

CASKET EMPTY

Part 4 – Kings

I Samuel 16:1-13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 22, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. 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.”

²Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’” ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” ⁵He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.” ⁷But the LORD said to 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.” ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” ¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” ¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” ¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah. (I Samuel 16:1-13, NRSV)

This fall we are walking through the story of the Bible with the help of an acronym developed by our Fall Retreat speaker, Carol Kaminski: CASKET EMPTY. The word CASKET outlines the story of the Old Testament, moving from Creation, to Abraham, to Sinai, to Kings, to Exile, to Temple. The word reminds us that because of our failure to trust God, humanity has cut ourselves off from God and the life that God created for us in this world. The word EMPTY, however, a word of resurrection hope, then outlines the story as it continues in the New Testament, from Expectation, to Messiah, to Pentecost, to Teaching, and finally ending with Yet-to-Come.

You see, the Bible is not a collection of stories, but one continuous redemptive story from Creation on through to Yet-to-Come, from Casket to Empty, a story that continues on today and, once understood, makes sense of everything we see and know. In our journey through this story so far, Creation first reminded us that the Lord alone is the abundant, generous creator of all there is, but that human rebellion has corrupted that creation. With Abraham, however, we see that God’s plan to redeem the world begin to take shape through this childless old man and his wife God promised to bless so that their family, one day, would bless every family on earth. At Sinai we watched God give the law to this chosen and now greatly expanded family of Abraham after God used Moses to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. When they respond by giving their worship instead to idols we see the defining truth of humanity revealed, that by nature we always turn and worship the creation rather than our Creator. Even in the face of such blatant rebellion, however, the Lord responds in grace, demonstrating again that the defining truth of the Lord is that he is, by nature, slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiveness.

Today we pick up from where we left off at Mount Sinai. As the story continues, the Lord does eventually lead his people, the Israelites, through the Sinai wilderness and establishes them in the land beyond the Jordan River which he had long before promised their forefather Abraham. Once in the land, however, the people ask God for a king. Every other nation in the neighborhood has a king and so we want a king too! They already have a king, of course. The Lord is their king. But they don’t want to be governed by the Lord



for, again, the hearts of people always cling to a desire to worship the creation rather than the Creator. Even though he knows it will not turn out well for anybody, God gives them the king they beg for.¹

It doesn't turn out well. A man named Saul was their first king. He looked like a king, a stunning physical specimen of a man, and yet he wastes little time demonstrating that he intends to do things his way instead of God's way. Again, it's the heart of the problem. If God is King, it's his kingdom and his will which reign supreme. But Saul wanted to call the shots, to have a kingdom where he did things his way. And it's the same, really, with all of us. Though you and I may rule over much smaller "kingdoms" by comparison, in the parts of this world and life that we can influence, we want to be in charge, kings and queens of our own little castles.

So one day – and this is where we pick up in the text today – the Lord sends the old prophet Samuel out to anoint a new king to replace Saul. He sends him to Bethlehem, a city which would later become famous for another reason. But Samuel doesn't want to go. For one, he is brokenhearted over the demise of a monarchy that began with such promise. On top of that, he's worried about Israel's fate. But God sends him anyway, reminding him that the true King has not lost control over his Kingdom. God has a plan. God always has a plan.

But Samuel isn't just brokenhearted, he's also afraid. You see, just prior to this, God had sent him to confront King Saul and with news that the Lord's favor no longer rests on him as king.² So naturally, Samuel is afraid that if Saul gets word that he has now gone out on a scavenger hunt for a new king, there will be a price on Samuel's head. It's one thing to campaign for new leadership in a democracy, but quite another thing to do so in a monarchy. But if you think about it, Samuel's fear actually demonstrates a profound lack of faith on his part, as if God is going to affirm Samuel's fear and respond, "Oh, you're right. We should be careful here. Saul is very powerful. We don't want to make him mad. Hold up, Samuel, and give me some time to think of a plan B." No, how can Samuel even imagine Saul is the one in charge here? Who really is king? And yet, the Lord, true to character, is gracious, slow to anger, full of compassion.

