Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13 / Psalm 23 / Ephesians 5:8-14 / John 9:1-41

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*A note to readers: A single set of dashes simply separates text into manageable bits for speaking. A double set indicates a pause which shifts focus or moves us in a different direction or offers a bit of “side” detail on a particular point.*

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul?

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As is not surprising, we generally refer to this text as “The Anointing of David” – fair enough, because that *is* the focal event.

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It is in these verses that we are introduced to the man of whom God says “I have chosen for myself a king” – the person to whom God has decided to entrust the future of Israel.

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David comes onstage at this point in the story and does not relinquish the spotlight until the end of, not just 1st, but *2nd* Samuel, while the characters who heretofore have played leading roles recede into the background or shift to supporting cast.

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The labors of Samuel, the prophet whose long career began as a young child in the service of the priest Eli, and whose forceful presence has dominated the early chapters of this book, end here.

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He anoints David as king and then essentially disappears from the story.

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Saul, Israel’s first king, still *plays* the king, but once God has decided Israel has no future under him, he seems to remain in the narrative primarily as a foil for David’s rising star.

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David is, indeed, the climatic point to which the story of 1st Samuel has been building for 15 chapters.

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David is the future hero, the chosen one of God. Of course we turn our attention to him.

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But here, in what amounts to Samuel’s last hurrah, it is he who is most active in the story.

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And in this tumultuous time of uncertainty and upheaval, perhaps we might learn something from him.

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As David Garber has written, Samuel's emotional state is important in this episode.

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We enter the story, as noted above, with the LORD asking the prophet “How long will you mourn?”

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It is unclear what tone God is using – compassionate? Curious? Testy? – but what *is* clear is that Samuel has been rendered immobile by grief.

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You will recall that Saul’s story, including the specific nature of the “crime” which causes God to reject him – in point of fact seemingly far less egregious than some of the things David does later in his career – has confused and disquieted scholars and general readers alike across the ages.

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But for our purposes, we will simply note that in the preceding chapter, we are told that Saul disobeyed the LORD's instructions to put *all* of the Amelekites to death and destroy *all* of their goods.

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Instead, he captured their king alive and kept the best of their livestock to sacrifice to the LORD.

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For this infraction, God sent Samuel to tell Saul the LORD had rejected him as king and would no longer be with him.

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Samuel did as he was directed, accepting that the man he had anointed and guided as the first king over Israel had failed in the LORD’s eyes.

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For all intents and purposes, the young Saul who came to the prophet searching for his father's donkeys, (1 Samuel 9) with neither intention nor desire to be king, was dead to Samuel; and this fact both grieved and disappointed him.

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But grief and disappointment are not the only emotions Samuel experiences in this story.

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He feels anxiety and fear: "If Saul hears of it, he will kill me."

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Even with his special connection to God as the prophet who anoints and rejects kings, Samuel still feels these vulnerable human emotions.

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He also experiences confusion and uncertainty.

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He begins his search for the new king with the same expectations he had when he was sent to anoint Saul.

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At the LORD’s direction, he heads for a family he has never met, living in a tiny hamlet he has probably never visited.

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He asks the man of the house, Jesse, to gather his family together.

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Immediately when he sees Eliab, the tall, handsome, eldest son, he assumes his work is done; here is the next king.

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But the LORD says “no.” Then “no” again. And “no” again. And “no” four more times.

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Well – here’s a fine mess. What in the world is he supposed to do now?

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In what we might suppose is a state of bewilderment, he asks Jesse whether all of his sons are present.

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“No,” comes the answer – “there is still the littlest, out tending the sheep.”

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And when Jesse presents his youngest son, Samuel responds obediently to God's voice, anointing David's head with oil.

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Then Samuel departs, and the next we hear of him, “all of Israel” has gathered to mourn his death.

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Grief, disappointment, anxiety, fear, confusion, uncertainty, obedience – how many of these human responses to the unanticipated, undesired, unpleasant, unknowable, unprecedented circumstance of Covid-19, and the actions that have been and are being implemented in response to it, have you felt over the last couple of weeks?

