



I can still sing you Three is a Magic Number, or the preamble to the Constitution, or how a bill becomes a law, or the conjunction junction song. There are many more. I won't sing them all.

It's very clear you're being unfair king,
no matter what you say we won't obey.
Gonna hold a revolution now, king,
and we're going to run it all our way.
With no more kings.
Rocking and a rolling,
splishing and a splashing
over the horizon what can it be?
Looks like it's going to be a free country.
No more kings.

But the idea of 'no king' rallies didn't start in this presidential term, or even with the American Revolution. It was God's idea, all the way back in the Bible. God wanted the people to follow God. But that's hard for us to do. In truth, the leaders of God's temples, the mediators of God's word to the people, were not good leaders. And why would people follow God when the people who speak for God are crooks?

Whether you agree or disagree with yesterday's marchers, regardless of our political views, we all trust voices other than God's some times. We all have moments of wanting a king to save us, to make complicated decisions simple, to give us the easy path to follow.

As we enter worship this day, I invite us to think about who, or what, gets in the way of us trusting God. Are there proverbial kings who charm us and make us want to cede our power to them? Or do we prefer to follow our own desires and agendas, making ourselves the king? Have there been religious leaders who were unfaithful with the message, who got us off track and turned away from God?

Whatever the reasons, no matter our politics, we all have the tendency toward the idolatry of monarchy. And so it is a gift to be able to worship together, to acknowledge the reality of our lives, and to offer to God our hearts, with all of our contradictions and complications. All of who you are is welcome here.

1 Samuel 15:34-35, 16:1-13

Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeath of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that they had made Saul king over Israel.

The Lord said to Samuel, How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."

Samuel said, How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me."

And the Lord said, Take a heifer with you, and say, I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you."

Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, Do you come peaceably?" He said, Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, Are all your sons here?" And he said, There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

I LOVE A GOOD UNDERDOG STORY, and the call of David is a great one. It isn't even the only underdog story involving David. In a few chapters, you can read the story of David, the young shepherd, defeating Goliath, the Philistine Giant.

The Underdog Effect is a psychological phenomenon where people are more inclined to support those who are perceived as disadvantaged or less likely to succeed. This doesn't just happen in sports or competitions; it's a deep-seated response that influences our behavior in many areas of life.

One article¹ I read about the Underdog Effect said this:

One of the primary drivers of the Underdog Effect is empathy. When we see someone struggling against the odds, it triggers an emotional response in us. We can imagine what it feels like to be in their position, facing overwhelming challenges and fighting to succeed. This sense of shared struggle makes us more likely to support the underdog, as we feel a connection to their plight.

Sympathy also plays a role here. The underdog is often seen as vulnerable or disadvantaged, and this vulnerability can evoke a protective instinct in us. We want to see them succeed because it feels like justice—like the world is righting itself by giving the little guy a fair shot.

It follows that when empathy, sympathy, and justice are frowned on, people stop cheering for underdogs and start supporting the top dogs, giving benefits and adulation to CEOs and big corporations and punishing the 'little guy' with regressive policies and scorn.

This effect is even stronger in cultures like ours, where the underdog narrative is woven into our identity—the scrappy group of colonists who fought off King George.

¹ <https://psychotricks.com/underdog-effect/>

This underdog narrative dominates American culture not only in sports but in all other popular media. From Moneyball to Cinderella, from the Mighty Ducks to Rocky, Americans crave stories about underdogs.

What does this story about Samuel and David say about our preference for the underdog?

Samuel was a prophet. He was offered to God before he was even born, by his mother Hannah, as Joann preached about last week. And as a child, he heard God calling his name and responded with “speak, for your servant is listening”. We’re told in 1 Sam 3:19, **“As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground”**.

Isn’t that something?

Samuel became a judge over the people of Israel, traveling in a circuit from Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah, and Ramah to administer justice to the people and help them to follow God, to serve the Lord, to set aside foreign gods.

He appointed his sons to serve in his cabinet and act as judges as well, but “his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice”. (1 Sam 8:3)

So the people clamored for a king, like the other nations had. Samuel saw it as a rejection of him, *which is a fair observation on his point, for his sons were pretty bad at judging*.

God said, though, it wasn’t about Samuel, it was about God. The people **“have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them”**.

And so Samuel brings God’s warning to the people. **Kings are bad news**. A king will conscript their sons to run his chariots, and take their daughters to be cooks and bakers and concubines. A king will take the best of their grain and vineyards and livestock. **“And you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day”**. (1 Sam 8:18)

Remember that it wasn’t that long ago that God heard Israel crying out under the weight of slavery in Egypt. God is trying to remind them of where they have been to keep them from repeating the past. No kings, says God.

