



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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## **"See the Heart"**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church*

*On June 2, 2024, from 1 Samuel 16*

People believe the Bible is an irrelevant, outdated compendium of stories that have no bearing on our lives. How could an Ancient Near Eastern text from the late Bronze Age speak to contemporary issues or the problems we face as Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? We don't have an unqualified person who ascended to the highest and most powerful position in the land. We don't have a deceptive political leader who said he was a follower of God, yet never did anything God desired. We don't have a would-be-king who called himself a 'very stable genius,' but was in fact a very unstable fool. We don't have an elected official who promised he would do one thing but then did another. We don't have an anointed ruler who broke the law yet claimed to be innocent and refused to take responsibility for his crimes. We don't have a commander-in-chief who said he could do anything (like shoot someone in the middle of fifth avenue) and not lose any supporters, but then fell out of favor with his closest allies. We don't have experience with anyone like King Saul, so how could a story like this be relevant for us today?

King Saul bears a striking resemblance to the first former president to become a 34-time convicted felon, yet 1 Samuel 16 is also relevant because of the way it calls us to reflect on a bigger more radical question: How do we move forward in the wake of the devastation wrought by a failed political leader and discern where God is calling us next? We don't only need to ask this question of ourselves as a country, but also as a church, as families, and individuals. If we imagine we have not been physically, spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally impacted by the presidency of Donald Trump, then we are fooling ourselves. We've all been impacted, some more than others. Regardless of where we stand politically, the failure of a president has far-reaching consequences for our lives. For my parent's it was Nixon, for myself it was Clinton, for our current generation it is Trump, and in every case of failure our trust and confidence in the office of President, the promise of America, and the institution of democracy itself was shaken. Where do we go from here?

It would be easy for us to move quickly toward the anointing of David and overlook the first verse of chapter 16, and all the emotional energy of the text. But then we would miss the story of Samuel, and the context that makes the rest of the story so powerful and dramatic. Immediately preceding our text today, Samuel challenged Saul for refusing to follow God's commands, told Saul he'd been rejected as king, and cut ties with him once and for all. As Samuel turned to go away, "Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore" and in a moment of tragic irony Samuel said, 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.'



Afterward, the narrator tells us that Samuel and Saul never saw each other again, and that Samuel grieved over Saul. I don't know about you, but I find Samuel's grief strange and compelling. There was no one more intimately aware of how horrific Saul was as king, than Samuel, yet he was still grieving. Why? Why wasn't he celebrating God's rejection of Saul's kingship? Why was Samuel grieving over Saul?

Humans have the capacity to grieve for a myriad of reasons. It is possible that Samuel grieved because he was losing Saul as a friend, but it is also possible that Samuel grieved over Saul's mistakes or blamed himself for Saul's failure. Samuel may have been grieving his role in anointing Saul as king, or how disastrous Saul's reign was for Israel, or what Saul's rejection would entail for the people. Perhaps Samuel grieved for the nation he'd been entrusted to oversee as a judge that was now in ruins. It could be Samuel was grieving the long-term consequences of Saul's mistakes and the havoc that might unfold in the kingdom. Was this the end? Would there even be a future? We don't know exactly why or how Samuel was grieving, but we it clouded his eyes, inhibiting his ability to see what was ahead, and obscured his capacity to envision any kind of future. Samuel's state of mind in chapter 16 reminds me of the extraordinary first line of a poem by Simon Armitage, "The future was a beautiful place, once. Remember."

What happened to Samuel is deeply ironic, because back in chapter 9, he referred to himself as a "seer," which is another word for prophet. Samuel was literally calling himself as a "see-er" one who sees what others cannot, into the future, past the surface, who sees the ways of God. Yet, now because of the devastation and grief over Saul's failed kingship, this great "see-er" Samuel had lost the gift of vision. At first this may not seem like a big deal, but it was an existential crisis for Samuel threatened the future of the entire nation. Samuel was no ordinary person. He was the last judge and first prophet. He was a kingmaker. He was the right hand of God on Earth. He had tremendous power and responsibility as the key religious and political leader of Israel. If he could no longer see what to do or where to go, then everyone in Israel was in trouble. If Samuel could not envision the future, then there was no future. And, as it states in Proverbs 29:18, "When there is no vision, the people perish." When there is no vision for the future, people die.

