

Trusting in the Unseen

Sermon based on lectionary readings for Proper 6 Year B
1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17, and Psalm 20

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I love legendary succession stories – stories of how great heroic kings are chosen to be king in the first place. Really, the story of David’s anointing is not that different from other stories. King Arthur comes to mind. He thought he was only the younger brother destined to be squire to his older brother. He wasn’t even looking to be king, he only pulled the sword out of the stone because his brother needed one.

A less famous story, an old Celtic myth, more clearly echoes the “unlikely king” trope. There was a king who had three sons, and the problem of choosing one of those sons to be the next king. Their father decided to settle the issue by promising the



crown to the son who could bring him back the Goldfinch that sang to him every summer. At one point in the story, the three boys meet a wise old man who knows the way to the kingdom of the Goldfinch – which happens to be through a deep underground tunnel. The oldest, being the strong and brave, heads down, but quickly returns empty handed.

The middle son, laughing at his older brother, heads down, thinking he will succeed because he is smart and cunning. He too soon gives up and comes back. The youngest thought either of his older brothers would be a fine king, so wasn’t even going to try. Except that he knew how that bird made his father happy, and the old man encouraged him, saying that a kind heart is better than a clever head. He succeeds getting through the tunnel, and passes other tests of patience and ability to listen, and to keep his word, and not only becomes king, but solves all his family’s problems.

Paul’s own dealings with the Corinthians follow along the same lines – only, without the throne. Corinth was a city bent on emulating either Sodom or Gomorrah, and wasn’t known for high moral standards. But that wasn’t their only problem. We aren’t sure of the details, but it seems that some of the Christians there didn’t see why they should look to Paul as an authority. There were others that were claiming authority who were teaching things different than Paul had.



They had questions about whom they should follow. Paul provides them with an answer to “those who boast in appearance and not in the heart:” As a Christian, he is not like that; he isn’t concerned about this world as much as he about the world to come; he just wants to be pleasing to God. By faith he walks, not by sight.

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Two Words are worth note here: faith and sight

ΠΙΣΤΙΣ is the Greek word for faith, also used for belief and trust. In the Greek mindset, these are intrinsically related and might as well be the same thing. If you actually believe something, you act as though you trust its truth. It is not actually opposed to sight, nor is it just used for things invisible or things which have not yet happened. It is about reliability. If you walk by faith, you are walking according to that which you believe is trustworthy.

What Paul is saying here, is that what he finds trustworthy, is not

εἶδος – the second word we need to consider. εἶδος can be translated as sight, but there is more to it than that. There are at least 4 words in the Greek language related to sight (that I know of). εἶδος is special, and a pain to translate. To have seen (past tense) often has the meaning of to know (in the present tense). Sight, is sight, but in the sense of knowing things based on their appearance.

It's not something's outward appearance that makes something trustworthy. For Paul, to walk by faith is to trust something else.

The distinction between faith and sight Paul makes to the Corinthians is the same one revealed to Samuel as he seeks a new king. It should be remembered that Israel was very new at having kings – Saul had been their very first. Before that, Israel was ruled by judges, which is technically what Samuel was. And in this story, it is his duty to judge who should succeed Saul. He was reasonably certain about Eliab - the first son he saw, that that one must be the one. God, have you seen this guy??! – he exudes king-ness! But God explained his rejection of Eliab: “People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” God advises Samuel not to consider things like appearance and height, but trust that God was going to make it clear which one he wanted to rule Israel. The one God wanted was David. The same one Jesse didn't even consider to be in the running, was the right one.



David is generally remembered as a great king, the musician, the warrior, the king - the king whose lineage eventually leads to one Jesus of Nazareth, sort of. Of course, David is far from perfect. As it turns out he isn't God. Kind of disappointing – a lot of the kings from neighboring lands liked to claim they were gods. David isn't even that great of a human being, at least by human standards. But this wouldn't be the first time, and certainly not the last, that God would choose someone so unlikely to serve him.

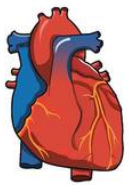
This story is a great reminder that God knows us, and doesn't judge us as other people do. But it isn't just about God. It's about those trying to listen to God. With Samuel, we are advised not to put too much stake into one's outward appearance. This is because what matters the most to God, we have limited access to. You can't know what is going on in the mind, much less the heart of another just by looking at him or her. I can look at any one of you, but still forget that you are a

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human being with your own story, your own needs, your own dreams, just as complex as my own, if not more so. Sometimes, we don't even know our own selves what is happening in the mind of our heart that well. Yet, this is what matters to God. God judges our hearts. Sometimes I think it would be nice if God would just judge me by my GPA. I can do the school thing. I know big words. I can sound smart. Let's just forget about the heart.



That's not going to happen. As much as we like to focus on what we have, be it material wealth, physical ability, intellect, or whatever else we feel we can boast in, God is focusing his attention of us elsewhere: who we are in our hearts.



By walking by faith, we trust God and his judgment, and base our priorities on things invisible, but very real. We watch our hearts, and urge them to practice kindness and gratitude. And we comfort one another.

One of the fathers from the early church suggested reading the Psalm for today – the 20th Psalm - to someone needing encouragement. But that is not the only use for the Psalm. Someone actually rewrote this Psalm in 21st century English as something he calls “almost a creed.” This is what I’d suggest it means to walk by faith rather than by sight. Join with me in this “almost a creed” as this morning’s affirmation of faith.

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“Almost A Creed”

**Do we believe?
Yes, in spite of ourselves, we do believe!**

**While some follow fad and fashion,
changing with the seasons in Paris, London and New York,
we follow the man from Nazareth.**

**While some put their hope in a big lotto win,
or chase profits at no matter what cost to family,
we put our hope in loving one another as our Christ has loved us.**

**While some may give in to a sophisticated cynicism,
or some fall into apathy or despair,
we put our faith in the God who has given us his only true son.**

**While some may boast of their superior education,
culture, race, or living standard,
we boast in the self-giving of that Son on a Cross.**

**While some try to justify themselves by prizing fame or power,
or by claiming superior morals,
we allow the grace of our Lord to Jesus to be our best prize.**

**Because of Jesus,
yes, we believe in the living God
by whose Holy Spirit all things are open to change and renewal.
And that includes us and the church,
thanks be to God!**