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“Making the Best of a Bad Situation: Our Freedom, God’s Power”

1 Samuel 15:35-16:13

Read the scripture online (NSRV): <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=206611676>

Author Roald Dahl is best known as the author of children’s book classics such as *James and the Giant Peach* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. But family tragedy brought out another side of Dahl that sparked his creativity in the medical field, too. In December of 1960, a taxi cab struck the carriage carrying his infant son, Theo, whose nanny had taken him on a stroll through Manhattan with his sister and the family dog. Young Theo survived the accident, and after surgery to relieve pressure and remove fluid from his brain, he was home within weeks. But Theo’s recovery was not yet over. Repeatedly, fluid would build up on his brain, and a valve was placed in his brain to drain the fluid to his heart where it could be reabsorbed. But the valve would frequently become blocked, causing Theo to lose his sight each time. Dahl was not one to sit back and do nothing. He abandoned writing and teamed up with two men, a pediatric neurosurgeon named Till, and a toymaker named Wade whose specialty was the design of model airplane engines with a hydrolic pump that never blocked. Together they developed the Dahl-Wade-Till valve, which was fitted for its first patient, a one-year-old child, in May of 1962. Theo was well on his way to recovery by the time the valve was ready, and never needed to use it. But this valve helped more than 3,000 children before more advanced technology replaced it.¹

Of Dahl, Peter Lennon said: “It cannot be said that the series of misfortunes and tragedies Dahl was to suffer made him more bitter. Loss and physical adversity seemed to stimulate his enormous energies to positive action. He fought misfortune as if it was a dragon to be slain.”²

The same can be said of many who have faced adversity with the courage and conviction to not let tragedy have the final say: Cindy Lightner who founded MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) after her own daughter was tragically killed; Nancy G. Brinker founded the Susan G. Komen foundation in memory of her sister and has been working to raise funds and awareness to fight breast cancer for more than twenty-five years. The list goes on of those who in the face of adversity make the most of a bad situation and bring about something new.

Our text for this morning picks up in the middle of a bad situation. As we learned last week, the Israelites cried out for a king to lead them. And although God warned them, through Samuel, that such a king would wreak havoc on their nation, they wanted a king like other nations. And, so, God appoints Saul to lead them. Yet Saul had disobeyed God’s commands when in battle against the Amalekites. His failure to follow God’s will

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/biographyandmemoirreviews/7930233/Roald-Dahls-darkest-hour.html>

² www.roalddahl.com.



was so egregious in God's sight that Samuel broke all ties to Saul. The opening verse of our text even tells us that God *grieves* having ever appointed Saul king.

And so in the midst of a very bad situation, God introduces Plan B. Even though Saul is still king, God tells Samuel that God has identified another to be king, one of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem. Even though Samuel is discouraged, God enlists Samuel's help again, ordering him to go to Bethlehem and find this son and anoint him with oil. Samuel, worn and afraid, mentions that if Saul finds out what is going on, he'll have Samuel killed. And so God creates a way for him to go. So we read the story of Samuel's journey to Bethlehem, his meeting with Jesse, and his introduction to Jesse's sons. Even though Saul finds merit in the older sons' appearance, he is told that they are not to be king. God's favor falls upon Jesse's youngest, a shepherd boy named David. He is young and small, but God knows his heart. So Samuel obeys, and anoints David to be king.

It is a familiar story to us, this anointing of David. We see God, true to form, choosing the weak to shame the strong, the young to shame the old, the poor to shame the rich. We see one of God's great reversals in action, even as Saul continues his reign as king. God's anointing has now fallen upon Saul's successor, a young shepherd boy who will soon be called away from the field to play harp in Saul's court, the only medicine that can soothe away the anxious fears that arise within him. We see God's call upon David well before he is actually king. We know that God has a plan and is preparing him for it, as we hope that God does with us.

What is intriguing about this text is that we see God engage in human history in terms we understand. Yes, we may make movies about God who allows Moses to part the Red Sea, or who compels Noah to build an ark. But we are, in our own lives, more accustomed to a God who works through God's relationship with creation, who cares about us, and knows where to find us. We are more familiar with a God who calls to us in quiet prayerful conversation and through the anointing of others than a God who moves mountains and waters. We *know* a God whose call commands a response in order for God's will to take hold of our lives. We see a God who intervenes in human history, but likewise we see that God's intervention is dependent upon and even limited by human freedom. We've seen it all through the story, and we see it in our lives: Our prayer for healing often requires that we also seek medical attention; our prayer for a vocation may mean that we work hard through a program of education to have the skills for our call; our prayer to be freed from addiction requires our participation in a rehabilitation program. The list goes on.