Many mistakenly believe vision is not a matter of life or death. We think of vision as a "bonus," or "nice thing to have" or "icing on the cake," but without vision all we have is death. When there is no vision, people perish, not simply in physical or biological ways. They die spiritually and emotionally as well. This is not just true for nations, but for communities, churches, families, and individuals. If we cannot see a future or envision ourselves flourishing tomorrow, then something within us dies. Have you ever noticed that sometimes how we often need something to look forward to get through the week?



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It's why we're always asking each other about our weekend plans. We need to believe that something good is around the bend. We need to know that tomorrow is worth living for. We need to be able to see a future and envision ourselves there. We need vision and when we do not possess a vision of the future, then we have no hope.

One thing that impedes our vision more than anything else: trauma. The inability to visualize the future is a hallmark symptom of trauma. Clinical psychologists say the question most frequently asked by their patients is, "Why can't I see a future for myself?" And the question is often paired with some degree of incredulity that there are other people out there who can. There is terrific research been done to determine why trauma impacts our ability to visualize a future for ourselves. First, trauma alters our memory impairing access to key autobiographical data, making it difficult if not impossible to "mentally time travel" into the future or achieve the flexibility required to visualize it. Second, trauma can impair executive functioning or the skills that allow us to plan our lives like organizing, prioritizing, staying focused, regulating emotions, practicing self-control, or good time management.

When these critical skills are impaired, it can be difficult (if not impossible) to see or plan a future for oneself. Third, trauma can fundamentally alter our self-understanding leaving us with a core belief that we are "broken, dysfunctional, or unworthy of love." A negative self-understanding greatly hinders our ability and motivation to see a positive future.

Recently, there has been an explosion of research and dialogue in our culture about trauma, yet there are many who remain unwilling to admit they've experienced trauma. One scholar, Gabor Mate believes we've all been traumatized. In the book, *The Myth of Normal*, he writes, "Trauma is a Greek word for wound. Trauma is not what happens to you. Trauma is what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you. Trauma is not the event that inflicted the wound, but the wound itself. Trauma is not the sexual abuse, or the war, or the crisis, or the death, or the abandonment, or not the inability of your parents to see you for who you were. Trauma is the wound you sustained as a result." Friends, I hate to break it to you, but if you've been living in America in the last ten years, then you've been traumatized. The presidency of Donald Trump was traumatizing. The Covid-19 pandemic was traumatizing. The murder of George Floyd was traumatizing. The opioid epidemic was traumatizing. The January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection was traumatizing. The overturning of Roe v. Wade and Affirmative Action were traumatizing. The environmental catastrophe is traumatizing. The anti-transgender bills are traumatizing. The income inequality and housing crisis are traumatizing. The war in Ukraine, the attack by Hamas, and the genocide in Gaza have been traumatizing.



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Why are we acting like we've not been traumatized? The most dangerous people in the world are those who've been traumatized yet are not willing to admit it! If we're wondering whether we've been traumatized, a key indicator is our ability to envision a good future. Can you see a good future for the earth? Can you see a good future for America? Can you see a good future for the church? Can you see a good future for your family? Can you see a good future for yourself?

If we're struggling to envision a good future for any of these areas, it might be a consequence of our trauma. Samuel lost his vision for Israel's future and his own future, because of the trauma he'd experienced from Saul's failed kingship. Samuel was the one who had the gift of sight, he was the one responsible for vision, he was the prophet called to lead people into the future, but he could not see through his trauma.

Yet even though Samuel lost his vision and could not see the future or imagine where he was going or what he should do next, God was already at work providing a future that Samuel could not imagine. When Samuel was grieving over Saul's failure, God was working on a new plan. When trauma caused the prophet to lose his ability to see, God was working on a new vision. When the nation of Israel was dealing with failure and devastation, God was working on a new hope. When the people were suffering like sheep without a shepherd, God was working on a new leader. When everything seemed lost and hopeless, God was working on a new future.

This is not just true in the days of Samuel, but for us today. We may be traumatized, we may have lost our vision, we may not be able to see the future clearly right now, but God can see the future for us even when we can't. God is working on a plan even when we don't have the ability to see one yet. God is casting a new vision of the world even when we are stuck in the old one.

Even if our eyes are closed, God's are open. Even if we are asleep, God neither sleeps nor slumbers. When we don't have the strength to see a future, God envisions it for us. As we learned in story of Hagar, our God is "El Roi," the one who sees. God sees us, God sees our people, God sees our nation, God sees our future, God sees our way through, and God sees to it that we find our way, because God makes a way where there is no way. Even when we cannot see the path forward, God sees it for us. While we are mourning or grieving in trauma, God is working on a new beginning.

