

Sermon (3/26/17, 1 Samuel 16: 1-13):

I've reached an age when most of what I see without glasses is blurred. It can be very frustrating. When someone wants to show me something, I can't just look at it. I must first fumble around for glasses.

When I'm working in the kitchen, I can't just glance over at a recipe or label to check if what I'm measuring is accurate. Instead, everything must be put on hold as I fumble around for a pair of glasses.

About a year ago, I finally had to give up my GPS I've had for so many years. I could no longer see the screen without, first, you guessed it, fumbling around for a pair of glasses. My new GPS now verbally says street names, which saves me a lot of aggravation.

The manuscripts I now use in the pulpit are printed using font size humongous. It's my last-ditch attempt at avoiding the need to fumble around for glasses up here.

During my most recent trip to the eye Doctor, I told her how frustrating my blurred vision is. 'Not so long ago,' I told her, 'there's so much I could see without glasses!'

'Well, you're getting old,' was her answer which, of course, made me feel so much better.

It struck me this week that today's lectionary passages are tailor made for those us of who struggle with blurred vision. In fact, today's story from 1 Samuel might give us some comfort as it suggests that even Yahweh, God, seems to have his own issues with blurred vision.

The passage opens with God instructing Samuel to move on from his grieving. There's work that needs to be done. The welfare of Israel cannot wait for his season of sadness to end.

I'm sure it's a feeling most of us have felt at one time or another when the wave of grief flooded over us. There's such a big part of us that wants to shut down, curl up in a corner somewhere, fade away into the darkness for a spell. Unfortunately, though, life doesn't give us much room for that...it's demands press in on us; those who depend on us still need us to somehow keep going even if it feels like our motions are an out of body experience.

Saul was the first King of Israel that had been chosen by God and

anointed by Samuel. Providing a King for Israel was something that Samuel was hesitant to do in the first place, but the people demanded it and, as God had done so often before, God yielded and gave them a King. God and Samuel had hand-picked Saul. At God's instruction, Samuel anointed him for the position and, thereby, promised his and God's commitment to him. To be sure, Samuel did not take that commitment lightly. By every means possible, Samuel tried to mentor Saul into being a kind of King that would do Yahweh proud. Despite his efforts, however, Saul turned out to be a dismal failure. Which brings us to the moment today's passage highlights. Saul had to be replaced and, understandably, Samuel is deeply grieved. Saul's failure had to feel like his failure too.

What's interesting here is that God, yes, Yahweh, the Creator of all that is and ever will be, apparently didn't see this coming. It seems God had blurred vision too. I don't know whether it's because he had misplaced his glasses or he needed a stronger prescription, but when picking Saul to be King, God seems to have missed something about Saul that led to this disaster. It seems so odd to say this about God but, having been through the challenging process of looking for people to fill positions at the churches I've served, I find it strangely comforting to know that God had trouble getting this process right too.

The process of interviewing and hiring is such a complex and challenging thing. For the person applying for the job, it sure is a challenge to flesh out a multidimensional picture of who you are by way of a single sheet of paper, an hour or so of interviews, and a few references.

Equally challenging is the job of a potential employer trying to fill a position with the right candidate. It is so very hard to get to know someone within such a short space of time and via such a limited process. You can work hard at asking the right questions, you can pay close attention to gut feelings and any little signs which might pop up that confirm they are either right or wrong for the position. Even so, the potential for a poor match remains and sometimes, as in the case of Saul, it can lead to disaster. Yes, I've been there and done that.

I also know the joy of what it's like to find the right person for the

job. Such people are surely worth their weight in gold!

For all those times, though, when a hiring process crashed and burned, I find it oddly comforting to be reminded of this story which suggests that even God knows what it's like to pick the wrong person.

So, at God's prodding, Samuel sets off to find a new King albeit with great reluctance. Saul, after all, is still in power. Saul doesn't know yet that God has fired him. Saul doesn't have a clue that God is working behind the scenes to stage a coup. Yes, that is what this is, a divinely ordained coup and Samuel has been drafted to be God's co-conspirator. In fact, God is even willing to lie to make this happen. That's how important this is.

Frightened that Saul might find out and do him in, Samuel asks God what he should do if, at the check point into Bethlehem, they ask him why he's come. "Well," God says, "Lie...tell them you've come to worship and make a sacrifice."

God sends Samuel to a little Podunk town named Bethlehem to find this new King. Not exactly a place where one might expect Kingly sorts to be found. When arriving at Jesse's home, Samuel keeps close to his chest why he's there. Jesse then parades each of his sons before the great prophet, not exactly sure why Samuel has come to his home.

