CARDIOLOGY 101
Scripture: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

FOCUS: God cares only for what is in the heart and God uses each of us for the good of his kingdom if we will offer ourselves to him.

I long ago came to the conclusion that it was not my calling to justify literal and inerrant interpretation of all scripture. Now before you rush out and announce that your pastor doesn’t believe in the Bible let me explain. If you want to share what I believe about scripture let it be this. I believe scripture is filled with God’s truth and offers us insight into the nature of God. And I believe that scripture is one of several tools absolutely used by God to inspire, encourage, direct and redeem us.

But I must confess that if I had to take some Old Testament scriptures, like those which set the stage for this morning’s text, to be literally true, and completely without mortal influence, I would have a great deal of trouble sanctioning the actions of the God that seems to be at work there. I look forward to once again participating in a Disciple Bible Study group in a few weeks. During the 34 week study we will read approximately 80% of the Bible and will learn to consider the scriptures in context and to recognize that the book we call The Bible is actually not ***a*** book at all. Rather it is an anthology of 66 very different books written over more than 1,500 years by at least 40 different authors in eight diverse genre.

For some encountering such information is a stumbling block, as these facts don’t work very well for those whose approach to scripture is marked by the once popular bumper sticker which read, ***“God said it, I believe it and that Settles it”.*** But for many others, myself included, who prefer to encounter scripture with an open and inquiring mind, such an understanding of the nature of the books that make up the Bible is a source of comfort, for it allows us the freedom to understand that some of the things which seem rather unloving and ungodly are the result of cultural influences and 20/20 hindsight. In the verses that lead up to and set the stage for this morning’s scripture we find a harsh example of the kind of passage of which I speak.

It begins by reporting a parting of the ways between Saul and Samuel. Samuel had been led by God to anointed Saul king. But Saul had been rebellious and had ignored a direct command from God and was therefore rejected by God and sent into exile, so to speak. That command marks this as one of those passages which, in my estimation, are best read with an open mind and an understanding that the words are the reflections of an author who is looking back at the situation through the lens of a culture which attributed all things to the direct hand of God or the gods. No matter how any situation turned out, it was the thought of the people that God had desired the outcome.

As the author, and we don’t know who that was, writes he is fully aware of all that has transpired. He knows that Saul has been deposed. He knows that Saul’s troops have annihilated the Amalekites. So it is clear to him, based on the prevailing thought of the time, that God wanted Saul to do just that. So the author reports that Saul was instructed by the prophet Samuel to ***“Go to Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”***

I simply cannot accept the notion that the God I have experienced, the God whose very character is pure love, the God who sent his son to redeem a broken world would give such instructions. Yet that is what the Bible says. I hope you see where I am going with this. We need to read scripture intelligently, recognizing the different genres, taking into account the historical background and the cultural influences while listening for God’s voice to speak out of even difficult passages. And then we need to focus on the overarching theme of scripture as we allow it to encourage us to become those people of light and grace who reflect the true nature of God as revealed in the life of his Son.

While I can’t accept that God ever orders total annihilation of innocent people and defenseless livestock, I do find an important warning here. We read that Saul spared ***“Agag”***, the king, ***“and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and all that was valuable.”*** I would argue that Saul’s greatest sin was that he spared only what he thought could be of benefit to him and to his people. There ws no compassion, no grace, no love. At first Saul tried to sneak one by on Samuel. ***“God bless you Samuel. I did just what God told me to do”***. But there were sheep bleating and cattle lowing in the background. Then you gotta love what Saul does when he is caught in his attempted cover-up. ***‘Oh, yeah, I saved those to donate to the silent auction at church, to help the building fund.”*** Well that isn’t exactly what he said, but you get the drift.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, don’t we all have to admit that at times we are Saul in this story. I’m reminded of a sign which is making the rounds online these days. It is one of those chalkboards businesses use to post daily menus or other information. This one is on the sidewalk in front of some unidentified establishment and carries this hand written message: ***“Your beliefs don’t make you a better person, your behavior does.”***  We all are those folk who know what we are called of God to do, how we are meant to act as children of God. But sometimes our selfish nature just gets the best of us. And when we are caught in our faithlessness we make excuses and look for someone or something to blame for our failure.

So I am reminded by this rather odd tale of disobedience that while I have not ever slaughtered a nation of innocents, I have been unfaithful, and so have each of you. I bring this up not to depress us all. Lord knows there is enough depression already. I bring it up as a reminder that we are called to be those folks who actively seek to put aside more and more of those behaviors which mark our baser nature. We are those called live in the world while being less and less of the world as we work daily to as Paul and Wesley put it, “go on toward perfection”. To be sure we will not ever get there in this life, for we remain mortal. Of that Paul and Wesley were both certainly aware, for both of them had significant character flaws. Yet God used them mightily because they sought to move forward in spite of their occasional unfaithfulness. Like those two saints, we are called to intentionally seek to live each day in such a way that the great arch of our life is ever more upward. As we do so we all can be used of God to build his kingdom here and now, in this time and in this place.

That is, at least in part, the message I hope you will take from the scripture we have read this morning. It is a message about being used of God and a message about the difference between the world’s value system and God’s. Like so much of scripture this is a great story in and of itself. It is filled with irony, with action, even with a bit of humor. It begins with an encounter between God and Samuel. Samuel is grieved by the downfall of Saul. He was both disappointed in the one with whom he had been close and saddened by his downfall. So what does God say to him?

