

March 22, 2009

Overcoming Reluctance to Lead

To encourage us to transcend our feelings of inadequacy and accept God's call to service

Key Bible reference: 1 Samuel 9.15-10.1a, 1 Samuel 20-24

Key Verse: 1 Samuel 10.1a

Biblical Background

1 Samuel 9:1-14. Chapter 8 of First Samuel ends with the boisterous and insistent cries of the people of Israel demanding a king and the final dialogue between Samuel and the Lord regarding the people's request. The setting of the narrative changes, however, as Chapter 9 begins. Gone are the clamorous crowds; gone too is the aged judge Samuel. We are now on a farm in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. In the opening verses of the story, there is no concern for the questions of government rule and military leadership, no apprehension over "the ways of the king" (1 Samuel 8:9, 11). Rather, the cause of the distress described in 1 Samuel 9:1-14 is a matter of some lost donkeys!

The narrative jolts us rather abruptly away from deliberations about the system of government. But we must take care that we do not become too comfortable in the pastoral tranquility of the farm country of Benjamin. Remember: There is still an outstanding command from God to the prophet Samuel: "Set a king over [Israel]" (1 Samuel 8:22).

Verses 1 and 2 of 1 Samuel 9 introduce us to "a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish" and his "son whose name was Saul." The writer notes that Saul was a handsome man of considerable stature (verse 2). Saul was sent by his father with one of the family's servant boys to find some donkeys that "had strayed" (1 Samuel 9:3). Saul and the servant boy "pass[ed] through

the hill country of Ephraim," looking for the donkeys. But they did not find them (verse 4).

Just as Saul was about to head home without the donkeys, the servant boy suggested that the two of them visit "a man of God in this town" and inquire whether he could tell them where the donkeys were (verse 6). After a brief discussion, Saul agreed to the servant boy's suggestion; and together "they went to the town where the man of God was" (verse 10).

The story about the lost asses does not encourage us about the future of kingship in Israel. Saul wanders about without finding his quarry, and the servant boy seems to show more initiative than the physically impressive son of a prosperous farmer. However, we soon realize that the meandering search is bringing Saul into contact with a prophet who will disclose to the young man God's plan for his life. God is behind the seemingly random events!

Verses 11-14 tell how Saul met the "seer"—that is, a visionary, one who received messages from God in visions and dreams. Just as Saul and the servant boy arrived in town, they encountered the man of God/seer on his way to a shrine. This is the first indication in the narrative that the "man of God," the "seer," is anyone of any importance; he has been anonymous up to this point. But now the narrative slips in the seer's name: "As they [Saul and the servant boy] were entering the town, they saw Samuel coming out

toward them on his way up to the shrine" (verse 14). And with the insertion of the name Samuel into the account, we are given notice that this story that began as an amusing rustic tale about some lost donkeys may end up being a story of significant import for the history of Israel.

Verses 15-17. Verses 15-16 tell us that Samuel had been informed by God that "a man from the land of Benjamin" would come to see him, "and you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel." This is the first clue as to how reluctant Samuel was supposed to carry out the Lord's command that Samuel "set a king over [Israel]" (1 Samuel 8:22).

Samuel was to anoint Saul "ruler over ... Israel" so that he will "save my people from the hand of the Philistines" (verse 16). God goes on to explain that Samuel is to anoint a ruler over Israel because "I [the Lord] have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me."

A familiar theme surfaces in 1 Samuel 9:16. As in the stories of the judges, now in the story of the anointing of Saul, when the people of God are suffering and oppressed, when they cry out to the Lord for help, the Lord acts to save. The Lord raises up a ruler—formerly a judge, now a king—who will serve as the agent or vessel of salvation. First Samuel 9:16 is noticeably similar to Exodus 3:9. In the verse in Exodus, God calls Moses to service in response to the "cry of the Israelites [that] has ... come to me." Now, in First Samuel, the Philistines have taken over from the Egyptians the role of oppressor of Israel; and Saul is taking over from Moses the role of God's agent of salvation and deliverance.

As Samuel first sees Saul, God specifically identifies Saul to the seer as "the man ... who

shall rule over my people." There is no explanation, no rationale for the announcement; God's choice is without qualification. Note, however, that the theme of the passage is God's concern for Israel, for "my people." The emphasis is not on anointing for the purpose of legitimizing a monarchy or for enhancing an individual; the purpose is saving the people of Israel.

