1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 51:10-14
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Hearts that Look the Part

Decades have passed since the boy Samuel heard God calling in the night. Scripture tells us that God was with Samuel as he grew up and that "the word of Samuel came to all Israel."[1] Tensions flare between the people of ancient Israel and the Philistines, and the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred vessel holding the Ten Commandments is lost in battle and eventually recovered. Samuel assures the Israelites that God will deliver them from the Philistines if they repent from worshipping other gods and return to the one true God. They do and God does and there is a period of peace, with Samuel overseeing the people as a judge. Samuel installs his own sons as judges, and sadly, scripture tells us, those sons "took bribes and perverted justice."[2] The people grow weary and begin to demand a king, like their neighbors have. Neither Samuel nor God is in favor of this request. After all, the people already have God as their king. Through Samuel, God emphasizes that a human king will take and take and take some more. The people are not convinced, and God relents, and Saul, the most handsome man in Israel, who stands "head and shoulders above everyone else"—is anointed as Israel's first king. The people are pleased because Saul looks the part in their eyes. And after Saul deviates from what God intends on more than one occasion, God decides that it is time for a new king. [Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13]

The people get nervous when they see Samuel come their way. He is closely associated with Saul, and they are unsure what his arrival means for them. Samuel is a bit unnerved, too. After all, God has commissioned him to commit treason by anointing a new king while Saul still sits on the throne.

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[1] 1 Samuel 4:1, NRSVue
[2] 1 Samuel 8:3, NRSVue

God gives Samuel a promise, a plan, and a cover story, and Samuel heads to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the new leader of the people of Israel.

Jesse presents his strapping boys to Samuel, and Samuel assumes that the first, Eliab must be the one. After all, he looks the part. God overhears Samuel's thoughts and says,

> Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him, for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.[3]

Six other sons come and go, and not one of them has what God is looking for. Samuel then asks if Jesse has any other sons. Jesse shrugs and says there is one more, the youngest who is off tending the sheep. And of course, that youngest son is the one who has the heart God is looking for.

It's tempting to fill in the blanks and decide what exactly God sees in David's heart, but we aren't told, not here anyway, not in any explicit detail. We must hear the rest of the story to find the clues and piece them together. And even then, David is a bit of a puzzle. It's important to note that the heart plays a different role in Hebrew than our contemporary notion. For the writer of 1 Samuel and throughout the Old Testament, the heart is not about sentiment or emotion or even love. Instead, as scholar Kathryn Schifferdecker points out, the heart here refers to "the seat of wisdom, imagination, discernment, and reason."[4] In this boy David, God sees someone who is more than just another seat filler for the throne. Once again, God does not choose the first-born son or even the seventh-born. As Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message*, when asked if he has any other sons, Jesse refers to David as the runt. And it just so happens that the runt is in the field tending sheep. This detail would have

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[3] 1 Samuel 16:7, NRSVue

[4] https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/639-god-calls-david-oct-19-2025

captured the attention of the first hearers of the story. A king—or a good king—is understood to be a shepherd, one who tends and protects his flock, even at the cost of his own life. At an early age, David is already practiced at doing what a good and faithful king is called to do.

Like many of us, the original hearers of this text would know the fuller sweep of the David story. They know where this narrative is headed. They know that the shepherd boy does not remain a boy, nor does he shepherd his people perfectly. They know about his defeat of Goliath and his brilliance in battle, as well as his love of dancing and singing as he praised God with everything in his being. They also know about the ways he would fail as a faithful shepherd king, about the ways he does exactly what God warned the people a king would do, the ways David chooses to take and take and take some more, and the way he eventually lays claim to Bathsheba and has her dutiful soldier husband Uriah killed. And they know the familiar words of Psalm 51. They have heard in that psalm David's plea for a clean heart in the wake of being confronted about his egregious actions with Bathsheba and Uriah, which brings us back to the heart that God saw in the shepherd boy in Bethlehem.

Create in me a clean heart, the psalmist pleads. Of all the psalms attributed to David, it is this psalm that is tied most closely to him, and it gives us a window into what makes him tick. In this wretched moment when he is faced with how dramatically he has failed God and the people, David recognizes that he cannot give himself a fresh start. Only God can do that, and David does not make excuses or try to cajole God into giving him a pass. He knows that he has disobeyed God *and* that he is utterly reliant on God's mercy for his redemption, so he begs God for a new beginning. He pleads with God to hold him close and not to give up on him. With a washed-clean heart and a sustaining spirit, David declares that he will teach others God's ways. This is not a self-righteous pledge to wag his royal finger and straighten others out from on high; it is instead a humble and gratitude-filled promise from a

repentant sinner to tell his own story and to teach others about God's righteousness and God's mercy. Perhaps it is this kind of heart, this kind of wisdom, imagination, discernment, and reason that God wants sitting on the throne and tending to God's people. Perhaps this is why David looks the part in God's eyes.

We are three Sundays into our monthlong stewardship celebration when we are exploring what it means to build a house for God. We have talked about a house that stands on a foundation God's faithfulness. We have been reminded that a house for God has walls girded with God's justice and righteousness and doors flung open by God's mercy. And today I am struck by the notion that a house for God needs windows that let in the light and remind us of God's unearned and abundant grace.

In June I witnessed some of the freshly restored stained-glass windows of Chartres cathedral. The artistry of these masterpieces is unmatched, and it was a rare gift to see the colors up close—especially the unique Chartres blue—as they sparkle just as they did when they were first installed centuries ago. They are stunning. And I found that I missed the simple beauty of our clear windows. I like to see the leaves changing or even the rain falling outside while we worship in here. I also love the transparency they offer between us and the larger world, because I am convinced that transparency and humility and integrity and honesty are crucial to our being faithful to the God who is always faithful to us. We may not be called to be king like David was, we are however called to be a royal priesthood, serving and loving in the name of our one true king, Jesus Christ. [5] Like David, we are not perfect, we repeatedly fall short of all that God intends, ***and*** we are beloved by God, always. If someone were to scale the walls and peek inside, I pray that is the kind of community they see; if neighbors walk up the

[5] 1 Peter 2:9, NRSVue: "But you are a chosen people, a **royal priesthood**, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

steps and venture into this light-filled space, I pray that is the kind of community they experience. And when God looks through these windows and into our hearts as we live and move and have our being in here and out in the rest of God's world, I pray that God finds a people who look the part of a humble, grateful, joyful, and faithful community in our hearts, and that God sees people who embody what it means to be God's beloved ones in God's own eyes. I pray that God continues to create clean hearts in us, that God continues to restore willing spirits within us, and that God continues to empower us with courage and humility to teach and tell of God's gracious saving ways so that others might find their way home to God, just as we have.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.