

Face Value

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

Busier life gets, the more I need quiet. Less quiet there is to be found. Even if you go out there is extra noise: amazed at the number of businesses in town that have a TV or radio on, and what they are tuned to. If you go to El Torito, you will probably watch soccer. Sponge Bob is often on at the orthodontist's office. But in most other places of business the news is on. Recently, I started noticing which of the major news outlets they have on. CNN? Fox? Or maybe NPR if they have their radio on instead? Seeing as how we are in East Tennessee and not, say, New Hampshire, you can probably guess who most of the businesses are tuned in to.

Raises the question, whose take on the world do you trust? Who sees things correctly? Which side is seeing and telling the truth? Is it the conservative voice? Should we be terrified by the trillions being thrown out there to bail out the country, and the debt that we are taking on? Are our immigration policies endangering our jobs and the American way of life? Or is it the other side that sees and speaks the truth? Maybe the economists who say that the end is in sight, that the stimulus is working are the ones who are right. Maybe the real threat is global warming and our excesses.

Now, hopefully you all know me well enough after 7 years to know that I'm not trying to start a fight or even sway you one way or the other. I promise that I won't try to convince you that you should trust my people, that my view is right, that you should see the world and foreign policy and economics and politics my way. Quite the opposite, in fact. The point I hope to make this morning is that maybe we shouldn't trust any of them.

Personally, I would have anointed Eliab. He was the oldest of 8 brothers, and who knows how many sisters, so he must have had a super-sized version of all the characteristics of a first-born: he was probably a born leader, incredibly responsible, an over-achiever, eager to please. Some even say that first-borns are more intelligent than middle and youngest children, but I'm in serious doubt of that. And if all that didn't make him the ideal candidate, he was quite the looker, too. Probably a very charismatic personality. This was a man who was wired for success. Exactly the sort of person that Israel needed as a king after the catastrophic and abysmal failure of Saul.

But if there is one thing that we should take away from the story in 1st Samuel it is that we cannot trust what we see. We cannot take things at face value. In fact, all of today's readings are about the limits of vision. Deep inside the tiny mustard seed are the makings of a mighty shrub. Paul reminds us that the world is so foreign to us that we have to walk by faith and not by sight. And Samuel was all prepared to pull out his little bottle of holy oil and get to work anointing Eliab, the clear and obvious choice, when God told him to pack up his things and keep looking. Eliab was not the one, despite what was readily apparent to Jesse and Samuel and anyone else with two eyes and half an ounce of common sense. And neither was Abinidab, or Shammah, or any of the other 7 strapping, mature and promising sons of Jesse. It was the baby of the family God had his eye on, the very last choice, the least obvious, the brat, David. It was

the one the team captains would probably have chosen last, and taken only grudgingly, having run out of all other choices.

Whatever it was that God saw in him, no one else did. And whatever it was that Samuel saw in Eliab, all of those qualities that seemed so attractive, so obvious, so appealing, God saw beneath them or beyond them or through them. God saw his heart.

It is a story that should cause us a good measure of self doubt. We cannot trust our good senses, or our years of education, or our experience. We cannot trust what we see. What seems obvious or good, or attractive, or promising to us might very well be rubbish in the eyes of God. And what seems alarming, or unimpressive to us may look completely different in God's eyes. The lying, cheating ne're-do-well, Jacob, chosen by God over his twin and the true heir. The young peasant girl is handed the privilege and responsibility of being the mother of Jesus. The classmate who wins all the awards may go on to publish or earn lots of money, but it is the quiet, almost invisible student who goes on to make a real difference in the world as a teacher. A cross, an instrument of torture and execution, becomes the symbol of salvation to the world. When Paul said back in 1st Corinthians that we see through a glass dimly, it was quite the understatement.

Next week you will get the official word from our Stewardship Committee that we are over \$15,000 behind this year. Some of that is due to some large expenditures we had in January, but most of the deficit is due to a decline in giving, which, in turn is due to what we politely call the recent economic downturn. Not as much is coming in, so not as much is going out. What we are experiencing here is no different than what both businesses and non-profits alike are experiencing. People are hanging on to what they got. People are anxious. People are afraid. The economic world looks like a scary place these days.