"Take a heifer with you, [Samuel,] and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Not only does the Lord provide some incognito for Samuel to ease his

fears, but he's also thinking ahead to the people of Bethlehem and how afraid they will be when they see the great prophet Samuel strolling into town. In those days, you see, prophets almost always showed up to deliver news of God's judgment. It's like the police officer knocking at your door in the middle of the night. He's not coming to bring you good news. But with the heifer by his side, Samuel can announce, to the collective relief of the town, that he was merely coming to offer a sacrifice.

Well, when Samuel arrives he prepares the sacrifice and invites the village to join him, making especially sure to invite a man named Jesse and his sons. According to the Lord, one of these sons of Jesse was to be made king. When Jesse and his boys show up it becomes immediately clear to Samuel which one has the mark of a king. The oldest, Eliab, is a stud. 6'2". 225 pounds of pure muscle. All-star. All-state. Top of his class. A warrior who also has excellent taste in fine wines and fine food. An officer and a gentleman. His middle name was "Future". Yes, Samuel thought to himself, this one is going to be a fabulous king.

But the Lord said to 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." But let's not be too hard on Samuel. Isn't this our way? Is it not our tendency to look to ourselves for salvation, imaging that it is something in *us* that can set things right in the world. We look to human strength and goodness, to creative ideas, to good old-fashioned effort, to material wealth, to improved technology, to political leaders and policies. Like Samuel, we don't trust the kingdom to the King.

Does any of us really think God actually *needed* a big, strong, gifted, young man like Eliab to accomplish his purposes? Absolutely not! God could give the throne to a frog and accomplish just as much. You see, God doesn't need us to carry out his will. *God does not need you. Me either.* And I hope that comes as good news! Imagine finding out that God is, in the end, dependent on you and me to make things work out in this world, that it's up to us. Imagine the pressure!

We like to make everything in this world about us and our tendency to do so is absolutely suffocating us. So don't ever let anybody tell you the terrible news that God needs you. He doesn't *need* you. And yet, by his grace and compassion – that's who God is! – the Lord chooses to use us anyway, invites us to join him in his story of redemption. Like a loving mother who doesn't really need her daughter's help baking cookies, but

¹ Read this story in I Samuel 8

² See I Samuel 10:15-35

invites her to climb up the step stool and help her anyway, even though flour and sugar end up everywhere, and the whole process is now going to take a whole lot longer than it needs to, God invites us to join him in his work if we are willing to do so.

That's what the Lord wants Samuel to look for, a willing heart, no matter what sort of body it's walking around in. The problem is that not a one of Jesse's sons has such a heart. One through seven, impressive wrapping paper but nothing inside the box. But Samuel, perhaps showing that's he's learning his lesson here, questions Jesse this time instead of the Lord. "Somebody must be missing, right? Are all your boys here? They can't all be here because God said one of *your boys* has the heart the Lord is looking for in his next king."

"Well," Jesse says, "there's the runt. But he's out in the fields watching the sheep." Any youngest brothers or sisters here? Are you relating to this part of the story? It's unbelievable, really. David is virtually a nonentity in his family, an afterthought at best. It never occurred to Jesse that this scrawny kid of his would be good for anything other than menial farm work. And I shudder to think how many times I've looked right past people I never imagined God would use in powerful ways because I, just like Samuel and Jesse, struggle to trust the kingdom to the King.

So while everybody stands in place, the sacrifice on hold, somebody runs off to get David. When he shows up we're told that he's actually quite good looking himself, which is perhaps a corrective to keep us from thinking that God *only* uses unimpressive people to do his work. Again, it's got nothing to do with the external and everything to do with the heart. And not even a *good* heart is required. Think of all the rotten people God called into service. Paul was out killing Christians when God called him! But even rotten people can be willing to let God use them.

Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel has a willing heart as well. That's why he does what the Lord commands and anoints this measly shepherd boy who looks nothing like a king. But as David is anointed we're told that the Spirit immediately comes upon him with power. In other words, the Spirit of the true King now rests upon this future servant king, empowering him with the only thing any of us needs to do what the Lord calls us to do.

