taxes, military conscription, arbitrary police, the impossibility of limiting power.

Nevertheless the people refused to obey the word of the Lord that came to Samuel. They said, "We want a king." So Samuel went out among the people of Israel and chose young Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin. Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on Saul's head, kissed him, and said, "The Lord has chosen you to be the captain of his people."

Saul was a handsome young man, head and shoulders taller than any of his contemporaries. He became the first king over Israel and led them into many battles against their enemies, the Philistines.

After a while, Saul disobeyed the laws of the Lord and the Lord was sorry he'd made Saul king over Israel. The Lord said to Samuel, "Fill your horn with oil again and go; I'll send you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I've chosen a king from among his sons."

Samuel did as the Lord told him and came to Bethlehem. "I've come to sacrifice to the Lord", he told the elders of the town. He invited Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked carefully at Eliab. Samuel thought, "Surely this is the one whom the Lord has chosen." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Don't look at his face or his height or age. This isn't the one I've chosen. I don't see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but I look on the heart."

One after the other, Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord hasn't chosen these." Then he asked, "Are these all your children?"

Jesse replied, "I have one more, but I didn't bring him to the feast. He's my youngest. Right now he's in the field caring for the sheep."

"Send for him at once," Samuel said. "We won't eat until he comes." And they waited while a messenger hurried to bring the boy to Samuel.

Out in the fields David saw a messenger running toward him! He knew his father and brothers were attending a religious feast. They'd been

getting ready when he left home that morning. As he watched the messenger he wondered if something had happened to his family.

Quickly David rose and pulled his shepherd coat around him. Picking up his rod, he hurried to meet the breathless runner.

"You're wanted in Bethlehem at once," the messenger shouted. "Samuel, the old prophet, wants to see you. Your father wants you to leave the sheep and come at once."

Meanwhile Samuel waited. Finally a rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed shepherd boy entered the room. And the Lord told Samuel, "Arise! Anoint him! He's the one."

Samuel poured oil on David's head as God had commanded. David knew this was the sign that he'd one day be leader of Israel.

So God used the disobedience of Israel in wanting a king; the Lord used the disobedience of Saul in not obeying the Lord; he used their rebellion to prepare the way for the ancestor of the one who would come, great David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We see in all of this the mysterious strategy of God working out his purposes in and through people making their own decisions and shaping a nation.

The storyteller clearly believes that leaders aren't the highest authority in the land, that the Lord is in control, that leaders do God's will either willingly or unwillingly. The Lord uses both the obedience and disobedience of a nations leaders to carry out his gracious purposes in history.

3. What does all this have to do with us today?

Like Samuel was tempted to do, we're apt to select our leaders on the basis of outward appearances. Sometimes the selection of a nations leaders turns on such superficial things, for example, on how photogenic the candidate is. I read an editorial³ not long ago which said that George

Washington couldn't be elected today because he had false teeth; Grover Cleveland, because he was overweight; Abraham Lincoln because he was so ugly; and Franklin Roosevelt because he had infantile paralysis.

We have such superficial ways of determining who will lead us. Years ago, Edmund Muskie was a leading candidate for the presidential choice of his party until newspaper reporters caught him weeping in the face of a human tragedy. That was interpreted as a sign of weakness?

Sometimes accidents take candidates out of the race. John Glenn was a leading candidate for the Presidency about twenty years ago until he slipped in his bathtub and hurt his ankle and dropped out of the primaries.

Those who believe in the One the Bible bears witness to see a hidden hand at work in the world and in politics; in Ethiopia with its new leader, in the Soviet Union where Gorbachev's future is uncertain, in the USA, Angola, the Middle East, Northern Ireland. History is not just a meaningless jumble of events. God is working out his purpose in history through our obedience to God's will and even through our disobedience.

There's a hidden hand at work in history, in politics, in the selection of our national leaders. God is working out his gracious purpose in history through us, in spite of us; and through our leaders and in spite of our leaders.

Let us pray: O Lord our Governor, whose glory is in all the world: We commend this nation to your merciful care, that, being guided by your providence, we may dwell secure in your peace. Grant to the President of the United States, the Governor of this Commonwealth, and to all in authority, wisdom and strength to know and to do your will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness, and make them ever mindful of their calling to serve this people in your fear; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.