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Osler Mennonite Church

Anointing in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13 & Ephesians 5:8-14

Good Morning,

Our Reader's Theatre text today tells us the story of David's anointing, an unsuspecting little boy who gets plucked out by God and anointed with the Holy Spirit. The interesting thing about this story is that our protagonist is not the little boy David; it's Samuel. David isn't even named until the final anointing verse. It's the fulfillment of Samuel's calling that fills up most of our verses. Central to Old Testament anointing theology is the role of the prophet, who is God's agent to anoint, reject, or confirm.

This esteemed role in our story is the work of Samuel, who is not portrayed in a particularly flattering way in today's chapter. It begins by showing us that God has to rouse Samuel out of his immobilizing grief. He is an excellent Lenten figure, working through his own journey of despair and time in the 'wilderness'. Samuel is grieving God's rejection of Saul, whom Samuel first anointed as king. God has rejected Saul's ways and is looking forward to the care of the people, but Samuel is still dwelling on what might have been.

Our scripture is this back and forth dialogue between God and Samuel, where this prophet must be pulled along and specifically instructed every step of the way. Nevertheless, this is the prophet through which God has chosen to work, and the prophetic role is being honored even when the individual is not entirely effective. Samuel is not interested in moving on to the next king and is fearful about committing treason with Saul still in power. Even when he arrives in town, he is looking for the quickest answer, picking out Eliab immediately and saying "here we go, found one!"

Samuel is ready to go with society's predictable choice: the oldest Son. What's noteworthy about God's rejection is this coaching that Samuel must **“pay no attention to appearance and height; I have rejected him.”** Commentaries have noted that Eliab was likely similar to Saul at first glance, both are noted as tall and handsome. This insight gives us a double meaning in the words “I have rejected *him*.” The explicit message: that this is not the guy we came here for, and the underlying message, that Samuel needs to stop holding onto the image of Saul as king. Now we see Samuel start to truly listen to God, and one by one move through the brothers until David is brought forward.

One of the basic themes throughout the entire biblical story is that God finds possibilities for grace in the most unexpected places and through the most unlikely people. God has a habit of passing the oldest child and singling out a younger sibling with little prospects, and in them finds hope for the future of Israel. I think there is a danger in reading this theme too shallowly, taking this story as God plucking out the ‘diamonds in the rough’ and finding pure, noble people who society can't recognize. There is goodness in this message; too often we fail to look for possibilities of grace and hope beyond the traditional channels of power, influences and success. We ignore possibilities in those who are customarily absent from gatherings of power. But I think you've all heard that Disney story before, so lucky for you there are further teachings here.

The more interesting lesson confronts us when we hold the struggle of Samuel up with the anointing of David. Samuel is a great prophet, and a flawed, reluctant, begrudging prophet who does *not* want to move on from what he knows. And David is a young boy, but if you have read further in the biblical story you know that he is famously selfish and misuses his power to abuse and murder Bathsheba and Uriah respectively. And yet in our scripture

we are told that the spirit comes upon David as soon as he is anointed, and stays with him from that day forward. This is not only a story of looking past appearances, but of God looking right into **“the heart”** of these individuals, knowing their capacity for darkness and finding within them possibilities for grace. If the church is to both discern and to mediate God’s grace in the world, then it, too, must seek to look on the heart – to see as God sees. It must look beyond appearances of darkness in our lives in order to grapple with the concerns and address the needs of the human heart.

And here we turn to our Ephesians text. Ephesians is this unique letter because as far as we know it is not written to a particular crisis, and was likely written to be circulated as a general tool for teaching. These verses contain in them beautiful pieces of wisdom in our own moments of estrangement and self-doubt; when we struggle to believe that God can find possibilities for grace in us or the chaos of our surroundings. The text is set up in a baptismal or anointing format, “once you were this but now you are new.” Believers are called/anointed as being “Children of Light” and then they are told to live into this calling.

