

4 June 2017

Anointed for Service
Acts 2:1-8, 12; 1 Samuel 16:1-5
Pentecost and Confirmation

On the day of Pentecost – fifty days after the Passover, for Jews in Jerusalem – Jesus’ disciples were gathered, still mourning their Master’s death seven weeks earlier. Then something happened that changed the meaning of “Pentecost” forever. We read from Acts chapter 2:

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’ ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? . . . ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’

Our Old Testament reading begins a story. We read the first five verses of 1 Samuel 16:

16 The Lord said to Samuel, ‘How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.’ ²Samuel said, ‘How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.’ And the Lord said, ‘Take a heifer with you, and say, “I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.” ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.’ ⁴Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, ‘Do you come peaceably?’ ⁵He said, ‘Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.’ And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

Let’s start that again: God spoke to Samuel. “Samuel, Samuel. How long will you grieve over Saul?”

Samuel hunched his shoulder impatiently. God was right. His heart was still sick about King Saul. Although Samuel had never wanted a king at all and had argued against it, once he had anointed God’s choice – Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin – he had gotten used to him. The tall, handsome Benjaminites, erratic though he was, had become a friend. But the kingship had gone to Saul’s head; he had become arrogant. When he claimed God’s authority for himself, Yahweh had said to Samuel, “I am sorry I chose Saul as king. Now I will have to choose someone else.”

“Can’t you give him another chance?” Samuel pleaded.

“You have no idea how many chances I’ve given him.”

“But you *chose* him. You can’t give up on him now!”

“I have never given up on Saul, and I never will,” Yahweh replied patiently. “But I am still choosing another to be king.”

“I know he has his problems,” Samuel argued. “But when he’s in one of his rages, he just isn’t himself –”

“What does that mean?” Yahweh asked gently. “Saul is always himself, even when he isn’t the person you want him to be. You should learn to look at others with my eyes, Samuel. But enough of this. I have chosen Saul’s successor. I want you to go to the tribe of Judah, to the clan of Ephrathah, to the family of Jesse. I have chosen one of Jesse’s sons to succeed Saul.”

Samuel cleared his throat. “Um, Lord?”

“Yes?”

“You know Saul’s been . . . edgy recently. If word gets to him that I’ve anointed someone else as king, he’ll . . . um . . .”

“He’ll kill you,” God agreed.

“All right, I get it. Saul’s out-of-control.”

“As I was saying, I’ve chosen another. Go to Bethlehem and say that you’re there for the annual sacrifice. While you’re there, visit Jesse and I’ll show you which of his sons I’ve picked.”

So Samuel went to the town where the clan of Ephrathah lived, a town called Bethlehem. When he arrived, the elders of the city came out to meet him, a little nervous. Everyone knew that Samuel and Saul were close, and nobody those days wanted to be on Saul’s bad side. “Samuel,” said the elders, “Is it shalom? Is all well?”

“It is shalom,” Samuel replied. “I come in peace, for the annual sacrifice. Gather all the families of Ephrathah.”

So they gathered all the families of Bethlehem, including the family of Jesse, son of Obed, grandson of Boaz and his Moabite wife Ruth. With Jesse were seven tall, strong sons. Samuel’s eyes gleamed when he saw them. When the sacrifice was done, Samuel got himself invited to Jesse’s home for dinner – some ministers are really good at that – and once they were alone, Samuel got down to business. “I am here because God sent me to anoint one of your sons to become king after Saul. Bring your sons to me.”

Well, what father would not be flattered? Immediately Jesse sent for his oldest son, Eliab. Eliab was tall and broad-shouldered, already a noted warrior. Samuel reached for his flask of anointing oil.

“No, Samuel,” said God.

“Are you kidding?” said Samuel. “This one’s perfect!”

“You mean, he’s tall and handsome? How has that been working so far?” Samuel said nothing, and Yahweh continued, “What did I tell you earlier? Learn to look at people as I do. Look at their core, not their surface. This isn’t the one.”

Samuel shook his head, and Jesse brought in his second son, Abinadab. No, God said, not that one either. Jesse's third son, Shammah. No. Jesse brought in all seven tall, imposing sons. No, not any of these.

"Don't you have anyone else?" Samuel asked.

"Just the youngest, but he's not here. We, um, we send him out to watch the sheep, where he can't do much damage."

This didn't sound promising. "Is there a problem with your youngest son?" Samuel asked. "I mean, is he crippled? Or feebleminded?"

Jesse sighed. "It's not that exactly. It just that he's . . . he's a musician."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to –"

"No, it's all right," Jesse said reassuringly. "I have seven other sons, after all."

"Well, look, could you send for him?"

So Jesse sent for his youngest son. Samuel examined him. He wasn't as tall as Eliab, or really any of the others. He was red-cheeked and sweaty and smelled of sheep, but there was something about his eyes. They were deep and beautiful. "This one?" Samuel muttered.

"If you could see him as I do," God replied, "you would not ask. This one is made of iron and music. He has already learned to recognize my voice. Anoint him."

And so Samuel anointed the youngest and least promising son of Jesse, a shepherd boy, to be the next king of Israel. The boy's name was David.

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Confirmation is a weird thing: Leo Jacoby used to call it "a sacrament in search of a theology." It's not in the Bible at all, and every church thinks of it differently. Some say it's a sacrament that only someone really holy, like a bishop, can perform; others say it's a rite of passage and let anyone do it who has can sign his or her name "Reverend," and still others don't do it at all. Even for those churches who do it and take it seriously, it's a source of endless frustration, because so many people treat it as if it were graduation from church, the last thing they'll ever have to do here – kind of like graduation from high school, except that sometimes graduates go back to visit their old high schools.

Well, we've reworked Confirmation a lot the past few years, trying to find a way for it to be meaningful. I think we've seen some progress, even if we aren't done yet. So for the time being, here are a couple of things I hope you confirmands understand. First, we aren't confirming you, you are confirming your own faith. You are here by choice, making a public statement to all gathered in this sanctuary that you have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ and now intend to serve him. And second, this Confirmation is neither an end point nor a beginning: this is a checkpoint on a journey that you've already begun and that each year should lead to new growth in knowledge and service. When we lay our hands on you in a few minutes, we are not conferring on you our own strength. We are inviting upon you the same Spirit that fell on the disciples at Pentecost and then kicked them out of their hiding place to go witness to Christ in the world. And when I anoint you with oil, I am anointing you in the same spirit in which Samuel anointed David, not for the people that you are now, but for the leaders that you will be one day. And

remember this: only God knows who that future leader is, because God sees you with different, and more hopeful, eyes than anyone else does.