

**Leaving the Cave**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras**  
**October 22, 2017**

*1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 7:24*

Something that has marked the human condition from the beginning of time is the ability of people to see what they want to see, to find what they want to find. We see this reflected in scripture, time and time again, just as we see it in our own lives.

Each of us has probably had a moment in life when we have seen what we have wanted to see, rather than what is there. We have found what we wanted to find, rather than what we needed to find.

And this can be a good thing sometimes! Think about relationships. When we fall in love with someone and we focus our attention on the good things, the attractive features of that individual and we set aside the aspects of that person that may be less attractive or enticing.

We do it with our leaders all the time. We see all the things we like about the person, and we build them up. Sometimes it works out! And sometimes it doesn't.

Think about how we get to this pivotal moment in the history of Israel. This is one of the great turning points in the story of the people of God because David is the one who is anointed to be king and his descendants will rule over Israel and it is from him that a messiah, a deliverer will come. And in the Jewish tradition, that figure has yet to arrive and in the Christian tradition we say he has been here in Jesus.

It's a critical pivotal moment, yet it almost didn't get there.

The story starts off with Samuel, and he is grieving because in the previous chapter he has had to tell Saul that the king has lost God's favor and that he was going to be disposed. Samuel had been Saul's mentor! Samuel had anointed him king at the command of God! Everything he had hoped would unfold in the future was now not going to come to pass.

Samuel mourned the loss of a future, and he dwelt on what had happened already. That's what he wanted to see. He wanted to find comfort in the past.

But God wasn't having any of that. God was looking forward! God had a future in mind. So he told Samuel to go, he had a mission for him and it was to anoint a new king.

Confronted with this new assignment, Samuel's response is one of concern. He doesn't want to cross Saul, who might charge him with treason, who would see him committing an act of betrayal. Samuel should have been focused instead on looking at his heavenly ruler - God - who had proven himself to be mighty and powerful and faithful. Samuel could not look in the right direction for the answers he needed.

But he did what God told him to do, and off Samuel went to Bethlehem. And he arrives at the town and there are the elders waiting for him. You remember their response? They were nervous, they were worried. When the government shows up, no one is expecting anything good to happen. And to them, Samuel was "the man". He was a prophet! He was the only person in the kingdom who had the power to tell off the king.

So there are one or two possibilities they anticipated. Samuel is there speaking for the king (and that would mean trouble for them) or even worse, Samuel and Saul had a falling out and if they were seen talking to him and dealing with him then they would be collaborators. So rather than seeing Samuel as God's spokesperson, as a holy man, they saw him as a danger.

You recall that God has told Samuel as cover for his mission; he should say that he is coming to offer sacrifice. So the elders accept this explanation, and they start gathering the people together including Jesse and his sons.

Samuel is supposed to anoint one of these sons to be the new king. And it's interesting that he's looking for a successor to Saul. What is he hoping to find? The text suggests that he wants to find another version of Saul - a tall good-looking warrior, someone who looked like a king.

But that wasn't what God wanted Samuel to find. When the first of Jesse's sons comes out looking all kingly... God says "Nope". Same thing happens right through 7 boys until there are none left.

Samuel is not stupid. If God told him there was going to be a son to anoint, and all the ones present were rejected, surely there must be another boy somewhere. And he was going to find him. So he asks Jesse - are there any more?

Jesse's answer tells us something interesting about the relationship he may have had with his youngest son David. Remember, David is out in the field

taking care of the sheep. Now either these sheep are so important that when the most powerful people in the country comes and says I want to see all of your boys, Jesse's thinking, nope – I better leave one to take care of the flock.

Or, more likely, Jesse's thinking *"David's a twerp. David's a punk. I don't need to bring him out; he's not worth Samuel's time"*. But look what happens, the youngest son is David, and David is the son that is anointed.

The key to understanding this passage comes in the exchange between Samuel and God when God says... *"People are always looking at the outside, at appearances, but I, God look to the heart."*

In the ancient world the heart wasn't seen are merely the place of emotion, but so much more. It was a place where in the intellect, the spirit and the soul. But still a pretty clear message we can expect today – don't look for appearances, even though that's what you might be looking for. Instead, look inside the heart.

What was true of people back in Samuel's day is true of our day too, isn't it? How often are people swayed by the pretty face, the impressive resume, the fact that someone lives in a nice house or has a great job, runs with the cool kids.

None of that interests God. God's looking for something else; God's looking for what is inside us. But what is inside of us? Resentment? Lusts? Vice? Anger? Jealousy? Sin? I don't know about you, but I'm not sure that I'm comfortable with God finding any of that in me.

Remember the story of humanity that is in the beginning of our sacred text. What happens when Adam and Eve disobey God, and God calls them out on it? They make excuses. They try to hide. Others who come after them do the same thing too. And the pattern repeats thorough out history.

We often try to hide these dark places in our hearts from God but our scripture and our faith teach us that we can't be fugitives from the Lord. He will always find us and the truth will eventually come out. God doesn't want us to try and hide the bad that we have done, instead God wants us to confront it.

Which brings us to David. What words or images come to mind when you think of King David? Poet? Great Warrior? A figure who will lead his people? The chosen one? The perfect example of a leader? One of the great actions heroes of scripture? Yes, David's pretty cool.

But we also know that he is an ethically flawed man. This is the guy who sent one of his generals out to battle to be killed so he could then hook up with the man's wife. If we were generous we might say David had complicated relationships with his children and his family.

But God felt he could work in and through David. He established a relationship with this person, despite all of his flaws. And the fact that he would fail again, and again, and again. He established a covenant that God promised would endure throughout the generations.

Some of you may recall Plato's Republic and the story of the cave. As the story goes, a group of people live their whole lives chained to the wall of a cave facing a blank wall. All they can see are shadows projected on the wall and they think that's reality.

Finally, one of them leaves and goes out to the real world and he finds out that what he thought was reality was only a dim approximation of the truth. So returns to the cave because he wants to share this news with his companions. And they think he's crazy. And they are not interested. They prefer to stay with their disillusion.

Hopefully this story will give you and me some hope. And as we are looking for a way forward, as we try and decide what it is we want to find in life, we will take courage and inspiration from this passage and we will find ourselves wanting to find what we need. That we will look for what is real.

I believe that God wants us to leave the cave. God wants us to engage with reality and truth and all that is good in God's creation. But that's not always easy. Because let's face it, we mess up. And in doing so we damage the bonds between ourselves and our god, and between ourselves and our brothers and sisters.

But by repentance, by turning in a new direction we can begin to heal those ruptured bonds. And we can begin to find what we need. Not what we want, but what we need: God's grace, God's power and God's healing love.

May it be so! And may it be soon. Amen.