

Sermon, June 13, 2021, 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

One of the hottest musicals of the last six years has been *Hamilton*, a story about founding father Alexander Hamilton told through hip hop music. Gary and I strongly prefer plays to musicals, but *Hamilton* resonated with us so much that we've seen it twice: once in Phoenix, and once here in Richmond. We love and listen to the soundtrack, which is unusual for us with show tunes.

One song towards the end called "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story" came to mind as I read this week's Old Testament story about Samuel and Jesse and Jesse's sons, because different writers told the stories of the kings. This summer we will look at parts of the story as told by first and second Samuel and the two books of Kings, and starting in July, the Wednesday morning in-person Bible study will read some of the same stories as told by the two books of Chronicles.

Who lives, who dies, who tells your story? Sometimes Chronicles sounds like it was written by King David's publicist, because stories about him impregnating Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah are left out. But in the books of Samuel and Kings we get those sordid stories. We also get last week's story which is not in Chronicles, when God warned the people what would happen if they continued their quest for a king and gave up life under the system of judges. We get David and Goliath next week. Today we have this bizarre system of selecting a king by parading a man's sons before a prophet. None of these stories are in Chronicles. Today's makes me think of a line from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, when King Arthur talks about how he became king and one of his unenthusiastic subjects says, "Strange women in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government."

When thinking about how today's story applies to our life and faith, the way Jesse's sons are paraded around and their height, beautiful eyes and outward appearance may be less helpful than the opening of this section:

"But Samuel grieved over Saul."

As happens when we read little snippets of Scripture in church, we skipped a whole lot of stuff between last week and this week: seven chapters. Last week, we heard the warning about what a king would mean, yet God's people still insisted on a king. Then we skipped the parts where Saul was chosen as king. Saul was not enthusiastic about this at first: in fact, he hid when the Israelites assembled to hear who God had selected as king, but then he ruled for forty-two years before Samuel told him that he had broken God's commands and his rule would come to an end. Saul still kept screwing up and Samuel kept telling him he was going to get punished because he wouldn't obey, and then right before the part we got today, we read that Samuel left Saul and never saw him again.

Now we read that Samuel grieved. Samuel was invested in Saul's kingship. Going to a monarchy had been a huge change, one God didn't want but did anyway. Now not only had the corruption God warned about in last Sunday's readings come to pass, but Saul was directly disobeying God's commands. Samuel couldn't condone Saul's behavior and he grieved. Samuel had loved

Saul. While the monarchy wasn't God's original plan, Samuel had hope for what would happen, but those hopes had been dashed.

When I used to talk about grief in church, I felt like it was something that some understood and that others would someday come to understand, but now we all get it. The past year has been a time of collective grief as we struggled through a pandemic and shutdown. Here in church, some semblance of what we may think of as "normal church" is starting to happen, like singing. Last week, when we offered singing in this room for the first time, I didn't think I would sing. My life has changed so much since the last time we all sang together, and I didn't think my lungs could handle singing in addition to lots of talking behind a mask for two services. But when the music and singing started I joined in anyway. I couldn't stop. My voice decided for me.

Some of you have told me that you cried. While we are so grateful to Bonnie and Billie for faithfully offering beautiful instrumental music for the past year and a half, we missed singing so much.

But we still aren't back to normal, are we? Who is no longer here? What has changed? What story will we pass on? Who will tell the story?

Many of us are grieving, not only people who died, but church as it used to be. Some of my clergy colleagues talk about how much their parishioners miss the common cup, and one or two of you have indicated to me that you do as well, but I know others who will grieve if we do go back to a common cup.

Last week at the 10 in the nave, the passing of the peace was a little more like it used to be, but some people are not comfortable now with shaking hands, and some may never be. I don't know that I will ever go back to the Sunday morning greeting line, which I used to love so much I once wrote an essay about it. I don't know if the greeting line is going to make it back to "normal." Some people may choose to wear masks indefinitely or at certain times of years like flu season, which has apparently been common in some other countries for a while.

Some people prefer worshipping at home. Some people find outreach more important than Sunday morning worship. Some people are used to playing the stream back at times that are easier for them than Sunday morning and want ways to be connected outside of Sunday mornings.

The king God chose wasn't what the people expected. David was the youngest and least important son, off tending the sheep. His father didn't even bother going to fetch him when Samuel invited Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice. But David, the youngest of eight, turned out to be God's idea of a king.

In the coming weeks and months, we will together figure out who and what is coming back to church, and what we're giving up for a little longer, or permanently. Be prepared to grieve like Samuel did, and to pay attention to the unexpected blessings God has in store.