

## THANKS, I'LL TAKE IT FROM HERE

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

### I Samuel 15:10-19

We are continuing in a mini-series from the Old Testament book of Samuel. If you recall, last week we read how the Israelites begged the prophet Samuel to appoint for them a King so that they might be **“like other nations.”** (I Samuel 8:5) Everything within him knew this was a bad idea, and he warned them of all the ways this might not work out well. Against his better judgment, however, he went along with their demands

This morning we are going to read a little about their first King – Saul – and notice how his compulsion to please people, and his sense of being full of himself - led him astray.

For the best understanding you should go home and read all of chapter 15. For now, however, we'll just be reading verses 10 – 19.

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When Saul became king, Israel was in serious trouble. It had long been a loose confederation of tribes that fell as easy prey to all of their stronger neighbors. We are told in the prior chapter that Saul **“fought against all of his enemies on every side.”** He fought valiantly, rescuing **“Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them.”** (14:47-48) We are also told that Saul was able to do all of this only because the Spirit of the Lord was upon him.

One day Samuel, the man who anointed Saul to be king, reminded him that **“the Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord.”** (15:1) It was as if to say the definition of being an anointed leader is that you listen to the word of the Lord. It does not matter who you lead. It does not matter whether you are a king, or elder, or a stay-at-home parent. You cannot be a spirit-led leader unless you know how to listen to the Spirit's voice. God never gives anyone a goal and says, **“Let me know when you succeed.”** So if any of us feel called to any kind of leadership role, the primary “anointing” begins with learning to sense the leading of the Spirit.

There are parts of this 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Samuel that are hard to explain. I don't even want to begin to try and defend some of the directives that were supposedly given by the Lord to Saul. Taking the time to try and do so would likely distract us from some of the overall meaning of the story.

So let me instead try and shed some light on the part of the chapter that we *did* read this morning. You see before Saul headed into battle, he was told explicitly not to return with any “spoils of war;” i.e., no slaves, no “ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” (15:3) Yet when Samuel confronted Saul upon his return from battle, Samuel asked, **“What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?”** Looks like Saul was caught red-handed!

It would seem that Saul was afraid of his own people who wanted the spoils of war. Ultimately he confessed that, **“I have sinned . . . because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.”** (15:24) He felt compelled to please them – even though God had said specifically not to take any spoils. When Samuel initially confronts Saul with his failure to obey God, Saul protests, **“I did what the Lord commanded.”** Saul must have

been thinking, "Gimme a break. We won the war." Saul rationalizes, and Samuel yells his response **"Stop! Just stop. Does God need sheep? To obey is better than to sacrifice."** (15:20-22)

There are different directions we could take this now. I could riff on the verse that says, **"Saul went to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself."** That could be fun. Imagine, "Saul Tower." Or I could riff on the verse that says, "The word of the Lord came to Samuel saying **"I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me. . ."** Does God have regrets about the history that has been placed in motion?

Forgive me, but I would like to take this in a very, very different direction. You see for quite time I used to see a Jungian therapist each week, and a common approach was to have an in-depth analysis of some of my dreams that I had recorded from the prior week. This can be challenging and exhausting work on different levels, not the least of which is the discipline of waking up in the middle of the night and writing down your dreams!

So I thought to myself: What if I were to go in to my therapist, and convey the story of I Samuel 15 as though it were my own dream? Over the course of session he might say, "In what ways are you Saul? In what ways are you Samuel?"

In what ways am I Saul? In some respects, Saul just happened to be in the right place at the right time, just when the angst of the people was bubbling up, and they were demanding a king. Through no skill or planning of his own, Saul just happened to be born into a wealthy family. He just happened to be good looking, and he just happened to be taller than anyone else. (see chapter 9:1-2) Is that what it takes to be king? To look the part?

I wonder if any of you can identify with my thinking. If you are honest, are any of you able to recognize the privileges that you were just born with? Have there been times in your life when, like Saul, like me, you started to play along and think, "Yeah, there *is* something special about me. Yeah, how lucky God is to have chosen me. Come to think of it, I *do* feel somewhat like a king." Maybe you weren't from a wealthy family. Maybe you were just born with white privilege.

In what ways am I like Samuel? In what ways am I earnestly trying to hear God? In what ways do you earnestly want to be used by God to be blessing to those around you? In what ways do you earnestly want to be used by God to be a blessing to the wider society?

When it gets tricky is when we grapple with the possibility that there might be both a Samuel and a Saul residing within us at the same time. There might be a generative, protective King archetype residing in you, at the same time there is a Prophetic archetype residing in you. The real question is: How are these two personas or archetypes relating to each other?

As you are trying to fulfill your destiny, as you are trying to live into the purpose for which you were born, are you still open to listening to the spirit? Are you still open to direction from your Inner Prophet?

There is no question that Saul got his launch on his auspicious path by following the lead of Samuel. In chapter 10 we read: **"Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his**

**head, and kissed him; he said, "The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around."** (10:1) Even so, it almost seems as though in due process, Saul started feeling more confident, and more full of himself. It is almost as though he came to the point of saying to Samuel, **"Thanks for the help getting started. I'll take it from here."** Saul did have successful military initiatives that provided increased security for the Israelites, *but* he also started bending the rules, rationalizing, and asserting his own will.

Perhaps we do have both a King and a Prophet living within us, but that in itself provides no assurance of how things are going to work out. We have come to recognize that there are good Kings and bad Kings. Is your Inner King listening to your Inner Prophet, or have you had a measure of success in life, and you are now thinking, "Thanks. I can take it from here."?

Samuel could see where this was heading, so he said regarding Saul, **"For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king."** (15:23) While we didn't read this far this morning, the chapter ends with, **"Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel."** (15:35)

Sadly many people have gotten to a point in their life where they are no longer positioned to hear the voice of the Prophet within. They may even live out the remainder of their days not hearing the voice of the Prophet who once powerfully shaped their life. They may even find comfort in the habit of attending church, but it has been a long time since they have truly heard and responded to the voice of the Prophet. How sad. They may even be productive committee members.

I have no way of proving this, but I think many people get a visit from their Inner Prophet when they know that their end is near. When this does happen, there is a near universal sense of "I wish I had listened sooner. How shallow to have built a monument to myself. (15:12) I can only imagine what might have been had I remained open to the voice of the Prophet."

You may be leaving water bottles for migrants in the desert, you may be a volunteer on a suicide prevention help-line, you may be an Interim Pastor, but may you never be so full of yourself that you dismiss your Inner Prophet with the words: "Thanks. I can take it from here."

Amen.

I Samuel 15:10-19 (NRSV)

<sup>10</sup>The word of the Lord came to Samuel: <sup>11</sup>**"I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands."** Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the Lord all night. <sup>12</sup>Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, and Samuel was told, **"Saul went to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself, and on returning he passed on down to Gilgal."** <sup>13</sup>When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, **"May you be blessed by the Lord; I have carried out the command of the Lord."** <sup>14</sup>But Samuel said, **"What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?"** <sup>15</sup>Saul said, **"They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to**

**the Lord your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed." <sup>16</sup>Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me last night." He replied, "Speak."**

**<sup>17</sup>Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel." <sup>18</sup>And the Lord sent you on a mission... <sup>19</sup>Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord?**