

## A Season of the Heart

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First Presbyterian Church, Durham  
Sunday, March, 22, 2020  
I Samuel 16:1-13

My sadness comes out in strange places. Thursday evening, one of my favorite bands, the Indigo Girls, played a virtual concert. Laurie and I watched from our living room over Facebook, then Instagram, and then back to Facebook, as the different social media platforms worked better and worse. The Indigo Girls played some new songs off the upcoming album, some of their greatest hits, and some old songs I had forgotten that I know by heart. Comments popped up on the screen from watchers all over the world, and amazingly, some of them were from friends and colleagues in places like New Jersey, Massachusetts and Chapel Hill, all of which are impossibly far away these days. It was beautiful. It was familiar. Their voices resonated in my soul. And I was crying. Sitting in my living room on Thursday night at 6:30 pm, I was crying. And it wasn't even at just the sad songs.

The next morning, I ventured out to Sola Coffee, our regular Friday morning breakfast spot. If Sunday is a part of your work week, I've learned, that you have to make Friday morning special, and Sola does. It's a small business, and it's still doing carry out and curbside orders. Usually, the place is packed, with a line 10 deep, requiring a keen eye to spot the table that's about to open up. But this Friday, this beautiful first-day-of-spring Friday, there was one person in line in front of me. All of the chairs were up on the tables. Blue tape marked spots on the floor, six feet apart, for people to stand as we waited for our orders. This place of laughter and conversation and background noise was so quiet you could hear a coffee stirrer drop. It was still and empty. It was sad. It is so very sad.

Of course, you have your own stories. You have your own sadnesses:

Plans cancelled. Sports seasons stopped in their tracks. Graduations in peril.

Jobs lost. Increased financial anxiety. The poor at risk.

Friends and family you don't get to hug or talk to in person. Fears for their health. Fears for your own.

Or even things that are more particular, more peculiar, more personal to you. Things I can't even guess at. Moments that are still, empty and sad. Things that make you cry for no reason and for every reason.

"How long will you grieve?" the Lord asks Samuel. "How long will you grieve?" the Lord asks us, or maybe we ask ourselves – it's hard to tell these days. A long time. A very long time. Who knows how long? What day is it, anyway? Every day feels like Tuesday right now. How long will we grieve? As long as we need to. That's the thing about grief. It doesn't come with an expiration date, like the last, lonely carton of milk on the grocery store shelf. It's less perishable than that. We don't know, we tell ourselves. We don't know, we tell God. We don't know how long we'll grieve. Who are we, anyway, Samuel?

Actually, we are Samuel, in a way. Samuel is among the most faithful people in the Biblical

story. His name literally means “Listen to God” in the Hebrew. Samuel is wise. Samuel has a deep connection with the Divine. Samuel does, indeed, listen to God – especially through this paradigm shift in Israel from the first king, Saul, to the second one, the great David. Samuel stays faithful as the ground moves under his feet, even as he fears for his life, even as he doesn’t know what’s next. We could do worse than to be Samuel right now – a mix of grief and fear and faith.

So Samuel does all he can, just like we do all we can. He puts one foot in front of the other, takes one step at a time, follows God’s directions as best as he is able. And before long he finds himself in a new, strange place. He’s having sacrifice with Jesse and his sons, which is kind of like a holy barbeque. It’s the kind of thing we have to do over Zoom or Google Hangouts right now. Samuel is in his living room at home with a laptop on the couch. Jesse is at the kitchen table at his own place, trapped with all eight of his children, which, as we’ve learned, is the real measure of a person these days. How well do you survive being stuck at home with your kids all day long? God only knows. Only God does know, and God has told Samuel that one of these young men is the next king of Israel. And so Eliab, the eldest, the tallest, the one with the best college admissions essays and the highest number of followers on Instagram, hops onto the Zoom meeting from the den. The boy even mutes himself upon entry, like an online-meeting pro. This kid is the future. All of Samuel’s kingship problems are solved. All of the New Yorker and Vanity Fair think-pieces agree. The Democratic establishment has lined up behind Eliab, with Kam-ala Harris as his running mate. Samuel is certain that this is the guy.

And Samuel is dead wrong. That’s the thing about these strange times, when things are changing by the hour and grief is crashing on your couch for a while. We don’t know the future. It is hard enough to tell what’s going on right now, let alone where it will take us. Samuel was sure that Eliab was the way forward. But for all the smart articles we read and well-reported news we consume, the future remains just as gray and murky as it ever is, like the fog on an episode of Scooby Doo. Perhaps part of what we’re grieving these days is the loss of that sense of certainty, of a predictable future, which is to say a future we can control, sort of, maybe, here and there. But in this one way, March 22, 2020 is just like March 22, 2019 or any other March 22<sup>nd</sup> – we don’t know what March 23<sup>rd</sup> will be like. We trust in God that the Divine is working all things towards good. We pray that the Spirit blows through this earth, bringing justice and peace. We look to Jesus on the cross and then his empty tomb – emptier than your favorite restaurant right now – and see what love God has for us. God never promises us, or Samuel, or anyone, that there won’t be hard things. God does promise to be with Samuel, with us, in the hard things.

And that’s the surprise of it all. That’s the blessing of right now, if we dare use that word when people are dying and folks are being let go and grief is out walking the dog twice a day. God shows up. In the midst of sadness, in the midst of certainty-turned-wrongness, in the midst of no control, God shows up in a way that none of us could have imagined, for all of our faith and hope. Friends, we have a God who reveals God’s self precisely in ways that are intentionally surprising, as if revelation was one of the fundamental, divine characteristics. For here we are, largely trapped at home. Here we are, emerging experts at meeting online. Here we are, worshipping in PJs from living rooms. Here we are, with nothing but family members and pets and the divine glory of the Southland in the Springtime. Here we are, having burned through the first seven options for the king, the candidate we think we deserve, the future we have worked so

hard for. Here we are. And God shows up saying, “I look on the heart. Not on the outside, but on the heart.” Well, that’s all we have left.

Friends, this is a season of the heart, a season of the interior, a season of what really counts. God is with us at the heart of things. Coronavirus has made us inside people – inside of our homes, inside with our families, inside of each other’s homes as toddlers and pets wander in and out of the camera’s view. God is with us on the inside. So many important things are on hold or at risk right now. God is with us in the hard. But in pausing and cancelling so much, we are coming to realize what really matters to our hearts and what is just outside stuff. God is with us in this season of the heart.

Today’s story ends happily. David is chosen. Things move on toward the next great adventure. God’s stories always do. Even the hardest one of all, the one where Jesus gets killed for no reason and for every reason. That one ends with a happy surprise that no one saw coming. But before Easter, and right now we are before Easter, it is still and empty and sad. Grief is running rampant. Tears are everywhere. Everything feels shut down. But God is there. God is here. God is with us in the hard. God is with us at the heart of things. Amen.