An old parable tells the story of a man who climbs to the roof of his house as the floods roll in. He prays that God will save him. In a short while, a rescue team on a fire truck comes along, but he sends them away saying, "It's OK, God will rescue me." He prays again, and a rescue team on a boat comes along; but, he sends them away saying, "It's OK, God will rescue me." He prays again and a rescue team on a helicopter comes along, lowering a ladder to him, but again he sends them away saying, "It's OK, God will



rescue me.” He drowned. When he arrived at the Pearly Gates, he asked God why God didn’t rescue me. God answered: “Who do you think sent the fire truck, boat and helicopter?”

God’s call requires our action. God’s plan requires our partnership. God’s initiative requires our agency so that we can give God’s will hands and feet and voice in this world.

In our text for today, God and Samuel are partners in ministry, their partnership founded upon mutual love and trust. God is the initiator and inspiration of change; Samuel is God’s agent. God wills a new possibility, creating a plan, but Samuel must act. God and Samuel set about making the best of a bad situation together: God communicates God’s will and Samuel listens. God guides and Samuel follows. God’s will comes to life, but through the obedience and action of Samuel.

God’s will is played out in the realm of the creation that God made, a creation infused with the gift of free will. God’s interaction with humanity plays out on a stage dressed with human cultural norms, personal fears, and hopes; the opportunity for creation to say yes, and the possibility of creation saying “no” to God’s call. Even when the stage is dressed with the backdrop of human sin and fear, God continues to plant the seed for all that is necessary for creation to experience a fullness of life, and then invites us to nurture that seed into fruition through acts of faithfulness, obedience and hope.

It is just like God to be working in some hidden area of our lives, nurturing an alternative (and sometimes subversive) possibility when we think we have it all figured out—or even when we feel like life is completely out of control. But Scripture and experience continue to tell us that nothing in our lives is outside of God’s reach. Even in the moments when we make a royal mess of things, God takes what is and then starts creating: possibility, opportunity, new life.

But God’s initiative seldom breaks into our lives as we sometimes wish, through immediate intervention that we can just sit back and watch as if we have found a magic lamp and been able to make three wishes. Our prayers for peace, for healing, for forgiveness usually require our participation.

Like Samuel, we need to be willing to see the trouble around us and even acknowledge the trouble we have caused. Then we need to be open to God’s call, receptive to God’s vision for the future, and willing to act according to God’s will.

Thomas Merton writes. “Our free acts must not only have a purpose, they must have the right purpose.”³ The discipline of faith, then, is to discern God’s purpose for us, in us and through us.

³ Merton, Thomas. *No Man is an Island*. P 29.



Samuel is the character in this story who is ever searching out God's will; who is open to God's will when it looks nothing like he expects. God works through Samuel's openheartedness, even when that same heart has been wounded and discouraged by Saul's actions. We, too, are invited to a similar openheartedness and open sightedness so that we might recognize God's will in our midst, and then to trust in God's will that we may have courage to obey.

Yet this is nowhere near as easy as it sounds. Like Samuel we sometimes see an opportunity that is so eye-catching we're sure it is what God wants for us, and we venture down the path of pursuing the wrong thing. Or sometimes we have been so conditioned by the culture around us that we are suspicious of God's plan when it comes to us in different packaging. We lose confidence in our ability to follow because we forget it is God who is with us.

But if we stop and listen we might hear God say, "No. This isn't my hope for you, this isn't my plan. Wait for it. You might not be able to see it right now, but it is here, within reach, just around the corner. Remember, I'm with you always."

If we stop and listen, we just might be able to hear the will of God, in the face of great hope, and even in the midst of great frustration. We might be encouraged so that we can step out in faith, even when we know that God's plan will bear fruit in the distant (and not-so-immediate) future.

We are called to deepen our relationship with God, to recognize that God is the central love of our lives, so that we trust that we are indeed made complete in God. Merton goes on to say: "I do not find in myself the power to be happy merely by doing what I like. On the contrary, if I do nothing except that which pleases my own fancy I will be miserable almost all the time ... I can only be perfectly free by serving the will of God."⁴

Serving the will of God requires our willingness:

- To listen
- To be genuinely open to God's will
- To take the risk to respond to God's call
- To nurture the small seeds of God's kingdom that we know will bear fruit; even if we have to wait, even if we have no clue how God will make a shepherd boy a king.

⁴ Ibid 25-26.



Then we have to be willing to step out in faith, like we did today as we participated in Abby's and Max's baptisms, a sacrament that reminds us that God's own are claimed as water is poured over their heads. We don't yet know what God will do through Abby or Max, how God will nurture their gifts and call them to serve. We don't know what fruit they will bear in their lives, who they will love, what a difference they will make to God's glory. But this baptismal act, this anointing, comes with the assurance that God is with them, that God will be at work in their lives; that God has redeemed them in Jesus Christ and by the power of God's Spirit God will bear fruit in and through them.

So it is with us. God has claimed us, too. God is at work in this world. God is at work in us. Listen. God is calling.

Thanks be to God.

