

1 Samuel 12

1 Corinthians 15.1-11

We come to the end of our time with Samuel. This is the conclusion of a five part sermon series on the Judge and prophet. I hope you've enjoyed our time following Samuel through his ministry journey, which acted as a turning point towards the coming of Christ, towards the Advent of Christ our King. We have given ear to the prophet's voice which is all too often overlooked by our lectionary readings, letting his story speak to us today, to lead us towards Advent season. With the season of Advent beginning next week, we must conclude with Samuel, moving on in God's salvific history. We must let the prophet retire and we must bury our Samuel, so we can see the grace of God break into our broken world. We must move on, or we will never make it to Advent, we will never make it to the manger, we will never make it to the cross of Christ.

Let us turn now to our text this morning. We have in the twelfth chapter, Samuel's retirement speech. He has reached a point, in his now very old age where he thinks that he can retire from his ministry. He is so optimistic. It has taken a long time for Samuel to reach this point, he has been a prophet and a Judge for his people for almost his entire life, so much so that we cannot speak of Samuel as a person apart from his office, but now even he knows it is time to move on. The people need more leadership than he can provide. The people now have Saul before them as king. When we concluded last week, Saul was literally hiding behind the baggage from being king, hiding behind his reluctance to the mission he had been given, hiding from his calling to lead Israel as her king. He did not pick a great hiding place, because he was anointed as king anyways, and the people shouted long live the king. Saul was not one to give up on a bad plan so Saul continued to hide behind his baggage even after he was named king, he returned

home to plow his fields and live the same life he always had. Saul continued to let his uncertainty to this calling define his life, in a way which mirrored Samuel's absolute certainty, to his absolute life defining calling. Saul was not enough of a leader to replace Samuel, who spent his years circling around Israel to be with her people in their needs, and no one knew that better than Saul himself.

In Saul's inaction, he was not being a down to earth king, who was determined not to let his new title change him, he was denying the mission he had been given. He was the parent so paralyzed by fear that they do everything they can to make sure they are not alone with their child. He was the person at a new job who is so uncertain about their abilities that they are unwilling to show their talents because they are afraid they have none. And they are terrified that everyone around them will realize they are as useless as they believe themselves to be. He was the spouse who is so uncertain how they can survive after they have buried their partner that they become secluded within their own home and their own soul. As anyone who has ever felt the weight of uncertainty can attest to, it is not a feeling which ever really goes away.

It was not until news reached Saul that his people were being mutilated by their enemies, when their pain cried out louder than his unwillingness, that he was able to overcome his own uncertainty towards leadership, that he was able to be the king which Israel needed. Saul never got over his unwillingness, his uncertainty about his ability to be king followed him for years, throughout his entire reign. Every action was seeped in fear and trepidation, like so many of ours, but that is ok, because our mission is not to be absolutely certain, our mission is to be faithful. Saul did not have to be certain that he was enough to replace Samuel.

The Lord anointed Saul and he had a mission to fulfill. You have a mission that the Lord has anointed you to fulfill, no matter how small you think you are, no matter how much baggage

you try to hide behind, no matter how uncertain and unwilling you are, the Lord has anointed you. You have to take the mission which was passed on to you, and you will in turn pass onto someone else, faithfully. It is out of the mystery of God's grace, that God has chosen you, has anointed you. There is a mission that needs to be fulfilled, a mission that needs to be continued even after our prophets are old and gray, and that is all the certainty that we need. In our community there are people who are coming apart at the seams, who are desperate for someone to put them back into the hands of God, do you need more certainty than that? There are children in your lives, who need to know that they are loved by you and by God, do you need more than that? Outside these doors, there is a world which is being torn apart, which is crying out louder than our uncertainties, do you need more certainty than that, isn't that enough?

It is right after Saul finally takes up his mission, his leadership, that Scripture leads us into Samuel's retirement address, our passage this morning. It is right after Saul takes up his mission that the text transitions us into Samuel's departure. You know we get so used to sermons ending with a call for mission, for their charge and benediction, but Samuel still has more to say. God's word is still speaking to us, so we must keep listening. Samuel is fading away but he is not gone yet. With Saul taking up his anointing, his mission, Samuel feels that it is time for him to step away, the people have the leadership that they need. It is time for the old prophet to make a quiet exit, letting the work of God remain in the center stage. It is now that he surrenders his role to Saul, he admits that he is too old to continue leading. In his parting words for communal ministry, Samuel recounts the work of the Lord, from the past leading up to the present, ready to continue on. Continuing the story of God's grace which began long before us, and continues in everything which is unfolding to this day. He reminds them how they rejected God as their king, but instead of being a final word of warning, a final word of condemnation from the prophet,