Eliab is the first son...tall, handsome, muscular...boy his picture would look good on a \$1 bill! Just his showing up at a news conference would instill confidence and admiration! He surely looked like Kingly material. God and Samuel whisper back and forth as Eliab stands there, sort of like judges at a beauty contest. Samuel is convinced that Eliab's the one. God says 'no'. God has learned his lesson. Looks do not a King make. "The heart is what counts," God instructs, "The heart is what makes the difference."

One by one all of Jesse's sons are paraded before Samuel and Samuel thinks they are all good candidates. Turns out Samuel must be getting old and the years have not been kind to his eyes. His vision is blurred. God, apparently, is intent on getting this one right though. I don't know if God has a new pair of glasses or what, but this time, God's eyes will not be fooled. God's vision is clear and precise - honing in on the hearts of

Jesse's sons.

After the last of Jesse's sons is rejected by God, Samuel is more than a little confused. Why did God send him here?

"Is this all of your sons?" Samuel asks Jesse.

"Well," Jesse sheepishly replies, "there's one other but he's kind of the runt of the litter. You know, the youngest, still wet behind the ears...not much to see there. Someone had to keep an eye on the sheep and he surely was the one to do it."

"Bring him!" Samuel demands. "We're not sitting down until he arrives."

As soon as David, Jesse's youngest, arrives, God joyfully declares he's the one. David immediately passes God's heart test. David will replace Saul.

Appearances can be deceiving. It's the tough lesson one learns when trying to find the right person for a job. More importantly, it's the lesson God repeatedly demonstrates throughout the Biblical text.

Moses – a fugitive from the house of Pharaoh, hiding out in the wilderness, hoping he wouldn't be caught.

Abram. Seventy-five years old when God calls him to build a great nation.

The Apostles – uneducated fisherman; poor and probably smelly to boot!

Paul – a Pharisaic leader bent on eliminating the early followers of Christ but, after an encounter with Christ in the desert, became a critical figure in the building of the early Christian Church. In his letter to the Corinthians, he writes, *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.*

Such words, such choosing by God, reminds us all of just how blurred our vision tends to be. How many times have our eyes betrayed us? How many times have we mistakenly chosen or rejected someone based on what our poor eyesight has perceived – the color of their skin, the clothes they wear, the way they walk, their odd behavior, the accent they speak with, the size of their bank account, the fact they don't have a bank account, the faith they profess, their hairstyle, the degrees mounted

on their wall. How many times have our eyes failed us?

As hard as it is, there is one good thing about realizing just how bad our eyesight has become. It forces us to do something about it. It prods us to seek out the help of an eye Doctor so that they can prescribe glasses for us. And what a wonderful moment it is when we first put them on! It's a moment of amazement as we discover all that we've been missing.

As hard as it might be, there is one good thing about recognizing the limits of our ability to choose what God chooses. It heightens our listening, it forces us to pay attention to the whispers of the Gospel telling us that God chooses that which is nothing in the world to reduce to nothing that which is high and lofty. And, if we pay attention, the result is that we will be amazed to see all the wonder we've been missing.

It makes me wonder if we, as followers of Christ, should always have a vial of anointing oil in our pockets for those times when, not if but when, God says, "Hey, go, anoint that one, tell them how special they are. Welcome them, hold them tight, do all that you can to help them realize the potential I already know they have."

Yes, perhaps that's one of the most sacred responsibilities we have as a church.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, we come to you this morning recognizing our blurred vision. There is much in us that limits what we see and consequently causes us to miss the glory of your saving work in the midst of us. Heal us we ask. Open our eyes we pray. Clarify our seeing so that it might more closely match what you see.

Loving God, for those times when we respond with fear to those whom our blurred vision have misread, we ask for your mercy and for your healing.

For those times when we forget that it is often those whom we overlook and dismiss which you have chosen to shame the wise and the strong, we ask for your mercy and for your healing.

For those in positions of power and strength who forget to connect what they see with the divine call of the heart to be compassionate and gracious, we ask for your mercy and for your healing.

For your church, for the times when our eyesight is no better than the world around us. Heal us, we pray, and make us strong so that we might see each other and even ourselves as you see us.

For the work you have called us to, grant us the courage and strength we need to anoint, minister to, and build up those whom you point out to us.

We pray all of this, O God, as we lift up to you those who are suffering, ill, frightened, struggling, broken, and overwhelmed. We especially hold before you these prayers we now name in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.