

Lent Four

April 3, 2011

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen*

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”.

If I did a poll of members of St. Martin’s this morning, I am sure that most of us (if we were honest) would have stories about times in life when we struggled with disappointment.

Winston Churchill, no stranger to political misfortunes, (most folks seem to forget that he was voted out of office at the end of World War II) once remarked that “success in life was defined as going from failure to failure with enthusiasm”.

I know that as my own children enter the teenage years and share with me their ups and downs, I am reminded of various painful experiences from my past.

Being cut from sports teams, rejections from a girl I wanted to date...

I know most of these look pretty silly today.

But if I am honest with myself, those seemingly innocuous failures helped prepare me to deal with other disappointments that come along in human life.

We all have struggled at times with disappointment in our professional lives, our personal lives, and even in the daily struggle of raising children.

Robin Williams use to say he was haunted by two different visions for the future of his children.

The first was his child saying, “I would like to thank the Nobel Academy for this honor” and the second being the child saying “would you like fries with that?”

I am confident, though, that if folks would spend more time reading the Bible they would be better acquainted with men and women who have dealt creatively with life’s disappointments.

One of the major reasons I tell folks I believe the Bible is true or accurate is that it is unafraid to show us at our best and at our worst.

There is no editor at work trying to clean up the story, trying to make King David look good when he is putting the moves on Bathsheba.

Think about the creation story. The world’s most perfect loving parent puts his two children into a garden, a virtual paradise.

He gives them only one rule. What happens? The first moment God turns his back, they misbehave

Think about the story of Noah. God's creation is one big disappointment. What does God do? He goes with the nuclear option. He wipes the slate clean and tries to start over.

Think about the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph is sold by his own brothers into slavery, accused of trying to rape his boss's wife, and sent to Pharaoh's prison to rot.

Joseph must have spent a lot of time wondering if he was really his father's favorite son. What was the use of interpreting dreams if all it did was lead to slavery and prison? Yet Joseph was able to save his people.

If people spent more time reading the Bible, they would realize that disappointment, and frustration when things don't go our way is a natural part of human life.

Take our Old Testament story this morning for example. It begins with God saying to his prophet Samuel, "Why are you mourning and grieving over Saul?"

Just to be clear here, Samuel is not just disappointed, Samuel is pouting. He is doing what any five year old does who doesn't get his way.

God says to him, "so what, I made the wrong choice for the first king of Israel, but you and me we're going to give it another shot."

The Lord sends Samuel to the town of Bethlehem, to seek the family of Jesse.

One of Jesse's sons is to be anointed as the new king, the chosen one that will lead Israel in their battle against the Philistines.

Samuel starts by looking at the obvious candidates, the older sons, the responsible ones, who already are probably taking care of the family business.

But God reminds him not to look only at outer appearances. In fact, God looks at things much differently.

This is proven true in end of our story when God tells Samuel to anoint the youngest son, the most insignificant one of the boys in Jesse's household.

This turns out to be David, who is destined to be the gold standard for all the future kings of Israel, and a model for the Messiah that people longed for God to send.

God takes Samuel's disappointment and turns it into hope for the future of Israel.

So what lessons can we learn today from this simple story?

First, when things seem bleak, whenever we feel overwhelmed or that life has disappointed us, we should not lose hope.

I am sure Samuel thought there would never be a king better than Saul.

He had anointed Saul, he had advised Saul on being king, and he had put a lot of time and effort in making Saul the best.

And yet, despite all of his efforts, it had been a failure. Before he met David, Samuel must have felt life was pretty hopeless.

What we take as a loss of hope, though, may only be the way that God is going to take action in our lives.

Our hopelessness might be the opportunity for a brand new beginning.

God is not the sort that throws in the towel at the first sign of difficulty or trouble.

Our God is a God of hope, a God of second chances, of new starts and new opportunities...

We sell God short if we believe that there is only one path, or that God has run out of ideas, just because we are momentarily stuck and can't see our way through a certain problem.

Second, when we hit that wall (and we all know those times in life will come), we need to look for help from unexpected places.

God's purpose is often revealed according to Scripture in surprising ways and from the least likely people.

It is not necessarily the best and the brightest, or the starting QB, or Valedictorian that saves the day.

God's choice for his purposes is often found in people that we can be tempted to overlook.

Being faithful to God's purpose sometimes means that we have to take an unfamiliar path that might seem a bit treacherous.

Samuel didn't want to go to David's hometown. He didn't think he would find what he was looking for. He was fearful for his life, scared that folks would try and kill him.

But despite his fear, and despite his own reservations about the future, he still was willing to put his trust in God and forge ahead. He trusted that God would somehow, and some way, be able to deliver on his promise to Israel.

And by trusting God he found King David.

The season of Lent is a time where we follow unfamiliar paths and are challenged to look for God in unexpected places.

Are we willing to trust God's purpose for our lives?

Most of us are good at giving God credit when things are going our way, but will we trust God when the chips are down?

Can we look to God for guidance on the Good Fridays of human life?

Can we trust that God will always, in His own time, resurrect our human disappointments?

Can we trust that God will teach us that when we give up getting our way He is finally able to show us the way through Good Friday to the glory of the Easter morn?