In response to that dire prediction, the people said, **“Sounds great! Sign us up! Give us a king!”**

This is an ancient story. It is also a modern story, lived out around the world today every time people put their faith in strongmen to save them. When *individual boasts* seem stronger than *institutional structures*, people turn to kings, dictators, bullies.

In the story of Israel, they seek a human king in their midst they can adulate and worship, instead of trusting in the God who had already saved them. In this sense, the pursuit of a king is another chapter in the story of idolatry—directing our worship in the wrong direction.

If you don’t know the story of the first king, Saul, it’s worth a read this week. Dynasty, Dallas, Empire, and every other evening soap opera rolled into one. **Intrigue! Scandal!**

Makes for great ratings. Doesn’t make for an easy path for God’s people. God decides impeachment is an appropriate ending for Saul’s kingship and so he tells Samuel to go pick the next king.

I can’t decide if this story reminds me more of some weird reverse beauty pageant, where the sons are paraded across the stage in a swimsuit competition. **“I’d give this son a 9.5 for his stature, but looking at his heart, he only gets a 3. Next!”**

Which one will God pick?



Or, is it a reverse of that horrible moment on the playground where people are choosing their football teams? Except all of the star quarterbacks and strong safeties are still waiting to be picked when Samuel says, **“Isn’t there anyone else? Don’t you have some other sons I can pick?”**

Because, inexplicably, Samuel doesn’t seem to want the king that we would elect.

I don’t know why I am surprised by God’s preference for the underdog, when it is the consistent story of scripture.

God chooses the people of Israel to be God’s people, instead of choosing to covenant with a mightier nation like Assyria or Egypt.

God chooses the younger sons, from Abel to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph—on down the line.

God chooses to be born in a barn instead of a palace.

And the son, Jesus, consistently invites people to dinner who would not make our lists.

Samuel was surprised by this too, which makes me feel a little better about my consistent surprise.

And it makes me want to be the underdog. I want to be David, *the unlikely yet plucky hero of one of God’s narratives.*

After you heard this story, did anyone wish to be Eliab? No, we all want to be David.

Once, after I preached this text, I had thought my sermon was pretty good. *Decent, at least.*

Until.

At lunch after worship, my teenaged son Alden said, “Mom, your sermon missed the point.”

“Ok. Tell me more”, I said, with some trepidation, **wondering whose idea it had been to have children.**

“In America, we aren’t like David. We’re more like Jesse’s other sons—the ones who were rejected when God was looking for someone to anoint. We’re the ones with the power and privilege that first born sons have, using all the planet’s resources. We should be looking for the anointed ones in the people who are out tending the proverbial sheep.”

I went to my bible and wrote his observation down in the margin of 1 Sam 16, so I’d be sure to remember it the next time I preached this story.

I don’t remember the rest of the conversation from that day, but I suspect it also involved Elliott pointing out that youngest sons are clearly the best and most deserving of anointing.

And then there likely was brotherly violence.

On reflection, “brotherly violence” may be a fair subtitle for many of the stories in scripture. I suspect there was some brotherly violence that didn’t get written down in David’s story when they got home and his humiliated older brothers got their revenge.

Humans are a complicated lot. We claim the status of underdog while we benefit from being the top dog. Nobody wants to be Eliab the eldest brother. We want to be David, the sheep herder.

We see ourselves as underdogs even as we’re dominating other people.

We complain about the demands of climate accords, upset about the emissions of other countries, even as we create far more emissions per capita than other countries.

Politicians with all political power, the wealth they've accumulated in office, and with a press corps writing down everything they want to say pretend to be the underdog, complaining that their opponents are silencing them, keeping them from legislative success even when they hold a majority.

In our country, clearly one of the most powerful countries in the world, we act like underdogs, claiming to be under threat from foreigners to such a degree that we are zip tying children and grandmothers as we arrest anyone who doesn't fit a racist narrative of what it means to be American.

The US is no longer the underdog, we haven't been for a long, long time. We're the top dog—a country with a such a resilient economy and culture that people have been fleeing here for safety and opportunity forever. Do we see ourselves clearly and how much space we take up in the world?

I confess, as I was working on underdog illustrations, I could come up with a million illustrations of other people not getting it. I had a really hard time coming up with an illustration of me not getting it. I'm sure there are plenty of them out there, and my kids likely know them all, but my brain doesn't keep a file of the times I'm the top dog.

Maybe we feel like underdogs because we can always find someone out there who is richer than we are, or more successful, or whose "height and stature" makes us feel more like a shepherd boy and less like the successful CEO older brother type.

Do we, as a congregation, see ourselves as underdogs? With our resources, from our beautiful sanctuary in Pacific Heights, I suspect that as a congregation, we're rarely the underdogs. **Are we aware of our privilege? Are we using it for the benefit of the underdogs?**

The Lord looks on David's heart, and sees a faithful heart, a heart that recognizes the values humans admire are not the ones needed when facing impossible tasks. A heart that will rely on God is, I think, what God wanted to lift up in the new king.

