

Faith Mennonite Church
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What the seer could not see

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Last Sunday we met the child Samuel as he received the call from God to be a leader of God's people. Ry helped us reflect on how we hear God's voice—even when the voice remains silent. Today's reading comes near the end of Samuel's life. Raised in the house of the priest Eli, Samuel became a man who wore several hats—that of priest, judge, and prophet or seer. While hearing and voice were central to Samuel's personal call, today's text involving the call of a new leader, and the intervening chapters, move toward consideration of another sense: that of sight, of seeing.

The very first name given to God by a human in the Bible was *El-roi* the "One who sees." That name was spoken by a woman, Hagar, the slave girl of Abraham's wife Sarah. Sarah treated Hagar harshly after she became pregnant in a plan of Sarah's devising. Hagar fled the mistreatment but an angel followed her and assured her that her child would have a future and that she should return to the household. In response she worshiped God as *El-roi*—the One who saw her and the One whom she saw and yet lived.

How and what does God see? How and what do we see? The Bible demonstrates that this has been an important question since the very beginning of our recorded spiritual history. And it remains so to this day. Have you noticed the new word that has emerged in political parlance: optics? More and more frequently I hear this word as commentators speak of the political maneuverings in our country, particularly at the national level. "What are the optics here?" they ask. The question suggests that politicians are more concerned about image—how something will be seen—than about the actual effect of a policy or action. And it's not just politicians. We all live in a media-saturated world and through platforms such as FaceBook and Instagram each of us can project and publish images. What do we see? What do we share? How do we want to be seen?

Images are powerful. A Vietnamese child running from a napalm bomb captured in a photograph helped galvanize the opposition to that war 50 years ago. African-Americans being beaten by police and attacked by dogs during the civil rights movement called to the conscience of this nation when those images entered homes via the evening news. But just as images can prick a conscience and call forth the best in us, they can also instill fear and reinforce stereotypes: "build a wall," "keep America white," "bigger is better."

The context of our reading this morning and the call to "see as God sees" is a political one. God is choosing a leader, the second king of Israel. During Samuel's leadership as a judge and prophet, Israel was besieged by surrounding nations—the Philistines, the Amalekites. The quality of judges who preceded Samuel had become increasingly corrupt and the culture had become filled with violence. The people asked Samuel for a king, like the other nations had, and God conceded rather quickly. God warned, through Samuel, what a king would entail: military conscription, centralization of power and resources, diversion of resources away from food production toward armaments, loss of agency by individuals. But the people prevailed in their insistence that they needed a king and God answered their call.

The first king seemed to be chosen by appearance. As Samuel was awaiting God's command regarding who he should anoint as king, a strapping young man, Saul, was on a mission to find his father's donkeys which had gone astray. He was just about to return home empty-handed after unsuccessfully traversing various parts of Israel. But someone mentioned that the seer, Samuel, lived nearby; perhaps he could help them find the donkeys. Chapter 9 of 1 Samuel describes Saul as "a handsome young man," more handsome than any other, and "he stood head and shoulders above everyone else." This is whom Samuel anoints, according to God's promise that "He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me."

Saul was tall and good at fighting a battle, but he lacked in following orders. On two occasions he became concerned about optics—how things would look to his people—and failed to follow the directions he received from God. In short order, God withdrew God's support for Saul and sent Samuel on a new mission to choose a new king. That's where our story begins today.

Samuel is visibly distressed. He has delivered the news to Saul that God has rejected him from being king, but no succession plan is in place. We don't know why Samuel grieves: is he feeling a sense of failure that someone whom he has anointed and advised has fallen from grace? Was he enamored with Saul's stature and

couldn't imagine who else would take his place? Maybe Samuel was simply weary, having hoped that his work would diminish once a king was in place. But now the process was beginning again. And there's some danger here. Saul *is* still king. Will he step down without a power struggle?

God moves quickly directing Samuel to the house of Jesse, in Bethlehem, where in verse one the Hebrew text says "I have *seen* me a king..." The optics. But Samuel will find it a challenge to see what God sees. Following his prior experience with Saul, he's looking for someone tall, someone stately, someone to lead the troops. This time is different, however. God isn't looking for height or girth; God is looking at the heart. God has God's eye on one who isn't even physically present because he's out tending sheep. The youngest, still a boy. A shepherd. This is who God sees. Here begins a practice in the developing history of Israel's monarchy, of likening kings to shepherds. The kings who pleased God were the ones who tended to the needs and guided their people. [Note: it seems a bit ironic that after David is chosen because God looks on the heart, he is then described as physically compelling: "ruddy, with beautiful eyes, and handsome." Some scholars surmise this was a later addition, by a scribe loyal to the monarchy!]

In time, David became a celebrated king, but not without a succession struggle with Saul, and not without some major optics problems during his reign. At the height of his popularity he let his eyes stray, claiming a married woman and taking her husband's life. And in his own household he covered his eyes to a similar action of one of his sons, failing to shield his daughter from abuse. An ancient problem, yes, but sadly so very contemporary. Hollywood is the most recent setting for destructive sexual optics, but the echoing repetitions of "Me too" in the past couple weeks reveal a culture of abusive behaviors.

Yet David was remembered as a beloved king, throughout the Hebrew scripture and in the Gospels and New Testament epistles. The Gospel writers portray Jesus as a Davidic leader, inauspiciously born in Bethlehem, one who shepherds the people, one whose "yoke is easy and whose burden is light," one who cares for the sheep so intimately that the sheep know his voice.

How do we guard our optics? How do look and see with the eyes of God?

This account suggests that we have to combine seeing and listening. Samuel's eyes alone did not lead him to David. He was ready to stop and anoint the oldest and the tallest of Jesse's sons. He needed to listen to the voice of God to help him see. He needed to open himself to the unexpected...to the counter-intuitive...to vulnerability and even the appearance of weakness.

This account also reminds us that the important events through which God works are often at a very local, even subversive level. Even as Saul thought that he was still the King, a new leader was being chosen. We can talk ourselves blue about our president's woeful response to the disaster left in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria or we can tell other stories of response: I heard one yesterday on a podcast from the village of Aibonito. This village has long had a Mennonite church presence, although this story came through another avenue. A disabled man who requires a respirator to breathe was found in his car in a hospital parking lot where he was begging for an extension cord to power his respirator. A woman who runs an elderly care home, which has a generator, heard of his plight and took him home. Her action was technically illegal because he did not meet the age-requirement of her care license, but she ignored the legalities. When word spread of his precarious situation, another woman set up a crowd-source funding site and raised \$500 to purchase a generator for him. Someone else figured out how and where to purchase and transport it. This is the true optic of the response in Puerto Rico—destitute people reaching out to help one another. These are the ones who are doing a "really great job" of responding to the crisis.

Finally, this story reminds us to stop whenever we are tempted to think we may not measure up compared to someone else, or that we're not good enough for God's purposes. And it reminds us to stop when we develop narrow confines for who might be suited for a given task or calling. God's optics invite us to look far afield for the ones who may be overlooked or considered too young. May we all have eyes to see the very heart of the matter.