

Our Wednesday Bible study classes

have been learning about two of this morning's lessons.

The Men Under 50 class just studied the anointing of David,
and the Women's Bible Study just debated the story
of Jesus and the Blind Man.

To be honest, our classes don't have much to do with my sermon.
I just wanted them to get a little free advertising.

This morning we actually heard the story of 3 people being anointed,
not just one.
3 people were anointed and in some way all 3 of them were you.

First we heard the anointing of David. We all know this story.
David wasn't the oldest, or the tallest, or the strongest.
He was the youngest, with beautiful eyes, ruddy and handsome.
God called him out of the pasture to be the Shepherd of Israel.

The prophet Samuel takes a horn of oil and pours it over David's head,
because God sees in David
something David doesn't even see in himself - a leader. A warrior.

David became the King his people needed.
He was successful and brave, he was a musician and poet.
He was wise and crafty, and even when he fell into sin,
David repented and made amends.

David trusted God
and God gave David a life he never even dreamed of living.

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But David was the second person to be anointed king, not the first.

David's anointing should always echo with the anointing
of Israel's first king - a man named Saul.

Samuel anointed Saul to be king

years before he anointed David to replace him.

I imagine Samuel even used the same horn of oil for both of them.

Both men were chosen by God out of obscurity

and both were so young they were barely men at all when it happened.

But where David flourished as king,

Saul's life turned into a nightmare.

For whatever reason Saul was completely unable to handle

the burden of leadership, while David flourished under it.

Saul became paranoid, and petty.

He was ruthless when mercy was called for,

and weak when strength was needed.

As a king he was mostly a failure.

When you read his story closely,

it's hard not to bounce back and forth between sympathy and outrage.

He seems equal parts the villain and the victim of his own story,

and his death was violent, tragic, and heartbreaking.

Saul tried so hard to be the man Israel needed, but it just wasn't in him.

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Centuries later, Jesus anoints our third person this morning.

But where Samuel poured oil over Saul and David,
Jesus spit in the dirt and anointed the blind man's eyes
with the mud it made.

(By the way, those of you who flinch at drinking from the common cup,
might really want to avoid thinking
about being healed with "The Spit of Christ.")

Saul and David were anointed to be rulers,
but this blind man was anointed to be a witness.
His calling was not to wield power but to testify to God's power.
"I was blind, but now I see."

Unlike Saul and David, we don't know how this young man's life turned out.
He saw the truth of who Jesus is, but that's the last we hear from him.
For us, he will always be a work in progress.

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All 3 people of our anointed this morning
are in some way representative of you -
each of you are Saul, each of you David,
each the unnamed blind man.

That's because for each of us, our attempts to be faithful -
our attempts to answer God's call - have had mixed results.

Sometimes our sacrifices have led to success, like David.
Sometimes they've led to failure and heartbreak, like Saul.
And sometimes, like the blind man,
the result of our yes to God is yet to be revealed.

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The last couple of weeks,

I've been listening to two conversations about faith,
one with a neuroscientist and the other with a geneticist.

The conversations were both about the meaning of free will,

the meaning of human agency,
about how the way we make decisions
is so much more mysterious than we tell ourselves.

The neuroscientist talked about how when we decide to trust someone
it's not because we've rationally analyzed their behavior.

It's because our entire central nervous system

has responded unconsciously to this person in front of us,
from our toes to the little hairs on our skin
to all the different parts of our brain.¹

The geneticist talked about how we all have these genetic markers

that make us more or less likely to be violent,
more or less likely to be generous,
more or less likely to believe in God.²

And then how you have all these chemicals in your body

testosterone and estrogen,
adrenaline and insulin and all the rest.

¹ <https://livingchurch.org/podcasts/neuroscience-in-the-pews-with-rod-wilson/>

² This paragraph and the next 2: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/kathryn-paige-harden-on-genes-and-morality/id1536984072?i=1000753689295>

These chemicals drive us to behave in certain ways, too,

and yet all these factors -

the nervous system, the genetic markers, the hormones -

as powerful as they all are,

they still don't determine the decisions we make.

They are not in control of us; they are just a part of us.

They are in conversation with the rest of your body and brain -

with your values and desires, your faith and morals.

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And maybe it's because both our bodies and the world around us

are so complex and mysterious,

that we make up a simpler story of human behavior.

One where everyone is rational.

Where the world is divided into good guys and bad guys,

divided into successes and failures.

But life isn't really like that, and life with God isn't like that, either.

Faithfulness is not a guarantee of success, or happiness,

much as we wish it were.

Desmond Tutu seems to have lived a happy life all the way to the end,

while Mother Teresa's private letters reveal a woman

who spent decades feeling lost and distant from God

even as she served Him so faithfully?

Do we think it was because one of them was smarter

or more courageous or more faithful than the other? Of course not.

It's the same with you.

Why have your fortunes - your careers and marriages and children
gone in such radically different directions?

Do we really think it's because we're divided into successes and failures?
Into good Christians and bad Christians?

We spend Lent talking about repentance. Amendment of Life.
Discipline. Trying Harder.

And we should. That's part of what Lent is about.

But maybe one Sunday in Lent we could remember
that doing and choosing and trying will only get you so far.
That the rest is up to the mercies of God.

You know, the hardest but most profound part of being a shepherd to you
is bearing witness to these mysteries of your lives.

To the undeserved sufferings and the unearned blessings.
To the hard work that led to success,
and the equally hard work that ended in ashes.

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Our men's Bible study is about to come to Saul's death.

We know what the writer of Samuel thinks about Saul,
but we've been trying to remember that maybe his real life
was a little more complicated than the story we got.

That maybe God sees Saul, and each of us,
in a way that even a writer of scripture can't.

I picture Saul, that first king of Israel, at the end of his life -
defeated, a victim of his own insecurities, his own weaknesses.
A failed king.

But maybe also a victim - of bad fortune,
of having the wrong genetic markers,
or chemical imbalances that led to mental illness.
To use Shakespeare's words - A Man, all in all.

I see him lying there wondering how it all went so terribly wrong,
asking himself the same kinds of questions
some of you eventually find yourselves asking.

And then I picture Jesus - the Son of God -
coming to Saul on that battlefield, rubbing mud in his eyes,
wiping away the blindness that had crippled him as a king,
welcoming him now as a child into new life
with the God he had tried so hard to follow.

Amen.