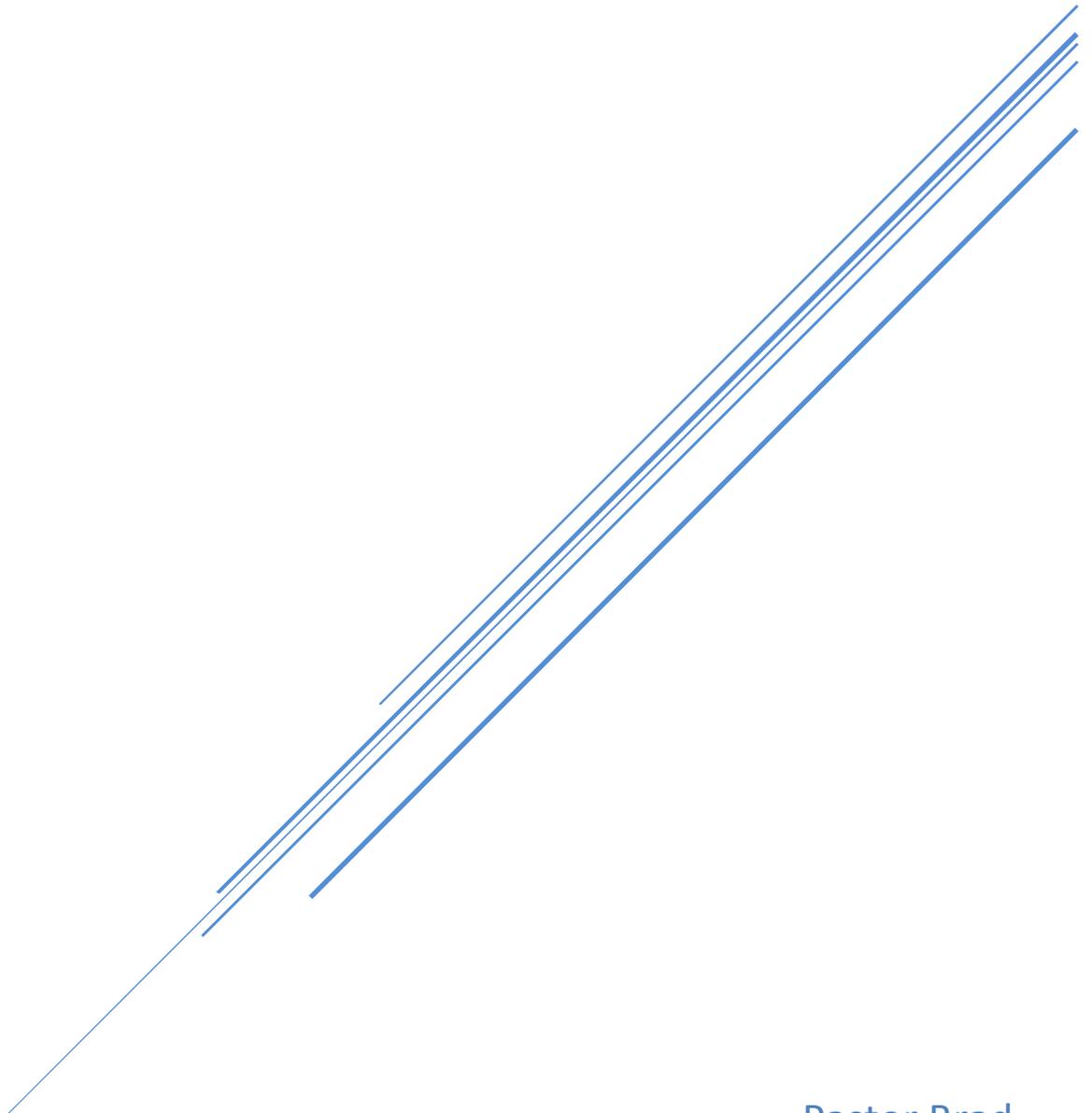


LOOK FOR THE SHEPHERD

1 Samuel 16:1-13



Pastor Brad
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This week we continue our series Called “Looking for love in all the Wrong Places.” All too often we look for security in powerful figures – certain that they can ‘fix’ things for us. Well, it wasn’t any different for the people of the Old and New testaments. They were looking for Kings, Saviors -- Liberators who would offer peace and security in uncertain times. And they often looked in all the wrong places.

The story of Samuel looking for God’s appointed ruler among the sons of Jesse is a case in point. The youngest, a ‘ruddy’ boy out taking care of the sheep turns out to be the one. And we know that the Pharisees never believed that this troublemaker, this rule-breaker named Jesus could possibly be the One, the Son of God and Savior.

In this story today we hear the origins of one of the most famous shepherd-boys-made-good in the history of the western world. This is the first we hear of David, the greatest King that Israel had ever known. But I don’t want to talk about David. I want to talk about Samuel. It occurs to me that maybe it’s not necessarily about where we look, or what we think we’re looking for, but it’s really about the looking itself, and how we see things. Can we see things with our earthly eyes the way God sees things?

I recently read a story about the most remarkable restaurant. It seems you can have one of the most unforgettable dining experiences of your life at the Nalaga’at Center in Jaffa in Tel Aviv, Israel. The Nalaga’at Center fosters engagement between the deaf and blind community with the greater public through artistic and cultural experience. Among the various activities at the Center, they run the Blackout Restaurant, which is completely staffed by visually impaired service workers. They open the restaurant in pitch black darkness, and allow seeing people to experience the complexity of a meal from the standpoint of the blind. That sounds so cool!