When we look at people's hearts, and not their bank accounts, the car they drive, or the clothes they wear, it stops our ability to compare our lives to theirs. It blurs the image we hold of what makes someone successful. It makes it impossible to see ourselves as the underdog when we see each other's hearts.

To look at people's hearts, we have to get past the outer surface of people's lives. We have to put ourselves in places where we have the opportunity to share stories with people who have led different lives, with people who have voted differently than we do, with people who have not had the privileges and opportunities we have had.

How often do we pass by people on the street with only the time to see as mortals see, without taking the time to see how our hearts might be similar?

The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

David's heart is, as We'll discover, a complicated thing. At the beginning of his story, he's the underdog, the youngest son out tending sheep.

For much of the rest of David's story, he's large and in charge—not the boy anointed by Samuel. He's the king of Israel. The one we look at to remember the "glory days" of Israel. It's from his family tree that Jesus claims kingship.

David loves God. He writes beautiful psalms. Those are the good parts of David's heart.

In the darker moments of his heart, David "takes" other men's wives, adding more women's voices to the refrain of "me too" that echo through history, reminding us that harassment and assault are an ancient story.

When David's children join the narrative, we discover he is **not** father of the year, which is the nicest thing I can say about his parenting.

I wonder if that *later David* ever really acknowledged his privilege and his power? Or if he always saw himself as the young shepherd, anointed by Samuel, the plucky underdog?

David is a complicated man, showing us the best and worst of humanity. One of his many psalms is the one we'll use later in worship.

Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me.

Friends, we live in a world where we've mastered the art of seeing each other only as mortals see, leading to much discord and animus. We categorize people by their behavior. In other words, instead of saying "a man who is unhoused", we say "did you see the homeless on the corner?"

People lose their humanity when we reduce them to labels of "he's an illegal", or "she's evil". Even if the labels are good ones, they don't capture all of our complexity.

When we see people as mortals see them, instead of looking at their hearts as God does, we lose our ability to see nuance and complication and connection.

I had an interaction this week that reminded me of this. I had posted something on social media about how bad it was for political leaders, or anyone, really, to be making jokes about the Holocaust, as if gas chambers would be appropriate for political opponents. I can't believe we have to point that out, but here we are. And I connected it to our faith, because these same people who were sending 'funny' texts about Hitler and the Holocaust also claim to be Christian.

And I got a message from a friend I met when I traveled in the Middle East when I was in seminary. He's conservative Southern Baptist. Back when we knew each other, he didn't think women should be pastors. I didn't think young men should be so confident in their pronouncements. But we somehow became friends and I enjoyed spending time with him on our travels.

I know we don't agree on much. He used to try to talk me out of being in favor of women's reproductive rights. I never tried to talk him out of anything because I don't have that kind of time and it never works when he tries it with me, so why bother? We had lost touch over the years.

And then I saw a message from him on Facebook, and I was hesitant to open it. I didn't want this friend to say things that would make it hard for us to continue to see each other as friends. I didn't want to fight. I didn't want to have to defend my views.

When I opened the message, though, he thanked me for my post and he agreed that divisive rhetoric is unchristian, that we have to engage across differences in a more respectful way. He and I don't agree on a lot but we agree on that completely. When we see each other's hearts, as God does, we have a path through the disagreements into meaningful connection that we don't get when we see people as mortals do.

When we volunteer with our Matthew 25 partners, we are given an opportunity to see past the complicating details of a person's present reality to see them as fellow humans in need of care, with hearts beating like ours, with hopes and dreams and challenges and struggles.

God saw David by looking at David's heart, a heart that was good and bad in equal measure, a heart that returned to God for a clean-up and renewal. The mysterious decisions of God challenge us to believe that we, too, are called and anointed to particular service because God can see our heart. **And** to also believe that God can call and anoint people we don't even notice, or people we noticed just long enough to reduce to a label.

The moral of this story is **not** to have the *most perfectest heart* anyone has ever had. God doesn't call us to perfection—that would just be another way of seeing as mortals see. God also doesn't turn away from our failings, pretending they aren't there.

God calls us for our hearts. Hearts that **beat with life and joy**. Hearts that **work for justice**. Hearts that are **broken open** for **love** and **loss**. Hearts that **get dirty** and then washed in God's mercy to be clean, so we can try again, greet another day, and go honestly into our complicated world, forgiving of ourselves and of each other.

Let us bring our hearts to this work of faith and community, seeing each other as God sees us. Caring for each other as God cares for us. Whether you see yourself as top dog or underdog, if you look for the hearts of others, and tend to your heart, you will have a heart that relies on God.

Amen.