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How many do you suppose you will continue to feel next week? By the end of April? By the end of May?

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What about frustration? Anger? Guilt? Disgust?

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Have you felt any Gratitude? Forbearance? Solidarity? Calm? Relief?

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Perhaps you have seen the excerpt from C. S. Lewis’ essay “On Living in an Atomic Age” which has been widely quoted and shared on various social media and in the press, with the suggestion that we might simply substitute “Covid-19” for “atomic bomb.”

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*In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How are we to live in an atomic age?”*

*I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.”*

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He goes on, of course, and an unfortunate number of people seem to have misinterpreted his message as a simple one of “don’t worry, be happy, we should just go out and live our lives as we normally would.”

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It is true he argued that a proper response to an “atomic age” would be to live life as we normally would, because the vast majority of us can not do a thing to prevent a nuclear bomb from dropping on our heads.

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But we all *can* do something to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

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And Lewis, I am certain, would support our “doing something” – because he actually *lived* the same *sort* of “doing something.”

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As Aaron Earls has written, living in England during the 2nd World War, Lewis dealt with rationing and bomb shelters and black-outs and restricted movement and a variety of other national measures that limited personal “freedom.”

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I think it’s fair to say he would see our current self-quarantines to be reflective of those actions; that they are meant to be personal sacrifices that serve a greater good and seek to keep not just ourselves, but others safe.

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But even this is not the point Lewis was trying to make in his essay.

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Continuing with Earl’s commentary, Lewis saw in the concern about the atomic age (and would undoubtedly see in the concern about Covid-19) a truth that undermines atheism or any other naturalistic worldview that sees no room for a supernatural God existing outside of nature.

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He pointed out that all of science agrees that the end of life on this earth is inevitable. It’s only a matter of “when” not “if;” and the fruitful bit the threat of a bomb or a virus offers is that it “wakes us from a pretty dream, so we can begin to talk about realities.”

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Once we are awakened to the frailty of life, Lewis says, we can see that what disaster ends life as we know it is actually not the most important question; something was always going to destroy us and civilization.

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The most important question becomes: Is this all there is?

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As they were in Samuel’s time, people are scared, looking for answers, and desperate for hope.

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For the ancient Israelites, the enemy was a military force; for Lewis a new weapon of mass destruction; for us right now, the coronavirus; but fear of “the enemy” has always caused people to confront mortality—their own and their loved ones’.

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In his essay, Lewis exposes how a naturalistic mindset – a mindset based on natural instinct, without spiritual guidance, derived purely from human reason - leads us to hopelessness or irrationality.

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This was true in Samuel’s time, Lewis’ time, our time – but as Christians can point to a better way.

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“Mistaken for our mother,” Lewis wrote, “[Nature] is terrifying and even abominable. But if she is only our sister – if she and we have a common Creator – if she is our sparring partner - then the situation is quite different.”

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Because there *does* exist a God beyond nature, and because we follow that’s God’s law and *not* Nature’s, Lewis said we follow “the law of love and temperance even when they seem suicidal, and not the law of competition and grab, even when they seem to be necessary to our survival.”

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In our own day, then, Christians love our neighbors by working to limit the spread of a deadly disease, while not participating in the hoarding of food and masks and toilet paper.

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“We must train ourselves to feel that the survival of [humankind] on this Earth, much more of our own nation or culture or class, is not worth having unless it can be had by honorable and merciful means,” Lewis wrote.

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And as we live life differently – by limiting our interactions and sacrificing some of our personal preferences, by rationing for ourselves and even sharing what is in short supply through a sense of Christian charity and selflessness – we have the opportunity to speak of the LORD through word and action to those who are waking up to the realities of this life.

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Perhaps more than anything else, this is what Samuel – and Lewis—and most importantly, Christ—would have us do in the Philistine age, the atomic age, the coronavirus age, and every age in this world to come. Amen.