

Seeing with Blind Eyes  
 1 SAMUEL 16:1, 6-13a  
 JOHN 9:1, 6b-11, 35-41

At the beginning of our first reading this morning,  
 the prophet Samuel is lamenting the turn his previous anointee has taken:

Saul, the first ever King of Israel, has become a political lame duck;  
 his time as ruler is coming to a close and he can't make much good happen from here on out.  
 Samuel may be saddened by the imminent regime-change,  
 but God refuses to relent in demanding new leadership.

With this as backdrop, God presses Samuel into service as the royal anointer once again:

"How long will you grieve over Saul?....  
 Fill your horn with oil and set out;  
 I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite,  
 for I have provided for myself a king among his sons".

With much hemming and hawing and reasons to avoid his mission,  
 Samuel finally agrees to cast God's vote on election day.

He comes to Jesse's house and has the 7 candidates make their campaign speeches;  
 and God rejects them all in favor of the write-in. The least likely.  
 Jesse hadn't even thought to bring his youngest son in from tending the sheep.

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I know I'm playing with the images a little, but it's hard to deny that this is where some of our thoughts tend to go during the week: to our upcoming election.

In fact, it's even harder to deny our connection to it all,  
 as this past week the IRS began an investigation into the United Church of Christ's  
 tax exempt status because long-time UCC-member Barack Obama spoke at our General Synod last June.

So this is on our *minds*, in our *hearts*, and therefore it becomes a part of our *faith* life.

Sort of like how politics was an inherent part of Samuel's relationship with God.

And like all of us, Samuel falls short. He doesn't quite get what God is telling him.

Despite God's caution to "not look upon [Jesse's son's] appearance...  
 for the HOLY ONE does not see as mortals see";  
 despite God's explanation that "[mortals] look on the outward appearance,  
 but the HOLY ONE looks on the heart";  
 despite this, Samuel continues to focus on looks.

He moves from the apparently gorgeous, tall, strong-seeming, oldest son Eliab  
 to David, who, despite God's caution, Samuel again sees with the eyes of mortals.

He just couldn't keep from celebrating the fact that  
 David "was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome".

It seems we're right back at the beginning.

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Seeing with the eyes of mortals is something we do every day.

We are all raised in a particular culture with particular expectations.

Samuel's culture told him that the oldest son was most important.

Not only that, but physical beauty and health indicated blessing from God.

We also see what we have been taught to see.

But over the years, our perceptions can change – our eyes begin to see with new vision –  
 call it visual evolution, perhaps.

Churches have a part in this, as do politics.

In 1785 a mainline Christian denomination finally ordained its first black minister: The Rev. Lemuel Haynes.

The Congregational church looked beyond the color of his skin to his heart.

In 1853, 68 years after Haynes' ordination, The Rev. Antoinette Brown was the first woman ordained to mainline ministry.

We continue to note these two "firsts" in our tradition with a sense of pride.

But only a few people were, at that point, able to look beyond the externals – gender and skin color – to their character.

It was another 80 years after Haynes' ordination – 32 years after his death – that the United States finally abolished slavery.

And Brown, although ordained, had too difficult a time finding a setting that would have her.

So she left the Congregational church for one where she could serve.

She died one year after women won the right to vote – fewer than a hundred years ago.

Our vision is still evolving.

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Glancing through the fullness of King David's story, we realize that his looks really shouldn't have amounted to much when compared with the fact that he was the 8<sup>th</sup>-born-branch on a very spotty family tree.

After all, his father "Jesse's grandmother was Ruth, an immigrant Moabite woman (Ruth 4:17).

His grandfather was Boaz, whose ancestors included

a Canaanite woman who was almost executed for adultery (Tamar, Genesis 38)

and a Canaanite prostitute from Jericho (Rahab, Joshua 2).

In the world's usual power arrangements, this would not be the stuff of royal lineage".<sup>i</sup>

I would venture that many of us also sometimes get caught up in looking for the familiar "stuff of royal lineage".

While it may seem old news, I continue to hear tidbits that tell me our country is still stuck on the external attributes of the African-American

the woman

and the Caucasian man

who are running for U.S. the presidency.

Whatever our political party, it's hard for us to stop looking at the exterior.

The media feeds our first impressions by offering a constant barrage of "facts" from both Republican and Democratic pundits:

*this person doesn't have enough experience, is too young;*

*this person is too old;*

*this person is too hard, too cold;*

*this person...you fill in the blank.*

Again, it's our cultural perceptions that rule us. We continue, as one biblical scholar states,

to "live in communities for which the **patterns** of power seek to become permanently entrenched.