And the very next day David ascends the throne and sets everything right in the kingdom. Right? Not so

fast. Some of you know the story. Over *thirty years* go by before David becomes king. Which is nothing, right? Prince Charles has been waiting 68 years to ascend to the throne promised him, though we should point out that he's been made relatively comfortable in the meantime. If you have to wait that long to be king, at least you can live like a king as you do. Not so with David. For the next thirty years David faced almost nothing but hardship, most of time running for his life away from the scorn of the current king and many of his own people.

Just imagine that. Imagine waiting for thirty years for God to do what God promised to do! And that's actually short for God. Forty years was usually God's standard waiting period.³ How old were you thirty years ago? Has there been anything you have been waiting for God to do since you were that old? Healing? Reconciliation? Peace? A soul mate? A family? Meaningful work? Release from some addiction? Freedom from pain?

Like it or not, this seems to be God's pattern with us. We see it evidenced not only in David's life, but in the life of nearly man or woman he ever called to do his work. It's why verses like Hebrews 4:7 encourage us, **"Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?"** There are, of course, children who are not disciplined by their parents and we know how those children generally turn out. And so the question is what are you doing with the hardship and waiting in your life which may be evidence of God's loving discipline? Even when hardship is self-inflicted, could it be that the Lord is using it to shape you in some way? Has he not promised those who trust him that we will not wait or suffer forever? Are we willing to trust the kingdom to the King?

Eventually, of course, David does become king. But interestingly, listen to the very first thing he does after ascending to the throne? In II Samuel 7 we read:

"Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.""⁴

³ The Israelites wandered for 40 years in the Sinai desert before God eventually led them to the Promised Land. Before that they waited for 400 years in captivity as slaves in Egypt before God sent Moses to deliver them.

⁴ II Samuel 7:1-3, NRSV

God has done what God promised to do. David did not bring about this house or this rest on his own. If not for the Lord, David would still be spending his days with the sheep. But now having been made king, David is going to take over from here, thank you very much. God has done this great thing for me, now I will do something great for God. Even his pastor, Nathan, thinks it's a good idea, though neither of them thinks to pray about it any of it. You see, even the one with the willing heart finds it very difficult to trust the King, the true King, for the kingdom. We just love to make it all about us.

Well, that night Nathan does pray and as he's on his knees the Lord makes clear to him that the human king's plans are going to get in the way of the true King's plans. God doesn't need David to build him a house. God doesn't *need* David for anything. On the other hand, David needs *God* to build him a house, and not one built with stones. And so in the next verses the Lord, through Nathan, makes a covenant with David.⁵ After reminding David that he was plucked from the sheep pasture, and that ever since the Lord has never abandoned him even when things appeared bleak, God then promises David that he will make for him a great name and make for his people a secure place. The Lord then promises that he will build David a house, a lineage if you will, that will continue on the throne long after David is gone. Specifically, God will produce one day from David's line a King who will, in fact, reign forever.⁶ This King will be punished for sin, but out of love never abandoned. The text reads:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up [resurrect, as it's translated in the Greek] your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him.⁷

What David needs to do now is to trust the kingdom to the King. God is working out his plans, plans first revealed to Abraham and Sarah all those years ago, plans to redeem every family on earth through this one family on earth. Even an impressive earthly king like

David, therefore, is really only a representative of the true King. His job, and our job as well, is not to go about building our own little kingdoms but to simply give visibility and representation to God's Kingdom, to submit to what God has done and is doing and then to bring all of it to the attention of others. There are times to build, of course, and to plan, and work, and vision, and create. God isn't against these things, but only calls us to them in his timing and with his power. It's why we as the church should never ask ourselves what we should be doing but instead ask what it is that God is doing, and then ask how he is calling us to join him in that work. Our witness is always meant to amplify God's sovereignty, not obscure it.⁸ Isn't this good news! We are not the King but royal representatives of the King, meant to live lives that not only bring him glory and honor, but lives which are empowered by his very Spirit to be used to work towards the establishment of peace, salvation, justice and righteousness in this world, to see his Kingdom come to earth as we have been taught to pray that it would.

