

P4B 2024 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 & Mark 4:26-34

I was surprised to find a long line to get in the Altoona Curve game last Wednesday. It turns out it was free t-shirt night, which probably drew some of the crowd, and it was also a Throw Back night where they swapped out the regular mascot for Steamer, the original mascot; between innings they played old videos of him from the early seasons of the Curve. I vaguely remember some excitement in the community when we were first getting a minor league team, but I'm not super nostalgic about that time. I was still away at school and working at camp in the summers, so I'm not sure I even attended a game that first season, and I don't remember the construction of the ballpark. But thinking farther back, I do remember them building the highway behind it. When they started construction on the bypass, I was still learning to ride a bike, and we lived on a hill by a busy street. So any time I wanted to practice riding, my parents would have to put the bike in the car and take me someplace flat without traffic. After the construction crews left for the day, my mother would take me and the bike to where 17th Street now turns into the I-99 South on ramp by Aldi's and Lowes so I could ride my bike on the new road that was partially finished but not yet open. *Now* I appreciate the bypass, because I drive on it every week. But at the time, I didn't want them to finish construction and lose my place to bike.

It may seem at first as though the Lord is rather insensitive to Samuel when he asks, "How long will you grieve over Saul?" That doesn't sound like the God who consoles us in all our sorrows, as we say at funerals; but in fact, Saul is still very much alive. The Lord has rejected Saul from being king over Israel because he has disobeyed the Lord's commands; Samuel is aware of Saul's disobedience and the Lord's judgment against him, yet Samuel is reluctant to move on. Perhaps it's just fear of the unknown, but even though Samuel knows that Saul is not a good king, he argues when the Lord tells him to choose a new one.

The Lord *is* asking Samuel to do something dangerous; anointing a new king when the old king is still alive certainly qualifies as treason. But the Lord provides an alibi and sends Samuel to find the next king from among Jesse's sons. Samuel assumes that Eliab must be the one because he's first and attractive, but the Lord reproves Samuel, saying *the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart...* though, how is the future King David described? Tan, with beautiful eyes, and handsome. Poor David was so far down the list of prospects that at first his father didn't even invite him, even though he was doing in real life the metaphorical job of a king—shepherding a flock like a king protecting and providing for a nation. David is also human and turns out to be an imperfect king, but he is still the closest that Israel ever gets to the ideal. The Lord wants to show Samuel a good leader who will take Israel into a better future...but the Lord had to drag Samuel out of the past to make that happen.

That gentle reprimand, *the Lord does not see as mortals see* is directed at Samuel relying on outward appearances instead of substance. But we could also say that *the Lord does not see as mortals see* because the Lord is looking forward while Samuel is looking back. The future of the monarchy depends on Samuel, but Samuel is stuck in the past—even when he knows that past is problematic. The Lord’s question, *How long will you grieve over Saul?* forces Samuel to ask himself will he keep yearning for the return of the kingdom that *doesn’t* align with the Lord’s vision or live into the new, different, *better* kingdom that the Lord is trying to bring about with his help.

From classic literature to historical fiction to all the Ken Burns documentaries—I enjoy looking back at the past. But if we only ever look backwards, grieving for what was, our imaginations will be limited by what has always been. Samuel wanted to choose the next king the way society had always chosen their rulers—the eldest son, the best looking—while the Lord chose the youngest (who was also good looking) but who was also going to lead from a different perspective. Samuel was looking for what used to be when the Lord was doing what never had been done before.

Fast forward to Mark’s gospel: Jesus says, *the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.* This isn’t the mustard seed worth of faith that can move trees or mountains—that’s Luke and Matthew. This mustard seed is like the kingdom of God, which doesn’t behave according to human expectations. It is the smallest seed, yet when it grows up it becomes the greatest of all...shrubs? We’d want it to become the greatest of all trees, right? To make lumber to build houses and cities and fortresses. But it becomes a shrub. And that shrub produces what? We’d hope for grain to make bread or grapes to make wine or maybe hops to make beer or feed to make cheeseburgers...but it produces branches for shade for the birds—a whole big picture of a harmonious ecosystem that goes far beyond just what we would imagine for ourselves.

The Lord doesn’t see things the way we mortals do; the kingdom doesn’t behave according to our human expectations...and thank goodness for that. We are freed from trying to reclaim a past that is out of reach and we are invited into a future that is not limited by our imagination or ability. In this long green season of life and growth may we not look back, since that’s not the way we’re going, but may we look forward with confidence and faith in the Lord and welcome whatever the Lord is up to next, trusting that God is good.