How do we find our way forward when we have no vision or the only thing we can see is devastation? We look to the story of "Plenty Coups" the principal chief and leader of the Crow Nation. When he was 11 years old, Plenty Coups had a vision that white European settlers would take control of his homeland and destroy the Crow people and their cultural heritage.



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Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

After fasting for several days in the Crazy Mountains, he saw many buffalo coming out of a hole who spread over the plains, then disappeared. Then, he saw surreal buffalo with weird tails, spots and different colors, with odd bellows coming out of a hole and covering the plains. He knew this meant the buffalo would be replaced by the white man's cows, and his people replaced by the white man. What were he and his people supposed to do in the face of such great cultural devastation. In the same vision he saw himself as an old man, living near a cold spring in the foothills of the Arrowhead Mountains inside of a forest where strong winds blew down the trees until only one was left standing. And in that remaining tree was the home of the chickadee—a small songbird with a black cap.

Tribal leaders interpreted Plenty Coups' vision as a warning that the white man would take over their lands and destroy their entire way of life. Cows would be replaced by the buffalo and wind would blow down all the trees in the forest—except one, which represented the Spirit's vision for the Crow people. The Crow people would only be spared if they could learn to live like the Chickadee who was "least in strength but strongest of mind. Willing to work for wisdom. A good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which are sharpened by constant use." From then on, the chickadee became Plenty Coups' spirit guide. He carried a pair of chickadee legs in a medicine bag, for protection and power. The vision of the Chickadee and its ability to listen, would guide Plenty Coups' actions for the rest of his life and he would lead the Crow people successfully into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When trauma hits and we lose our sense of sight or our ability to envision the future, we must rely on other senses to find our way in through the chaos and uncertainty of the world. When we find ourselves without the ability to see, we need to use our ears to listen. God didn't respond to Samuel's inability to see with a new set of eyes, a pair of spiritual glasses, or even a dream or ecstatic vision. Instead, God worked to overcome the limitations of Samuel's eyes with the power of his ears to listen. Everyone knows our eyes can deceive us and lead us astray. It is the primeval story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden where they looked upon the tree God told them not to eat and saw that it was good for food, and a delight to the eyes, and took of its fruit and ate.

The fall of humanity began with human beings allowing their eyes to betray their hearts and lead them to stop listening to God's word, when what we hear is always more important than what we see.

Samuel is a witness of how to live in a culture suffering a crisis of vision. We are called to listen. Samuel lost his prophetic sight. He lost the capacity to envision a future for himself or his people. Yet, he was still willing to listen to God's word. God said, "Fill your horn, go to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse, for I have seen a king for myself among his sons," and even though he could not see where he was going, Samuel listened and did as God asked him to do.



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

As Jesse brought forth each of his sons, from the oldest and tallest to the youngest and shortest, Samuel was tempted again to trust his own eyes, but God said, "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." And again, Samuel listened to God and moving beyond all the older and taller sons until Jesse brought in his youngest from the fields. God had chosen the one who looked least like a king by human standards. Samuel's eyes would have never seen which way God was moving, his eyes could never have imagined the future God had in store for Israel, but his ears could hear God's word and the rest is history.

Samuel's story gives a new meaning to that old Irish hymn, "Be Thou My Vision." When I cannot see clearly through my trauma, be thou my vision. When I no longer have a vision for the future, be thou my vision. When I do not know what lies ahead, be thou my vision.

When I do not know which way I'm going, be thou my vision. When things look bleak and dreary up ahead, be thou my vision. When my life is filled with failures and devastation, be thou my vision. When grief is my only companion, be thou my vision. When I'm not sure I have the strength to go on, be thou my vision. When people are perishing from a lack of vision, be thou my vision. When we cannot see the way forward for our country, our church, our family, our lives, be thou my vision. When we can't see which way we are going and we feel like all hope is lost, be thou my vision. When our eyes aren't working and all we can do is listen, be thou my vision oh Lord of my heart. Even when we are suffering from trauma the God who sees will be our vision, even when we can't see the future, the God who sees is working on a new beginning, even when we feel like all hope is lost, the God who sees is sending us our marching orders, and all we have to do is listen.

In the meantime, we can pray as Thomas Merton taught, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."