Some of you know how the story goes from here. David's son, Solomon, ascended the throne next. After his reign the Kingdom split into two, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Then for centuries thereafter, there came one king after another, most of them wicked and a few of them decent, though even the best ones failed in the end. Eventually – and we'll look at this next week – both thrones, north and south, are destroyed as Israel is overrun by foreign powers and carted off into exile, which must have left everybody in those days wondering about God's covenant to David. What about this perpetual house that God promised to David? What about this promise that David's offspring would sit on the throne forever? Now there isn't even a throne to sit on! Maybe we can't trust the kingdom to the King after all!

And though we don't put it that way in our day, the same doubt tends to work its way into even what may have once been the most willing of hearts. I know so many people, many in the church, who look around at the state of things in the world these days and find themselves full of serious doubts as to whether the kingdom can be trusted to the King. We've heard all the promises. So where is God? The mountains quake in the heart of the sea. The waters roar and overwhelm. The fires burn. The nations are in an uproar. Kings and kingdoms rant and rave and threaten. Everywhere

⁵ See II Samuel 7:4-17

⁶ See this confirmed in the New Testament in places like Acts 2:23-28 (by Peter) and Acts 13:22-24 (by Paul).

⁷ II Samuel 7:12-15, NRSV

⁸ I'm borrowing this line from Eugene Peterson, *First & Second Samuel* (Westminster John Knox, 1999), 168.

things seem to be getting worse rather than getting better.⁹

So what do we do when we rear we can't trust the kingdom to the King? We can't just keep waiting around forever, can we? No, we do what people have always done. We have to make sense of our lives. We have to find a way to fill our days with purpose and security. And so we start to build our own kingdoms, to take things into our own hands, to make it all about us or, at best, all about others.

In his book, *The Real American Dream*, Columbia professor Andrew Delbanco names all the ways we strive in vain to order our days and years in this desperate hope to make sense of the pain, desire, pleasure and fear that are the stuff of human experience. We tie our identity to a nation we hope can be great again. We pursue comfort and security through material gain. We make instant gratification the hallmark of the good life – having what we want when we want it. We throw ourselves headlong into our careers, our politics, our children, our ministry, our dreams. Mostly, we make it about ourselves, something so easy to do in a society founded on the bedrock of individualism. And yet all along, Delbanco writes, “There is within us the lurking suspicion that all our getting and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death.”¹⁰

What happens then when we turn to ourselves and take kingdom-building into our own hands, when we look at a young stud like Eliab and imagine that he is the personification of what is needed to live the good life, when we settle that it is *our* desires, *our* family, *our* nation, *our* tribe, *our* stuff, *our* accomplishments, *our* abilities, *our* knowledge, *our* mission that will make sense of our lives in some sustaining way? What happens is that the ache for meaning goes on as we imprison ourselves in a soul-starving present¹¹ that has forgotten both the promises of the past and the hope of the future. It's our way. We just can't seem to trust the kingdom to the King. And so how truly fortunate we are that the King is not one who, by nature, holds it all against us.

Flash forward with me. It'd been nearly 600 years since any descendant of David had sat on any throne. With Rome in town now, it doesn't look like that's going to change anytime soon. Herod is called king in Jerusalem these days, but he's really just a puppet on the hand of

Caesar. But then one day there are these astrologers in a distant land who are studying the sky one night and notice a mysterious star rising in the west. These are learned men, some call them magi, men who have not forgotten the promises of the past or the hope of the future. Well, being men of willing hearts, they set out and follow the star until it eventually comes to rest over the most backwater little nowhere village you could ever have imagined. The place is called Bethlehem, the city of David. And entering the city, perhaps on the very same road Samuel led his heifer down nearly a thousand years before, just past the field where a shepherd boy was once left behind to tend the sheep, the magi go straight to the humble home of a carpenter and his wife who have just given birth to their firstborn son.

