



**Lent 4, Year B – March 22, 2009**

1 Samuel 16: 1-13

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham**

In the midst of Jo's and my search for employment during our post-Katrina sojourn, we went into a bank in Austin, Texas. We had a box full of loose change, and the bank had a delightful machine that you could pour your loose change into. It would count the change and print out a slip reporting the amount of change deposited into the machine. We would then be able to take the slip to the teller and redeem it for paper currency. And if you had an account at the bank, they did not skim a percentage off the top for the bank.

At the time, we had no idea where we might eventually find employment. We had some irons in the fire in some parts of the U.S., but where we might end up was anybody's guess at the time. From time to time in funnelling our coins into the machine, we would drop a coin on the floor and pick it up. Now, if you have been in the U.S. in the past few years, you might have noticed that the U.S. has minted quarters marked for each and every state in the U.S. So in a fit of silliness, I joked with Jo that the next quarter I picked up off the floor would be marked for the state where we would find work and complete the ordination process. So I picked up the next quarter we dropped, half expecting it to be the quarter for some state where we had prospects. But, of course, the quarter was marked for no state. It was a Canadian quarter! This was, to say the least, unexpected. But the rest, as they say, is history. The great blessings of positions in the church, ordination, and now full time employment for both of us were, indeed, in Canada. God smiled upon us in a very unexpected way.

And if we are to learn something about God from this evening's reading from Samuel, it is to expect the unexpected. God sends Samuel on a mission to anoint a new king for Israel. This is more than a little problematic. Israel already has a king, Saul, also anointed king by Samuel at God's behest. So, already, we are in the realms of the unexpected. God is proposing nothing short of a coup. And Samuel fully comprehends that this might be a bit tricky. He knows that this is treason and that if he is caught the punishment will be death – a concern he does not hesitate to share with God. Does God offer Samuel a powerful army to protect him or just tell him to go forward in faith. No, God suggests subterfuge. God tells Samuel to take a heifer with him, so that Samuel can say that he going to offer a sacrifice to God. Which is true and honest, especially when one considers that in the tradition of the time ritual sacrifice would have accompanied the anointing of a new king. Truth, yes, but a deceptive truth designed to obscure the real purpose of Samuel's mission. Hardly the level of candour one might expect God to approve, much less suggest.

And Samuel's decent into the unexpected never misses a beat. He is presented with Jesse's sons. The first is handsome and strong. Samuel is ready to anoint him, but "no" God says. We're not going to choose a king based on looks. So Samuel essentially sorts through Jesse's remaining sons, but does not get the green light from God. No sons left. No king. Now what?

Wait. Jesse says, I have one more son, my youngest. He's a shepherd – there's a large hint there because kings often were thought of and referred to as shepherds. He's out in the field. So they summon David. Now, David is young, handsome. And Samuel must be thinking, "Wait a minute, God said not to go by appearances...and now I'm supposed to anoint this young, handsome man as king. Samuel by now must be realizing that with God, expecting the unexpected is the better part of wisdom.

And, indeed, where God is concerned, we must never circumscribe our expectations. We must resist the temptation to put God in a box defined by our limited, earthly expectations. Popular clichés hold that “God works in mysterious ways.” Or “If you want to hear God laugh, tell God your plans.” These phrases are worn out, but they do speak a truth. We cannot and will not always understand what God is up to in the world. But we must trust in God’s providence. Like Samuel, we often may end up perplexed and frustrated, and likely surprised, sometimes even pleasantly.

After all, that young shepherd son of Jesse became a great king and ancestor of Jesus. And he we are in Canada.

Amen.

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