

*Stay Blind to What You See*

Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 8:4-11, 2 Cor 4:7-13

Samuel was the priest - the high priest of the Israelites. He was like an archbishop, but in a spiritual way will less of the trappings of institution. He offered the sacrifices in the tabernacle. He spoke for God. There was no KING, no palace, no army. There was not even a TEMPLE. Just a tent and a box with holy tablets that moved up different valleys to the different clans for worship.

People were content in their clans, the twelve tribes of Israel. They generally were united only by a common foe. But they feared their enemies - other nations like the Philistines or Edomites. They wanted a king and armies. They needed "someone to fight their battles." We could say they were afraid for their "national security." Came to Samuel asking for a King.

For Samuel and the Lord God, the issue was security, too. But it was not power versus weakness. It was trust versus fear. The Israelites wanted a strong leader who would ease their fear, because they could only see the threat and saw their weakness. They wanted to see chariots and soldiers, and never thought their sons would be the soldiers who died. They wanted security against hunger and cold, a solid economy that would not falter with the storms. They wanted a king to solve their fears. They wanted a strong leader they could see, instead of trusting the God they could not see.

God's answer to Samuel is unexpected, to him and for us: give them what they want, and warn them about what they will see. The king will have the chariots and make them his slaves. The king will have all the riches and take away the best of their fields and flocks. He will take more in taxes than the tithe of the Lord.

There was a fear deeper than the enemies. The real problem was that they were not wandering in a wilderness anymore, and they weren't family clans living in different valleys anymore. They were coming into an new life and a new world they had never seen, and their fear kept them from seeing past their old life and ways. They looked at their enemies and wanted what their enemies had. They forgot what they had that their enemies feared.

Years ago, I was invited to play golf one day with a group that included the oldest walking member of a golf club here in town. He was 84, a 4 star general from WWII and a Pentagon veteran. Sitting around the table after the game, he was asked what he thought of the new war in the middle east we were calling Desert Storm.

"Well, I think we will have the same problems there that we have had with every war in this century" He continued, "We fight a war, and make mistakes. So we learn from them and try to strengthen the places we were weak to make the next fight better. It doesn't help much. We forget that the next war will never be like the last war. You can't prepare for what you can't see by what you have already seen."

For Israelites wanting a King, or us in the age of terrorism, it is easier to fight what we can see and know, even if the enemy, or the problem, or some change is what we

can't see. But it doesn't help much. When you are looking for what you have already seen, you are blind to what you cannot see.

Let's look at the problem in a more personal way:

How often do we have some problem and look around for a fix to that is obvious and quick and painless and won't really cost us much? We don't get enough sleep or enough exercise, and we are tired all the time. And the commercial tells us a "5 hour energy" drink will solve our being tired in the afternoon.

How many people think that weekly credit card offer with a lower rate will put them in better financial shape instead of learning new patterns and different spending in a class that can bring them financial peace?

How much of our attention or worry or decision is a response to a fear of some kind? Fear of finances, fear of getting really sick, fear of losing our independence, fear that we won't succeed, fear that we won't please someone? Fear of the dark? Fear we will fail our children? Fear of change? Fear that things will never change?

How often do we try to prepare for what we can't see by latching on to the first solution we can see? How often do we grab something we can see when we know it really won't help us, but it is right there in front of us?

How often do we do what the Israelite did? What did they really do? They latched on to their fear, and asked for something to make the fear go away. They grabbed on to the first thing they could see around them, something they did not have that someone else had. They have a king. We want one, too.

Fear is not an enemy. We all have fears. When you think about it there is a fear in us all the time. What is yours? Fear is an automatic response in our DNA to prepare us for danger or make us pay attention to a threat or let us know that something isn't right. But we want the fear to go away, so sometimes we focus on the fear instead of the problem.

We feel the fear, sometimes us it blinds us to the real problem, and we grab on to first thing we see that will help, ...help the fear. We want a king, We want a President, we want a miracle worker, we want someone else to do something else.

