

Rev. Larry B. Bell, "Loss and a New Beginning"

Lent A-4, 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23

3/26/17, Westminster

1. **Children:** Have you looked at the cover of the bulletin? What do you see? It's dark and the ground is all dried out. Would you like to go walking in a place like that? I don't think it would be very nice. It looks kind of scary. But sometimes we have to go to scary places. Like what? Do you say a prayer? As we go through those scary places, God is with us.
2. **Scripture intro:** Today we continue our series on death and dying. In our scripture reading, the prophet Samuel is mourning a loss. As our reading begins, he is walking through the valley of death. Let's read it and see what happens. **[Read scripture]**
3. At this point in the story, Saul is still alive, and he will be alive for quite some time. So why is Samuel grieving?
4. Saul is not dead, but the dream is dead. Saul was supposed to be the answer to all their problems. He was the first king of Israel. The nation had invested a lot of hope in him. He was big, head and shoulders above everyone else. He was a good military man. Won battles against Israel's enemies. But he didn't do what God wants him to do. In a theocracy, that's a problem.
5. So it's time for a new vision. But Samuel is still stuck in the old world and God has to nudge him on.
6. As we follow the story, we see that things are going to be different. When he sees Jesse's 7 sons, Samuel

automatically goes to the oldest and the biggest and thinks *this must be the one!* But God says no.

7. One by one, the 7 sons parade in front of Samuel. It turns out, none of them is the right one. For a moment, we wonder *has there been some mistake?* Samuel says *is this everyone?* Jessie says *well there's the girl in the kitchen doing the dishes.* No that's not what he says. He says *there is a little boy out in the field with the sheep.* They bring him in and he is ruddy with beautiful eyes. Ruddy means reddish. With a reddish complexion, he might even have red hair.
8. Now I never would have imagined it, but when we were in Israel we met a Samaritan named Itimar who had red hair and a light complexion. He stood out. Most everyone over there is dark skinned, dark eyes, dark hair. Not Itimar.
9. God says *this is the one. Pour the horn of oil on this strange looking red boy. Anoint David as the future king of Israel.* God looks at the heart, not the outward appearance.
10. Notice all the liturgical elements. There's an offering: Samuel brings a heifer. He meets the elders of the village. They exchange the peace. Then he invites them to the anointing ceremony. Everyone gets sanctified which probably includes a mikveh washing and cleansing ceremony. Since the anointing will include a sacrifice, it means everyone gets to sit down to a barbecued dinner. For people who don't eat meat very often, this will be a celebration. They're going to have a good time.

11. So we have a form of worship, a liturgy of calling, passing the peace, cleansing, blessing, anointing, sacrifice and a common meal. It's a ceremony, a liturgy that marks the end of one thing and the beginning of something else.
12. The old world will take some time to come to an end. Things are going to get worse and worse with Saul. He gets paranoid. He imagines people are out to get him. Eventually things will come to an ugly end.
13. Samuel is right to grieve. He invested a lot in the old order, but it just didn't work out.
14. God has already moved on. David is part of a new vision. He's very different from Saul. He is called a man after God's own heart. He's a poet and a musician. The new vision judges not according to outward appearance, but according to the heart. David's poetry tells us what is in his heart.
15. We began our service with psalm 23, certainly the most-loved psalm of all. In just a few lines a story is told, a picture is painted. We imagine David singing and playing his harp while he watches the sheep.
16. Because we know David's life story, we know he walked through that valley of the shadow of death. He lost a child. He lost his best friend Jonathan in the war. He was a man who needed to grieve his own sinfulness and face his evil side.
17. Grief takes many different forms.
18. Maude died last week and we are still grieving. I expect this will go on for some time. Everything reminds us of her. Clean the floor and it stays clean; no muddy paw

- prints to deal with. What do we do with table scraps now? And what do we do with all of her doggy stuff? Go on a walk—where is she? She must be hiding behind a tree. On and on it goes. The house is so empty with just the two of us.
19. Some might say *she was just a dumb dog. Why are you so sad? You're not supposed to mourn the death of a stupid dog.* I disagree. The valley of death has many different forms. It all leaves a scar. We are marked by it.
20. Everything dies. Loss is built into the fabric of life. Aging is a process of grief. In the past three years, I have had both shoulders replaced. The new ones are not as good as the old. I will never swing a splitting maul again. That's a loss.
21. And so it goes. We gradually lose our mobility until eventually we lose our own lives. Every living thing will die.
22. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me.
23. Yet renewal is also built into the fabric of life.
24. There is renewal in Psalm 23. You lead me beside the still waters. You make me to lie down in green pastures even though we have to go through the valley of death to get there. But thou art with me. You prepare a table before me. You keep refilling my cup, over and over.
25. So something new is being born. Spring follows winter. Easter Sunday follows Good Friday.
26. I planted some seeds this week. I never quite know if it's worth having a garden or not, especially after last year

when an animal ate half our garden while we were away.
What the drought didn't get, the animals did.

27. But this year I have a need to engage in springtime rituals of renewal since Maude's passing. There are things I need to do. So the tiny seeds are in their little containers, waiting for the magic of germination and sunlight. I need to give the universe a chance to re-create. I'm engaging myself in the cycle of death and rebirth. More so than usual, I am anxious to get out into the woods and do some chain sawing with these new shoulders. We will begin again.

28. Just as loss is built into the fabric of life, so is renewal.

29. At the heart of our faith is a resurrection. Yet, also at the heart of our faith is the man of sorrows, well acquainted with grief, a struggling messiah who walks with us on this earth, a messiah who struggled with doubt on the cross crying out *my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

30. That same messiah who had his own dark night of the soul walks with us in our dark valleys. Sorrow will leave its mark. But so too, will love. Thanks be to God.

Into your hands, O God,
we commend all for whom we pray,
trusting in your mercy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/25/opinion/sunday/after-great-pain-where-is-god.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region>