Verse 11 begins by saying **“take no part in deeds done in darkness.”** The language here is actually “do not co-participate,” meaning ‘do not share in the darkness of the world.’ It could be expected that believers are to turn their back on the darkness and separate themselves, proclaiming radical non-conformity is often reinforced with hostility towards those who do not meet the standards of righteousness and truth. But that’s not the calling here. In verses 13-14 there is a surprising twist, **“everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light.”** The call to not co-participate in darkness, is the same call to undo the darkness of this place and reconcile all people and things to be light. Light is the work of accountability *and* the work of transformation. When believers are

proclaimed “**children of light**” the word for “Children” is *tekna*, which is an inclusive term, an inviting term. To be anointed as children of light is to be given a life defined by participation in God’s comprehensive project of reclaiming creation and those who inhabit it.

The hymn/chant cried out in verse 14 “**awake o sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light**” is a wake-up call. It reminds us that we have been anointed in light, and now we are being told to live as children of light! It is the same push that Samuel received in our earlier text, you are here to anoint, so get out and do it. Being light is not some far off end goal for when we are all figured out and perfect. It is part of the wilderness journey of lent. It is the process of waking up to our anointing as Christian people and continuing to let go of the fruitless dwelling on darkness and to turn instead to the fruit of light.

The virtues named in verse 9 are phrased in a deliberately general way. There is no attempt to specify the positive obligations of Christian life; this means, the people have to constantly ask what conduct pleases God in every particular situation, to look at their context and work through what it means to be light here, in this place. It is the continual ‘turning’ of conversion, releasing our participation in the darkness of our society and seeking to transform darkness into light. It is the gentleness of offering this experience of light to those around us on the way.

All of our Lenten services have included a ritual of response. Today I invite you participate in an anointing, a blessing, to fill you with the presence of the Holy Spirit and the awareness that you are children of light. This ritual will take the form of a body prayer. It is very simple, you need only to sit back and receive. I invite you to follow my voice and partake as you feel comfortable. You are also welcome to simply sit back and bear witness to this time of blessing.

Ritual of Response

- First, I invite you to fidget, move around, squirm a little, and then come to settle into a place that feels comfortable to you.
- Now allow your eyes to find some rest, maybe you close your eyes, or focus on a Lenten candle, or a plant in your room. Whatever gives your eyes permission to slow down and discover some calm.
- Once you have settled in, notice yourself breathing in and breathing out. As you breath, I invite you to imagine a ball of light in front of you. A symbol of the Holy Spirit that is present in our scripture. Take time, create the form this light appears in, its color, its warmth, is it moving or steady.
- Allow this light to come towards you entering your feet. Imagine the Spirit's blessing moving over each toe, anointing you with light. Envision this light growing, moving up your ankles and calves. Soothing your knees and blessing your upper legs. Think of this light as the permission to know that you, too, are light. Breathing in, and breathing out.
- Envision your ball of light move into your torso, weaving between muscles and organs, filling your lungs with the breath of the holy spirit. Loosening some of the knots and tension in your chest and back. The Spirit filling up your body, just the way it is. You don't need to 'do' or 'be' anything, the spirit comes, it is already here, with you. Breath In, Breathe Out.
- Notice with wonder as this light moves through your fingertips and into your hands, feel the Spirit's promise of presence in all you do as your hands fill with light. Let this light flow up your arms, the stories they carry, the love they offer. Breathe in, breathe out.
- Finally let this light encompass your shoulders and neck, feel the Spirit's presence in whatever burdens you are carrying today. Imagine this light resting over your face, transforming your senses so that you may know the Spirit's presence in the world around you. Accept this anointing of the Holy Spirit, into your body. Breathe in, breath out. [Eph.5:8] "Live as children of Light" Amen.

Benediction

May the peace of the Holy Spirit be with you, where ever it may find you.
 May it guide you through this wilderness; protect you through the storm;
 May it bring you hope and wonder, in the moments it will show you.
 May it bring you home rejoicing, once again into our doors.