

Text: I Samuel 16: 1-13
Title: Leading Story
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You've heard the homespun wisdom about not talking about religion or politics at a dinner party? The quickest way to stain the linen, curdle the milk, or sour the punch bowl is to talk about religion or politics. Well, I am going to talk about both....

Each presidential candidate is trying to paint a picture, trying to cast a narrative arc, and trying to tell a story that resonates with your story. Each candidate is trying to tell a story in which you can find your place.

Barack Obama, the skinny kid with the funny name, tells a story of hope that can rise above the intractable battles of the right and left, the Bushs and the Clintons, and lead America into a new era of unity and prosperity.

Hillary Clinton, with the steely resolve of a seasoned politician, tells a story of having the experience, the savvy, and the fire tested strength, to be ready on day one to get the job done.

John McCain, the great American hero, tells the story of having seen the heart of darkness and being the only one with enough courage, enough wisdom, and enough will to protect America in a world of a terror.

Each campaign invites you to live into their story, or to find your place in the unfolding narrative that will shape history.

Oh, I know they hold debates over the details of platforms and plans and political agendas, but don't be fooled, underneath all of that the candidates want to connect with you on the level of story.

Do you believe the story?

The story of hope, the story of experience, or the story of patriotism.

Do you trust the story?

The story of the messiah, or the mechanic, or the maverick.

Will you vote for the story?

The story of change, the story of competence, or the story of conservatism.

And each candidate taps the deep wells of the American story to find their particular voice, but they want your story to resonate within their story.

Well, one way to read this story in I Samuel is as moral lesson and spiritual encouragement. God has had enough of Saul as king. He has been a disobedient disappointment. So, God sends Samuel to anoint another as king. Samuel initially balks at the idea ~ it might come from God but it still smacks of treason and treason meant death. Eventually he makes his way to Bethlehem and calls on Jesse to bring out his boys.

Samuel is impressed; the first is a tall strapping lad with a good jaw line, a thick head of hair, and the look of a king (oh... no.... that was Mitt Romney).

But, God passes over sons one through seven. Because the biblical principal at play here is that God doesn't see the way the world sees. God doesn't measure your height, or your weight, or the tilt of your nose; God doesn't look at your frame, or the cut of your jib, or the shine of your mane; God looks at your heart. So, be encouraged and look at others the way God looks at you....

That is one way to read this story, but a second way to read it is to place it in the larger story of God's activity in the world. The moral is secondary, the life lesson is a bonus; the primary purpose is the telling of God's pursuit of creation. This is another chapter in God's unfolding project of creation reclamation.

The story scripture tells is that with the spoilage of *shalom* we were kicked out of the garden and death became our lot. *You will surely die*. Lent One. And, as creation careened into crime and chaos God broke in to establish a covenant through which all creation would be blessed. To Abram and Sarai, *You will be a blessing*. Lent Two.

But, as that unlikely covenant couple become a distinct people,
as their children's children are shaped by captivity and exodus,
as they come into a promised land,
God gives them laws and judges and priests and prophets to help them follow his way in this world. And, eventually God even relents and establishes a monarchy. God's people are given a king.

Now, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, maintains that when God chooses David to be the new king he overturns the established order. Rather than picking a king from among the princes and leaders of Israel, rather than choosing from among the powerful and promising, rather than naming one with experience and proven results, God goes to the margins and picks a

young,
inexperienced,
common,
shepherd boy
with no pretense to power,
with no resume,
with no training,
with no credentials.

The only qualification he has to be king is God's favor.

God surprises Samuel and Jesse,
does the radically unexpected,
turns things upside down,
pours out his Spirit,
and picks David.

Rise and anoint him; he is the one. Lent Four.

A couple years ago when I organized a family reunion one cousin compiled pictures, while another cousin wrote the story of the Smith clan. For this disconnected American, who has lived in a variety of communities, it was a great gift. I saw pictures of my great grandfather's bakery in Fulham, England, I saw the dour doughy faces of my English ancestors making their way to the new England, and I read of their hard humble life and simple piety.....

And, I was reminded that in somehow I was part of that story. These were my people. This was my narrative. Like the running of a deep long river I was part of the same flow, caught up in the same current, just a little further down the river.

Dear friends, I don't know if you take comfort in the idea that God doesn't look at outward appearance but looks at the heart. I know myself to be bent and ugly both inside and out. What is substantially more comforting to me is the notion that God's unfolding story of creation reclamation includes you and me. That the story of scripture is not just an ancient distant text but it is a story

in which we have a place,
in which we have a part,
in which we belong.

It is our story.

And the line runs from God's heart through Adam and Eve, to Abraham and Sarah, to David, to Jesus, to you and to me.

There have always been multiple stories vying for your vote. There are all sorts of narratives that try to offer a unifying theme. In the marketplace of ideas there are stories that offer a way to make sense, a way of seeing the world, a way to find yourself. But, this is our story:

The story where the one least likely is the one chosen,
where the dry old man and barren old women are a blessing to all nations,
where the youngest son is the anointed one,
where the Messiah is born to a young mother in a backwoods stable,
where the King is nailed to the cross between two common criminals,
where the Lord is left for dead,
where God does the unexpected.

This is our story ~ the story where we find our place.

Joel Carpenter, Jeff's brother and the director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity at Calvin College, notes that only a century after 80% most of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America, now 70% of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In his words:

The average Christian is a woman from Africa or Latin America. Her family has little money. Her husband farms and scrounges up short term cash jobs when he can. She tries to sell a few things at market. The children haven't had their shots and they get sick. She struggles to keep them in school, where there are no text books. The political situation is fragile and the national government doesn't get

much done while local officials demand bribes. Our sister reads her Bible, and its accounts of famine, plagues, poverty, displacement and exile, tyranny, cronyism and corruption ~ which seem distant to most of us in the global North and West ~ are immediately relevant to her. The Bible is her book.

The Bible is her book.

The Bible is her story.

The Bible is our story.

And in that, her story and your story are tied together.

And in that you and she and me..... all have a place.

And in that remarkable unexpected story everything will get turned upside and the coming kingdom ~ that was planted in the imagination of God's people gathered together under a king ~ that coming kingdom, realized in Jesus, will comfort, challenge, heal, hope, and lead.....

Dear friends may that be our Lenten reminder:

You will die,

You are to be blessing.

You belong to a story.

And, when you can't see,

when you are blind and confused,

when you don't know what comes next,

when you're not sure how to even take a next step,

when the way seems dark,

even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

take heart ~ let the story lead.

It may start in death, but it ends in resurrection.

Amen.