Too often we fail to look for possibilities of grace and hope beyond the traditional channels of power, influence, and success. We ignore the possibilities in those who are customarily absent from the gatherings of power.

But in God's plans sometimes 'the last shall be first' (Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30), even an absent eighth son tending the sheep".<sup>ii</sup>

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In an op-ed piece for the New York Times, activist and author Gloria Steinem makes the observation that  
 “This country can no longer afford to choose our leaders from a talent pool limited by  
 sex, race, money, powerful fathers and paper degrees.”<sup>iii</sup>  
 These would be Samuel’s “outward appearances”,  
 not God’s parameters for heart or character-driven leadership.

And neither, I believe, can this country afford to deny our tendencies to see with the eyes of mortals.  
 No matter how hard we try,  
 we still SEE skin color  
     and gender  
         and age  
             and disability  
                 and wealth  
                     and weight  
                             and everything else we’ve been trained to view as significant  
                                 to a person’s potential.

Samuel shows us our folly, **and** reveals our tendency to carry on with it, to pretend that we see without bias.  
 But there is another option:

    we can choose to unabashedly bring into the light  
         our predilections,  
             our preferences and  
                 our prejudices.

*God knows they’re there. Only we seem to imagine otherwise.*

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The Gospel reading today tells the story of a man blind from birth to whom Jesus gives sight.

    The man’s neighbors see him,  
     but can’t quite tell if it’s him,  
     because his distinguishing attribute – his blindness – has been removed from him.

“The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask,

    ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’  
     Some were saying, ‘It is he.’  
     Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’  
     He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’”

They couldn’t equate the man they’d known with his new outward appearance.  
 Had they ever known him? Had they ever *seen* the man?

Would you know the person sitting beside you, if his or her exterior were suddenly changed?

    Do you know him by his height or by the cane he carries?

    Do you know her by her walk or her facial expressions?

What if those were changed – can you see the character behind all of that?

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The final verses of John’s reading show Jesus challenging the religious authorities.

    He tries to explain,

        “‘I came into this world ... so that those who do not see may see,  
         and those who do see may become blind.’

    Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him,

        ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’

    Jesus said to them,

        ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin.

        But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains”.

God knows our sight is flawed. Only we sometimes imagine otherwise.

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And yet there is hope that our sight is ever clearing – that visual evolution I mentioned.

Our ways of seeing external characteristics have changed so much already that we actually  
 HAVE a David-figure, 3 of them even,  
 who are viable candidates for our country's presidency,  
 and who, perhaps, could be collaborators for leadership in our world.

One is someone whose passion for social justice  
 for women and children, for young and old alike,  
 has kept her focused on healthcare-for-all  
 despite pushback and insult over many years;

one is someone whose audacious hope for unity amidst diversity  
 finds expression in his very own being;  
 and one is someone who tries to stand firm on his principles  
 while shunning the extremes of rhetorical fundamentalism.

Whatever our personal politics, we can celebrate that our mortal vision has evolved to acknowledge *character*  
 in the face of these three people's distinct physical appearances!

Whoever our nation eventually elects, we can honor the fact that, in this day and age,  
 we have leaders that we have never seen before.

We have people who represent of the overlooked child,  
 the one left in the pasture to tend sheep –  
 because who would ever have thought them able to get here?

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*We still have a way to go.*

Both of these readings today make us take a hard look at our own quiet prejudices.

We, as Christians, are called to bring them into the light.

God knows they're there.

But hope remains for us.

Because if the world had continued to look for leaders through the eyes of Samuel,  
 we would have missed the one whom we follow today.

Looking with the eyes of mortals – looking on the outward appearance –  
 we would have glossed over

a man, who the stories say,  
 was born in a common stable;  
 a man, who our tradition tells us,  
 Jerusalem on a lowly donkey;  
 a man, who our faith acknowledges,  
 endured capital punishment (death penalty by cross).

All outward appearances tell us that this man was nothing special – far from it.

But “the HOLY ONE does not see as mortals see...t  
 he HOLY ONE looks on the heart”.

May we learn to see through the eyes of the HOLY ONE. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II p. 1100.

<sup>ii</sup> p. 1100.

<sup>iii</sup> Gloria Steinem, *New York Times*, "Women are never front-runners", January 8, 2008.