Verses 18-21. Samuel the seer and Saul of the tribe of Benjamin have their first meeting. Saul's servant was correct. The seer was able to tell Saul—even before he asked—about the donkeys that had been lost. But the matter of the lost donkeys becomes secondary in importance to the fact that "all Israel's desire" is, as Samuel declares, "fixed" on Saul. The hopes and aspirations of the entire people, their wealth and power, their security and future, depend on Saul.

Imagine Saul's amazement! He came to the seer in search of some donkeys, and he ends up with a call from God! Like Moses (Exodus 3:11; 4:10) and Gideon (Judges 6:15), however, Saul expresses a reluctance to lead. He humbly declares his unworthiness in words that echo Gideon's declaration that he is of obscure and humble origin, not the kind of person on whom should be fixed "all Israel's desire." Saul inquires why Samuel would have said such a strange thing, but this inquiry is left unanswered.

To protest and express reluctance and misgivings about one's ability to carry out a mission are not uncommon responses in Scripture of people who have received a divine call. As noted in the preceding paragraph, Moses and Gideon both expressed reluctance to lead when called by God. Jeremiah also protested his call (Jeremiah 1:6).

Verses 22-24. Ignoring Saul's question about why he has said such astonishing things to him, Samuel takes Saul and his servant boy to a large banquet hall where about thirty other people have gathered. Samuel seats Saul "at the head of those who had been invited" (verse 22) and presents to Saul a special piece of meat that had been set aside just for him. God has identified Saul as the one who will rule Israel; therefore, Samuel treats Saul as though he were already king.

We can imagine that Saul's amazement is growing at every turn. First he is told, out of the blue, that he is the one for whom his people long. Then, he is treated as guest of honor at a banquet to which he had received no invitation. Remember, the narrative began with a somewhat leisurely search for missing donkeys; it has now come to the point of deference given to a bewildered king-designate.

1 Samuel 9:26-10:1. Samuel secretly anoints Saul "ruler" over Israel. Both the early hour of the morning and the sending away of Saul's servant boy indicate Samuel's desire that, at this point, Saul's anointing as king be done without witnesses.

Anointing was a sacramental act, a symbolic outward deed performed by a human being that represented a spiritual act that God was doing. It was a ritual whereby a person chosen for a particular office, such as that of priest and especially king, was consecrated by God for that office. First Samuel 10:1 gives us a fine glimpse of how anointing was done. We read that "Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his [meaning Saul's] head." Then Samuel pronounced a formula of anointing: "The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel." The "vial of oil" was probably a small clay flask or juglet filled with spiced olive oil. A recipe for

making anointing oil is given in Exodus 30:22-25.

1 Samuel 10:20-24. As presented in this passage, all concerns that Samuel may have had earlier about publicly setting a king over Israel are gone. Samuel brings the tribes together and, by lot, narrows the field of possible candidates for king.

Samuel first established by lot that the king was to come from the tribe of Benjamin (verse 20). Samuel then identified the "family of the Matrites [MAY-trites]" as the family from whom the king was going to come (verse 21). Then "man by man," Samuel cast lots to identify the first king of Israel. And, as we would expect, "Saul the son of Kish was taken by lot" (verse 21).

It is intriguing that, once the lot was cast and Saul son of Kish was identified as the person who was to be the first king of Israel, "he could not be found." The reluctant Saul, who in 1 Samuel 9:21 had expressed serious reservations about his suitability to be the person on whom "all Israel's desire [is] fixed" (9:20), now hides to try to avoid his divinely anointed destiny. God, overseeing the establishment of Saul as ruler of Israel, informs the people as to the reluctant leaders whereabouts. Poor Saul was found "hidden ... among the baggage" (10:22). In spite of Samuel's previous words and the outcome of the choosing by lot, Saul's aversion to leadership is not cured easily or quickly.

If the people of Israel felt the need to have a ruler who looked like a leader, someone who could instill confidence and courage in the people as they faced the growing threat from the Philistines, Saul fit the bill. First Samuel 10:23 echoes the words of 9:2 in describing Saul as being "head and shoulders taller" than

anyone else. Indeed, Saul's height seems to be his only commendable feature. But, he has been chosen by lot; and Samuel endorses him. The aged judge's assertion that "there is no one like him among all the people" (10:24) is similar to statements about Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10-11) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:25). Hearing Samuel's words, the people publicly proclaim Saul the first king of Israel: "Long live the king!" (1 Samuel 10:25).

Prayer

O God who chooses the least likely among us to be your instruments, help us to accept your call to service, no matter how inadequate we may feel. May we always remember that our empowerment for leadership comes from you alone. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.