Who in their right mind would have looked at the baby Jesus on that day in that place and imagined they were looking at a king? Who could imagine a king born in the back of an old barn? In amongst the sheep, that's not any place for a king! And it's not as if things became more obvious later. The kid grew up in, of all places, Nazareth, the absolute wrong side of the tracks for royalty.¹² There was some commotion at his birth, some angels, a few shepherds, and the magi of course, but then afterwards for the longest time – about 30 years coincidentally – nothing happened. Even when he did go public, he made friends with all the wrong people, never had much to his name, refused to seize political power even when the crowds gift-wrapped it for him, and in the end was executed without resistance in the most shame-filled way possible. And on that dark Friday there wasn't a person alive who was ready to trust the kingdom to the King if this was, in fact, the King, as the sign nailed above him on the cross mockingly declared that he was.

And yet, do you remember how the New Testament opens? Matthew 1:1, the very first verse of the New Testament reads, “**An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**” Then in the next verses Matthew launches into a lengthy genealogy, name after name after name, which seems like a terribly dull way to open the sequel of the God's redemptive story. In the end, however, it was the only way to begin, for as somebody once said, “Faith begins, not in discovery, but in remembrance.”¹³ We must not forget the promises of the past or the hope of the future. The Lord made a covenant with Abraham to bless his family, the Jews, so that one day all others

⁹ See Psalm 46 to see what God says about all this.

¹⁰ Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Delbanco's phrase.

¹² John 1:46 reads, “‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked. ‘Come and see,’ said Philip.”

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas & William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press, 1989), 88.

families on earth would be blessed through them. The Lord made a covenant with David, to one day bring from his line an offspring who would be raised up – resurrected, if you will – and reign on the throne as the true King forever. The punishment of sin would be upon him, yes, but in the end the steadfast love of the Lord would never abandon him. And so even at the blood-soaked cross, even in the stench of the lifeless tomb, the kingdom can still be trusted to the King, for it was, after all, just three days later that Christ rose from the dead and was, at the resurrection, crowned King of Kings and seated at the throne of God where he reigns today and will reign forever.

As we place our faith in him, as we trust the kingdom to the King no matter how many circumstances in our lives tell us that it isn't the logical thing to do, we display the willing heart that is the only passport we need to enter into a story that began long before we got here and shall continue long after we are gone, the story of God's very peculiar way of redeeming his world.

As we do, we give up concerning ourselves with what we need to do to make history come out right, because we know that God, in Christ, has already made history come out right. It really is only a matter of time. This doesn't mean we now sit around gazing heavenward until that happens, but that we are sent out, every last willing one of us, to be royal representatives of our King to the world in which we demonstrate, in our very lives, a foretaste of that kingdom. As we love one another across all the lines that normally keep people from loving one another, and live without fear in spite of whatever terrible circumstances we may see unfolding around us, and act with power and authority that clearly are beyond our natural pay grade, and give ourselves away for others without any hint of wanting something in return, and as we even give up obsessing about our own comfort, our own rights, or even our own death, people around us begin to see in us a hint of the extraordinary thing that God is doing in all the world and which he desires to do in them as well.

Brothers and sisters, may we today, and all days, in spite of every instinct and circumstance that tells us otherwise, may we trust the kingdom to the King.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the text from I Samuel 16:1-13 again. What do you notice here? What stands out to you? What is unique?
2. Why do you think that God chose David to be king?
3. When we look for God-appointed leaders in the church, do we ever make the same mistake that Samuel was making by looking at outward appearance rather than at the heart? Is it even possible for us to look at the heart?
4. David waited for over 30 years to see God's promise to make him king fulfilled. Have you been waiting for God to fulfill a promise you believe he made to you? How long have you been waiting?
5. Does God need you (or any of us, for that matter) to accomplish his purposes in this world? If God doesn't need you, is that good news or bad news?
6. Paul wrote the following in I Corinthians 1:26-29. What is the message in here for you today?

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

7. When you look around at the trouble in our world, is your faith in God tested? Do you trust the kingdom to the King, believing that God is working out his purposes today just as much as ever?
8. It's been said, “Faith begins, not in discovery, but in remembrance.” What do you think this means? Do you agree?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Can God use young people, even little children, to do his work as much as God can use adults?