You might think God would show some sympathy, give Samuel a little space. You might even expect God to commiserate, to share the disappointment and hurt for a while. But that is not what God did. ***“Boy, how long are you going to mope around here feeling sorry for yourself. What’s done is done. Now get up, grab some anointing oil and be on your way to Bethlehem. Look up Jesse when you get there and be prepared to anoint one of his sons to replace Saul.”***

Here we find another important and timely message. Like each of us, Samuel encountered challenges, disappointments, disillusionment and setbacks in life. We are guaranteed by the teachings of Christ that there will be struggles in each of our lives. In fact He assures us there will even be suffering if we are to be true to our faith. Richard Rohr writes, ***“If suffering is whenever we are not in control" (which is my definition), then you see why some form of suffering is absolutely necessary to teach us how to live beyond the illusion of control and to give that control back to God. Then we become usable instruments, because we can share our power with God's power.”***  That message is imbedded in God’s words to a grieving Samuel. It is not that God was unsympathetic. I am convinced that when we grieve, God grieves with us, that when we meet disappointment God has sympathy for our loss, that when we face abandonment by others God feels our pain. But such matters are, for the most part, beyond our control. And dwelling on them, particularly in a negative way, for too long is counterproductive and destructive. So God sends Samuel out on a new mission. That is what going on to perfection is all about, putting aside the past and all its hurts and disappointments and moving forward to be about the work God has for us to do right now.

There is an interesting discussion between Samuel and God. Well, it isn’t exactly a discussion. Having been given his marching orders, Samuel expresses doubt and fear. ***“I can’t do that. If Saul hears what I am up to there is no doubt that he will come after me and take me out.”*** And God replies, ***“And when you go, take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Once you get there I’ll show you what to do next.”***  It is as if God is ignoring Samuel. There are important life lessons for us here. Like Samuel we are often sent without being told what awaits when we arrive. And Like Samuel it is our mission to simply go even if we don’t have the answers to all our questions.

So Samuel goes. Scripture is short and sweet here. ***“Samuel did what the Lord commanded and came to Bethlehem.”*** I am certain that his reluctance, sadness and disappointment went with him, but he didn’t let them keep him from being about the work God had for him to do. When he arrived he followed God’s instructions. Knowing that they were being visited by one who had held a position of influence and power under the rule of Saul, the leaders of the town were understandably nervous. They feared that perhaps he was coming to make demands or worse, was being followed close behind by an invading army. But Samuel assured them that he came in peace. He then prepared the sacrifice, first making sure that Jesse and his sons had been ritually cleansed and would be in attendance. As Jesse and his sons arrived Samuel knew immediately who would be King. It would certainly be Eliab. He was the first born, the obvious choice under any rule of order. He was strong and handsome. So in his mind Samuel began to prepare to anoint Eliab. And God said, ***“Hold on there boy, it isn’t him.”***

Then God offers an explanation, which apparently Samuel didn’t truly heed. ***“Don’t just look on appearances, don’t simply follow tradition, that is all surface stull, which is what you mortals like to base everything on. But I am about what’s inside. I look on the heart when I choose folks.”*** When we read about the heart in the Old Testament we are being directed to the very core of our being. To Samuel and his contemporaries reference to the heart was reference to what we might call the soul. It was about character, about moral fiber, about substance. It has nothing to do with appearance.

So having been corrected by God, Samuel instructs Jesse to send up another son. I appears that Samuel and Jesse decided that if the first born was, for some unfathomable reason not to be king it must be the next oldest for sure. Of course they were wrong. But tradition still drove them and they went down the line by age and God told Samuel each time that he still didn’t get it right. Do you see the problem here? Again isn’t it often our problem. Even after God gave Samuel and Jesse a pretty clear explanation that God’s criteria was not like theirs they could not bring themselves to put aside tradition and their control of the situation. So one by one Jesse brought out his seven sons. And one by one they were deemed unfit.

So picture these two powerful men standing together scratching their heads. I imagine Samuel saying, ***‘I know I heard God right, I know one of your sons is to be king.”*** And I hear Jesse replying quite sincerely. ***“I believe you, but it just doesn’t make sense.”***  Then Samuel says, ***“We didn’t leave any of your boys out did we.” “No, we brought them all by for you to let God choose, well all but the youngest, he’s out in the field with the sheep. No way God would be making him a king, we barely even count him as a son.”***  Boom!

You may remember the rest of the story. David is fetched and David is chosen. He will not be a perfect King, far from it. But he will be used of God in spite of his failures, in spite of his standing on the mortal scale of things. And so will you if you will simply offer God whatever you have. I doesn’t have to be flashy, it doesn’t have to be impressive by mortal standards, it just has to be genuine and given from the heart. And when you offer it up, you will be a blessing and you will be blessed.

Jean Vanier was the founder of L’Arche. It is a wonderful world wide movement. Their website defines who they are this way*. “****We make explicit the dignity of every human being by building inclusive communities of faith and friendship where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together.”*** Vanier writes, ***“I do not have to pretend that I am better than others and that I have to win in all the competitions. It’s okay to be myself, just as I am, in my uniqueness. That, of course, is a very healing and liberating experience. I am allowed to be myself, with all my psychological and physical wounds, with all my limitations but with all my gifts too.”***

The L’Arche community gets it. We are all created and gifted by God. What defines us is not what folks see on the outside, but what we offer from inside. It is a matter of the heart, not cosmetics. And we learn from this morning’s rather strange scripture that God often chooses those everybody else has overlooked. I am convinced that God didn’t reject those other seven brothers. I am certain that God had plans for them, just not plans for them to be kings.

As we close this morning I proclaim to you the wonderful truth that we are all chosen by God, each of us for some unique place of service. We will not all be kings, but we will all be children of the creator of the universe and sisters and brothers of the Son. And whatever you have been gifted to do, spectacular or mundane, you will be blessed if you do it selflessly for the glory of God and for the benefit of God’s children. For your sake, for the sake of a needy world and for the sake of the kingdom of the One who calls you, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.