Now, before my husband has a conniption fit over there and reminds me that a degree in home economics does not qualify me to address the complexities of today's financial climate, let me put your mind at ease. In fact, I'm not even going to tell you that you need to loosen up and give more money so we can make up this deficit. What I want to do instead is remind you of Samuel and Eliab and David. I will remind you that we are visually impaired. We cannot take what we see at face value. As one commentator put it, for the Christian, for the one who truly believes that God is at work in the world around us in hidden and topsy-turvy ways, the way things appear, and the way things really are are two completely different things. To us, to people who've put great stock in the ability of our money to keep us safe and happy and secure, the economic world looks like a very scary place right now. The retirement we have always dreamed of may not be within our reach, or it may be a decade later than we had planned on. Sending our kids to college may be harder. For some, just making ends meet each month may be in question.

But is God panicked? Is God as worried about it as we are? Is our fallen economy as bad news to him as it is to us? I doubt it. Now, does he worry about the family who is barely making it, the family whose sole bread winner is out of work and can't find a job anywhere? Yes, I'm sure God is worried about them. I'm sure God is quite concerned about the people who rely on food

banks and financial assistance from places like Good Samaritan and Salvation Army whose funds are drying up.

But is God afraid or anxious? Nowhere in scripture is there any indication that God experiences fear and anxiety. Nowhere in scripture is there any indication that God lies in bed at night worrying about money and the economy. Nowhere in scripture is there even a hint that it is financial security that keeps the people of God safe and secure. Clearly, when we look at the stock market and our rates of return on our investments and our bank statements, we don't see the same thing God does. We see hope and confidence security. At best God sees a tool – something we have at our disposal to do God's work in the world. At worst God sees an idol. The competition.

We are over \$15,000 in the hole, but what you won't hear me say is that it's time to panic, or even be afraid. There is no room for fear or panic in God's world, in God's church. I'm not even going to tell you to trust God and pony up. Instead, I'm going to suggest that this is a time of opportunity – for you as individuals, and for us as a church. This is a time for us to take a long, honest, and most of all faithful look at ourselves, our hope and our priorities.

In his book on the Psalms, Walter Bruggeman writes that there are three kinds of Psalms that describe the phases that God's people cycle through their whole lives: times of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. I think we are in a time of disorientation. For a good decade or longer we lived high on the hog. I don't really understand the etymology of that expression, but I know that it means we pretty much bought anything we wanted and believed that the good life would always be ours. We were 'oriented.' We were 'blessed.' Life was good. Well, life isn't so good now. Our confidence has been shaken. The ground we stood on doesn't feel as solid to us as it once did. We have come face to face with the fallacy of our previous beliefs and hopes. We are 'disoriented,' not really sure where we are, where we are going.

But that's not necessarily a bad thing. Our disorientation shows us where we are fragile, where we may have drifted, where our roots are shallow. Disorientation invites us to critically examine ourselves so that we can find a new, firmer place to stand. A better way of understanding what is true and right; of seeing the world and our place in it. It invites us to look at our identity and our mission and purpose.

The session began that process last winter when it had to cut \$11,000 from this year's budget. I wish you could have seen the volley of e-mail messages that went back and forth as they worked. Instead of brooding or being discouraged, they encouraged each other to use what might have been a crisis to reassess what our mission was instead. What was our essential work here at Covenant? What were the things we were involved in that were most important? What they concluded was that our mission was mission, and the education of our young people. The places where budgets were cut were some of the niceties; the things we enjoy, but really aren't critical to the work of the kingdom of God.

Now, I hope it is obvious that this process of reorientation is no panacea. God does not reward us for reprioritizing our lives by waving his magic wand and refilling our bank account. We are still faced with a deficit that is not insignificant. What will happen? I can't answer that. Maybe

some of you are going through that same process of self-examination and are finding more joy in giving than in some of the luxuries we have. Maybe the economy will, indeed, improve later in the year and tightened belts can be loosened again. Maybe we will have some hard choices to make.

Here is what I do know: we need to look at this situation through the eyes of faith, or as Paul would say, we need to walk by faith, not by sight. To anyone with a lick of common sense the situation doesn't look good, but as people of the cross, as people who have seen good come out of bad time and time again, there is no room for fear or anxiety. Surely, for people who believe that death does not have the final word, this will not be our undoing. God's unseen hand is at work. That is the one thing that we can trust, the one hope we can take to the bank.