Rave reviews of the food aside, one of the striking observations from those who experience the Blackout Restaurant is the way that the loss of sight allows for one to experience food in completely new ways. Imagine - without the crutch of vision -- textures, flavors and temperatures all seem to be enhanced. It’s amazing how the intentional restriction of sight can change the entire dining experience. (My guess is that Sue could enlighten us a bit about that!)

I tell that story because maybe something similar is going on here. This is a story about seeing without eyes. Seeing without the lenses through which we all use to look at what’s around us - the lenses of our own upbringing and the traditions and dogma that we’ve all grown up with.

Now Samuel had been around for a while. Samuel was the prophet – or ‘seer’ which is kind of funny -- when the system of Judges proved ineffective and the people of Israel were begging for king, “so that we may be like other nations!” So God led Samuel to Saul to anoint

him as David's predecessor, and the first king of Israel. And apparently Saul was quite a looker! We can't blame Samuel for his lack of vision with David. Saul, as inaugural king over Israel perfectly fit the typical characteristics of an ancient near eastern ruler – tall, handsome, strong, and popular. In fact, 1 Samuel 9 says this about Saul: "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people."

I saw an article in Business Insider that said, "Studies show that being gifted with beauty and sex appeal may help job candidates land an offer or even a bigger paycheck, asking the question - Does attractiveness also make people more influential, giving them a direct path to leadership?"

Stanford law professor Deborah Rhode, in research for her book ["The Beauty Bias,"] found that attractive students are considered smarter, nice-looking teachers get better reviews, appealing workers make more money, and good-looking politicians get more votes. Researchers have even found that when attractive people ask strangers to do them a favor, they are more likely to grant the request. I'm sure that doesn't surprise anyone. We knew that, it's just that now there are actual studies to prove it.

The article also states however, that beauty may give you a leg up on the competition ...it's still no silver bullet. "Attractiveness has a very immediate effect, but it will wear off once you start to see the other signals the person gives." In other words, a nice face will not make up for incompetence. That's kind of what happened to Saul.

Scripture tells us that before Saul's rise to greatness he was quite humble, despite his remarkable attractiveness, but humility gave way to disobedience and Saul loses favor with God. And Samuel never really got over Saul's fall from grace.

The very last line of the previous chapter we read: "Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel." – Which opens up a whole 'nother can of theological worms: God has regrets?

So God tries to get Samuel out of his funk. "How long will you grieve over Saul?" It seems God understands but still calls Samuel to get up and go do something! Which is exactly what you need to do when you're down.

Samuel admits his very real and understandable fear that Saul would most likely kill him, so God gives Samuel specific instructions on just how to get around Saul, and Samuel responds the way we all should, of course, "[He] did what the Lord commanded."

So Jesse brings all his sons out for what seems like some kind of terrible audition, right? I think we can assume that Jesse and Samuel had talked so Jesse knew what was going on. We don't know if the sons knew anything or not.

That's probably why he doesn't bring out all his sons. This is just like the story of Cinderella, the little one isn't even considered. And whose fault is that? It's not David's fault – it's simply how people look at things – through the lenses of personal experiences and the social constructs of history and tradition.

Jesse's eldest boy Eliab is paraded in front of Samuel and God immediately tells Samuel ““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.”

The audition continues, the sons may or may not know what's going on, and Jesse is probably getting a bit fidgety as each of his fine-looking boys is rejected one after another. The passage itself seems to imply that it was rather quick and ruthless doesn't it?

Nope, nope, not him, nope, huh-uh, no, and no. Got any others?

And Jesse seems a bit reluctant doesn't he? – Like Cinderella's stepmother – “Got any daughters that might fit this shoe?” “Got any sons that might fit this anointing?” Cinderella and David aren't even considered until the parent is pushed. Think about it. They don't even enter their minds!

The wicked stepmother says “Well, there is Cinderella but she's working and she's dirty and ugly...”

And Jesse says, “Well, I do have one other son, but he's just a boy, you know, and he's little and kind of smelly – he's a shepherd.” So David is summoned.

David is still a boy, he's small, he's just a shepherd, but he's the one, Samuel is finally following the heart of God. He's closed his earthly eyes and he sees with his heart – which seems to be the same as listening... to God. David, the shepherd boy, is anointed with great ceremony, and right in front of his undoubtedly baffled brothers.

Time and again Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd to teach us how we ought to love and care for each other. What is it about shepherds? The shepherd does what is needed when it is needed, regardless of the rules.

Shepherds in the Old Testament period were responsible for the well-being of their animals, and if necessary they were expected to give their lives for them. Such men spent the majority of their time away from their families, leading their flocks and herds from one patch of

grasslands to the next. As loners they came to be viewed, by the New Testament period at least, as peculiar. They were unclean according to the rules of the Jewish faith. On the social scale they were very near the bottom, which makes the angel's appearance to the shepherds at Christmas even more remarkable.

But what is it that God wants us to know about shepherds? What are we to see in them? Psalm 23 gives us a terrific idea of the Shepherd's tasks. And this summer I want to do an in depth series on this psalm. No fear, no anxiety, no want. The shepherd's very presence is a comfort to those following him.

I wonder how much our own blindness – our earthly eyes -- blinds us to God's wishes and prevents us from really experiencing the abundance of God's intent. Like Samuel can we somehow look beyond what we see with our earthly eyes and see what God sees? When we look for safety and security, love, can we see beyond physical attributes? Can we see that the shepherd is much more than just a dirty loner that smells like livestock?

Sometimes I think that an occasional blindness can remind us how the gift of sight can actually prevent us from seeing. Of course we don't have to go all the way to the Nalaga'at Center in Tel Aviv. It's much easier than that. Instead 1 Samuel 16 shows us that all we have to do is intentionally close our eyes and listen in order to really see.