

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 13, 2021 (Proper 6, Year B)

There's some crazy statistic about how tall US presidents have traditionally been versus the general population. Height seems to matter when it comes to political success and, in fact, only six American presidents have been shorter than the average American male, the last one being Jimmy Carter, 40 years ago. And, while I obviously won't be running for President any time soon, I *have* taken to telling people who have started worshipping with us online over the past year that I am much taller in person.

But height and physical appearance, even in our supposedly enlightened age, makes a difference. Not just in politics but, studies show, in earning potential and job advancement and dating and happiness and even life span. As a society we continue to be enamored with and reward what we perceive as strong physical traits, equating them with character and leadership. Which is why there are an awful lot of really attractive mediocre leaders out there. And, no, the church is not exempt from this phenomenon. With a dash of patriarchy thrown in for good measure.

I bring this up because the exact same dynamic was at work in Biblical times. We see this in our reading from First Samuel about the anointing of David as the future king of Israel. 3,000 years ago, God was in the market for a new king. The first one, Saul, had been a terrible disappointment. And so God tells the prophet Samuel to go to Bethlehem, find Jesse — a prosperous and well-respected man — and anoint one of his sons. Which was a rather awkward and dangerous mission since, well, Saul was still the king.

And at first Samuel makes the same mistake we so often do. He takes a look at the eldest of Jesse's sons, a strapping young man named Eliab, and the guy just exudes royalty. I always picture one of those Disney princes. Tall, with a well-defined jawline, a deep voice dripping with self-confidence and decisiveness. A firm handshake, certainly. Eliab simply *looked* like a natural born leader which, on a superficial level, is often half the battle.

And it's not just his good looks. Eliab is Jesse's first born son. And by tradition, the eldest son was the favored one. He got the lion's share of the inheritance, the respect, and the family business. Birth order in Biblical times wasn't just a conversation starter, it mattered. It's why the story of Jacob and Esau and the stealing of Esau's birthright as the first born son was such a radical and controversial breaking with tradition.

And Samuel must have thought to himself, 'Well this is easy enough. Surely this is the new king God is looking for. Let's just get this over with so I can get back home.' But God, reading Samuel's mind, reminds him that looks can be deceiving. "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." Which is why that prayer we often say at the start of our services, known as the Collect for Purity, is so compelling: "To you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid." Yes, God looks upon the heart, rather than outward appearances. Which is both wonderfully comforting — God can see what's in our heart — and incredibly disconcerting — God can see what's in our heart?!

So, after that first impression goes awry, Samuel realizes that what seemed like an easy enough task, will actually be a lot more difficult than he had first imagined. And he ends up observing and then having God reject all seven of Jesse's sons. None of them get the rose, to use a Bachelor analogy.

But fortunately there's an eighth son. David. The youngest. He's so insignificant in the lineage of his own family that he's a literal afterthought. After running through and rejecting the first seven sons, Samuel has to ask Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" It's as if he knows Jesse's holding one back. And it's not because he's trying to protect or hide or shield David. The young shepherd boy is out tending Jesse's sheep. He's busy doing his father's and his family's dirty work. Jesse didn't even bother bringing David before Samuel because, well, he was young and scrawny and certainly didn't look like a king. Or act like one. Wandering around with his harp, singing songs to the flock, idling away his time by messing around with his slingshot. Surely, this one can't be the next king. The whole concept is absurd.

But, of course, David *was* the one. "For the Lord does not see as mortals see." The Lord does not look on outward appearances; "the Lord looks on the heart."

And it's telling that one of the great kings of Israel comes not from the traditional centers of power and authority, but from society's margins; from the periphery, the edges. By human standards, he wasn't even a consideration. By any reasonable norms of the day, when it came to power and privilege, David was bound to be on the outside looking in. But through David's elevation, we begin to see that what matters to God is not grandeur and proud boasts, but humility and a kind heart. It's not about the external trappings of power, but the internal stirrings of a compassionate and loving heart. That's what God values, even if humanity rarely recognizes or honors these qualities publicly.

And we see in this story some foreshadowing of the kingship of Jesus. God's son enters the world not from some grand palace, but through a humble stable. He's not born into the elite ruling class, but into a family with little means and even less public stature. He is, however, born of the House of David. You've perhaps heard that expression on Christmas Eve. And it refers to the fact that Jesus was born into the Davidic line, of Jesse's stem as the saying goes. And, yes, that's this Jesse, the father of the young shepherd boy who would become the great King David.

So what does this reveal about God that David is chosen as God's anointed one? He's the youngest son, he's small in stature, insignificant. It all kind of sounds like the familiar parable of the mustard seed, which is embedded in our gospel reading this morning. From the tiny mustard seed comes forth not some massive, imposing, powerful tree like you'd find in the Redwood Forest. But the kind of large shrub you might find in your backyard. A small tree large or a large shrub big enough for birds to nest in. The tiniest seed sows life and a place for further nesting and nurturing. And I find that to be both a beautiful image and a revelation of God's hopes and desires for each one of us. God desires for us to be loved and nurtured and set free through the humble beginnings but mighty and loving message of Jesus Christ. Allow God to gaze upon your heart; and through the story of the anointing of David and the birth of Jesus, allow yourself in return to gaze upon the very heart of God.