Samuel tells the people to stand and see this great thing the Lord is doing before their eyes. Samuel closes his ministry to the congregation of Israel before he retires, telling them to look and see the great thing that the Lord is doing before their eyes. He tells them just because I am leaving you, do not stop looking for what God is doing before your eyes, even when it is hard do not stop looking for the grace of God being poured into this world. As we move towards the celebration of Christ entering into human existence, keep looking for God's grace working in your lives, especially when it is hard.

And with that Samuel leaves the people. But it was still optimistic for him to think he could retire so easily. King Saul now knows that there is a mission, he has heard the cry of his people but he is still so uncertain, he is still so anxious, Samuel becomes the private chaplain to the king. Samuel would continue to remind Saul over and over again that he has been anointed by God, that the Lord has chosen him to lead this people. Samuel would continue to guide Saul, and he would remain with him, even after God's grace left King Saul. And it was Samuel, who in his extreme old age, long after he retired from congregational ministry was tasked with finding the replacement for Saul, who he had loved and cared for so dearly. Samuel tried so hard to remind Saul, to look for the great thing that the Lord was doing before his eyes, but Saul always stumbled so blindly. So in the end, Samuel had to anoint another, a boy he would not be able to raise, a child too young to have seen Samuel as the Judge over the congregation of Israel, a leader he would not be able to guide, a leader almost completely disconnected from the old prophet. But maybe for Samuel, it was easier that way than investing himself in another king, watching as King Saul struggled.

Samuel would eventually be able to retire fully, but only after he passed. When Samuel died, Saul was still king, the nation was in turmoil under the conflict between the two kings.

Samuel died not leaving his people peace but war, one of his anointed in personal anguish, and the other living in exile. He dutifully stayed with Saul until the end, offering God's Word to Saul whenever he needed it. Whenever Saul got himself in trouble or did not know what to do, which was all the time, Samuel was always there to pull him out of the ditch. But now Samuel is dead, Samuel is now truly gone, Saul has lost his prophet, and Saul cannot hear God's word, he cannot find God's word, not in dreams not in prophets.

We all have someone who has fulfilled Samuel's role in our lives. We all have someone who spoke God's word to us in our lives. Someone who was always there for us, someone who was faithful to God's calling in their life and inspired us to act beyond our own uncertainty. It may have been a teacher, a mentor, a parent, a pastor, an author who speaks to deep within your soul. Whoever they are, they have ministered to you in your most vulnerable moments, and they have spoken God's grace to you when you most needed to hear it. But one day, figuratively or literally we all will end up burying our prophets.

What will you do when Samuel dies? What will you do when the one who has reminded you again and again that you are anointed by the Lord is no longer there? Saul went to the witch of Endor hoping she could give him one final word from his prophet to base the rest of his life upon, to give him the certainty of mission, the faithfulness that Samuel always had. He was hoping to find something other than the silence he was experiencing, some alternative, some word that could fill the void in his life, to put an end to his fear. He did not get what he was hoping for. We have to bury our Samuel, not to forget the Word that they told us, but to embrace the mystery of God's grace as it continues to be revealed to us in ways we could never imagine. We need to keep listening for what God is saying even after our prophet dies, you need to keep looking for the next Samuel, to continue to stand up and look at the great thing God is doing

before your eyes. Because the alternative is to sit in silence, letting your anxieties fill it, unable to hear God's Word.

As we are on the verge of the Advent season, we leave Samuel. We leave Samuel who has given us God's word which reaches out beyond his own time and place. We have offered up to God all of our unfulfilling hopes for wholeness, we have raised our Ebenezers, but now it is time to go. It is not enough to just be certain that God has anointed someone for a mission, but that God has anointed you for a mission, a mission we must continue even after Samuel is gone. In our final word from Samuel, we leave all of our Samuels because we have been anointed by God, to be part of the continuing mission, to continually witness to God's grace at work in the world. We remember what God has done for us, and look for the great things God is doing before our eyes. We continue to have God's grace shown to us in new and mysterious ways, and let it fill our lives. We let go of our old prophets, so we can stand and look to see the great thing God is doing today. And what God is doing today is turning us once again towards our Advent hope, towards Christ, who is at work in our world.