For each of us or all of us together, fear is not the problem unless we make it the problem. What helps or hurts is the way we respond to the things we cannot see that are beneath the fear. Sometimes you have to stay blind to what you can see, so that you can see what is beyond, what it greater.

Take an example of a smaller fear that is not life-threatening in any way, ...say, losing a pastor, ...or getting a new one.

We could start out with a list of questions about all the things that can go wrong, all the new problems that get added to the old problems. We could start adding sticks to

the woodpile, until someone says innocently that we don't have enough fire insurance and things get really scary. All we can see is a pile of sticks ready to go up in smoke.

Some people jump in with helpful suggestions and others decide take a couple of steps back to see what will happen. But most of the faithful remember that we have been through this before. The church is just the people, and we are really good people and a great church. We can work this out. ...because the church is NOT just the people! The Lord never leaves us in the wilderness.

Those Israelites forgot the Lord God never leaves, so they got themselves a king. In fact they had several of them. It started out not-all-that-great with Saul and his paranoia. They had some great years with David, who had some problems with promiscuous behavior and a murder. There was glory with Solomon until he forgot to give glory. It went downhill from there with rebellion and civil war, conspiracy and lunacy, invasion from adversaries, and an assassination here and there.

In other words, things were pretty much the same as they had been in the wilderness, and getting a king didn't help all that much. They kept forgetting that they kept forgetting the Lord God, and that always led to trouble.

Remember what God told Samuel? They had been rejecting God as their king since the day they left Egypt. Until they truly turned to trust, they would always live in fear.

Crossing a river into an unknown territory can either be a land of promise or a land of peril, but that was up to them.

Getting past an interim may help, but getting a new pastor is not going to make that much difference unless you stay blind to what you see and keep your eyes and hearts and souls and commitments open to the promise and the Lord who is too big to see.

You are turning the page in a Northwood's story to start a brand new chapter you can title "The Next New Season" or "Here We Go Again." That is up to you more than the new leader/pastor. I have more than a wild guess on what you are writing at the top of the page.

You responded to the fears that came when you lost a pastor with fear and faith, ...and more faith. You responded with some defensiveness and little finger-pointing here and there first, but your better strength brought more honest reflection and good question-asking.

You chose a good search committee who were not alike and did not think alike, but were bound by one common bond of commitment to Northwood, They gave themselves in trust to Christ and honestly worked to find a match for the real and intangible strengths of this congregation and the real and less obvious needs for your future.

You engaged by talking things through and listening to each other, and by listening to help from Presbytery that could get you past what you saw on the surface. And from wisdom that looks back, maybe you have learned that you can't write the next chapter by looking back to copy and paste what you have already written.

You have been brave to say that you are in a place you have never been before, and you need a shepherd and guide to lead you to green pastures that will surely be new and can become lands of promise.

You know that you are ordinary. You know that in some visible ways you look a lot like a lot of other churches around you, and your strengths and uniqueness are sometimes unseen and need to become more visible. You know that *the* Spirit makes you extraordinary.

*Hear your good news - your encouragement - in 2 Corinthians 4:7-15: "If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized: we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. what they did to Jesus, they do to us - trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did for them, he does in us - he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best!"*

And here you are, standing on the bank of the river and ready to jump in and cross over. You have some time to think about it, and I don't think you will use the next couple of months to start worrying about what is over the horizon or whether the river is too deep.

The main thing you need to remember now is the one thing you always need to remember (and the one thing the Israelites of old always seemed to forget): you have to stay blind to what you see, so you can trust what you cannot see.

The Lord is Leader. Christ is Master. Christ is King. Trusting God and serving the Savior eases the fear, and helps with the struggle, and can even make suffering seem small in comparison to the "glory about to be revealed" - the Greatness of God that we have not seen yet.

We have begun. Put pen to the top of the first page of the next chapter and write: "The Next New Season." And make it a celebration of what glory God brings when you stay blind to what you see.