

Blessed Uncertainty

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

Psalm 23

Back in my days working at camp, we had staff training weeks four times each year. One of the many things I did were small group games. These were not games for entertainment, rather they were initiatives designed to promote things like team building or problem solving or self-reflection. They were fun, but they were never easy. One year we did a game called the Rope Maze.

At the time I had a wrangler nicknamed Tex. She was strong, smart, and extremely capable. She was also exceptionally independent and stubborn. The way the Rope Maze works is that participants are blindfolded. A rope is strung between trees to form a fairly large, enclosed space around the blindfolded participants who are then led to place a hand on the rope. They are told the objective is to find their way out of the maze by following the rope. If they cannot find their way out, they are told to raise a hand, ask for help, and assistance will be provided. They do not know that the rope frames an enclosed space with no way out. The goal is simply to have the participants get to the point of being willing to ask for help. But understand, this activity took place after a week of staff conquering these types of games teaching them to be tough, persevere, and lean into ingenuity.

I have had groups finish this exercise in under ten minutes. Tex's group took over an hour and a half. Everyone else on the rope asked for help within the first 20 minutes. Tex, however, was determined to be the one to figure it out. She could not bring herself to ask for help. Eventually she realized the only way to "win" was to relinquish her independent pride and accept help. It stung her pride to lift her hand for help, but she also recognized the power of the exercise. Strength and independence are pinnacle American virtues. They are valuable, to be sure. But, as Christians, our strength comes from our dependence on

Christ. When we refuse to allow ourselves to be led, when we refuse to admit that sometimes we are blind and maybe we don't have all the answers, we separate ourselves from our greatest source of strength.

This morning, we read Psalm 23; one of the most well-beloved texts in all of Scripture. It is considered such a profound source of strength that it regularly appears in funeral liturgies when grieving people are in most need of spiritual fortitude. This Psalm frames us as sheep following our shepherd. It indicates the source of our resilience and victory is our shepherd. When traversing uncertainty, even the very valley of the shadow of death, it is our shepherd who guides and protects us through it.

The thing about following this God of ours is that God doesn't tend to travel in straight lines. Trusting the shepherding heart of God can be tricky when the path makes no sense to us. Human thinking says the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but God is not interested in short distances or straight lines. Ask Samuel.

In today's reading we encounter a grieving Samuel. This man had been a prophet of God his entire life. He was there when God was still the only king over Israel, when the people were begging God for a human king like the other nations had, when God was warning the people of the dangers of kings. He was there when God finally gave into the people's insistence on being given a king. And Samuel himself, at God's instruction, was the one who anointed Saul to be the first king of Israel. He was also around for Saul's quick descent into prideful rebellion against God and the Israelite's inevitably resulting suffering. In chapter 15, God rejected Saul as king, and it is difficult for us to imagine how disillusioned Samuel must have been. The whole situation was heartbreaking and confusing. God was the one who picked Saul! You'd think the first guy picked by God to be king over God's own people, would have been better at it. Samuel had understood that Saul's dynasty would be a lasting one. His heart was invested in Saul's success. Samuel

did not yet know that God was more interested in teaching the nation about how to walk with God than merely providing them with the monarch they desired.

God's priorities tend to be different than ours; God sees beyond our limited view. So, when we meet Samuel in chapter 16, we can relate with his disorientation. The man is grieving, but God basically tells him to dust it off because they have work to do. God instructs him to fill his horn with oil so he can anoint a new king. The scene elicits the picture of a mom dragging her small child by the hand away from a dropped toy. Mom says, "we're going this way" while the child's entire focus and weight is pulling backwards towards the lost treasure. And even after Samuel gets on board with the plan and shows up at Jesse's house in Jerusalem, God doesn't select any of the sons standing before him. No, God wants the kid whose still out in the pasture with the sheep. Again, God is not interested in things being easy. - The treasure found in Samuel's story is that he allowed himself to trust God's leading, even when he couldn't see or understand God's plan. And God used him to anoint David, Jesus' great grandad, so one day Jesus could be our true and lasting king.

We are often blind to the bigger plans and purposes of God, but God still wants our participation. Which is why our humble willingness to trust God's leading is so essential to finding our strength. In John's gospel we hear the story of Jesus healing a man born blind. Allow me to let you in on a secret. Whenever Jesus heals blind people, it's never just about the blind person's physical eyesight. Jesus constantly used his ability to restore sight as a living metaphor highlighting spiritual blindness. In today's story, the pharisees were so sure they saw clearly that they were prevented from understanding what their own eyes were seeing in front of them. Whereas the blind man understood his limitations. He essentially raised his hand indicating he needed help getting out of the Rope Maze. His willingness to accept help made it possible for him to receive the ability to see.

Paul speaks of those who exist apart from the Lord's help as living in darkness. He pleads with his readers to live in the light. He frames enlightenment as the ongoing work of

discernment; of trusting God to teach us, of letting Christ's light shine on us. This need we have of Christ's light is because we live our earthly lives within the shadow of darkness. He warns that taking our cues from the world, because of its darkness, will only keep us tied to things that are doomed to fail. It is God who will remake this world, but we cannot see how to participate in that work apart from Christ's illumination. Paul invites us, through this ancient hymn, to awake, to follow Christ in the resurrected life, allowing Christ's light to illumine our minds to understand -and our hearts to follow the path ahead. That path may not be the one we would choose, it probably won't be easy, it may occasionally lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. And yet, when we are humble enough to seek guidance, Christ promises sight for our blindness and comfort on the way.

One of the things I love most about the stories of Jesus healing blind folks is that he's never offended by their blindness. Jesus is not surprised or bothered by their inability to see. We value strength and independence, but Jesus doesn't seem to. Jesus appreciates those who are willing to be dependent, to acknowledge their weakness, because it makes them able to receive God's strength. The disciples wanted to blame someone for this man's blindness, as if finding someone to blame was the goal. Jesus essentially blamed God. But rather than seeing it as a problem, Jesus saw it as a gift. That man's blindness opened the way for many to experience spiritual sight.

When life takes unexpected turns, when we feel lost, frustrated or confused, God stands ready to come to our aid. Rowan Williams, said "Faith is not certainty about God; it is trust in God in the presence of uncertainty."

May we be a people able to identify our limitations, willing to seek God's assistance, trusting God as we walk in the light of Christ.