

How Long?
1 Samuel 16:1-13
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Can I start with a question?

What did you give up for Lent? ...Was it eating out? ...Be honest. Was it sports? ...Did you think you'd be giving up *church* for Lent?

The coronavirus has sure changed things in short order, hasn't it?

I was perusing the internet the other day and came across a meme that had been posted by a pastor. It simply read, "Well, I didn't plan on giving up *this* much for Lent..."

I have to tell you, if you think worship feels artificial on *that* side of the screen, imagine what I'm feeling on this side – preaching to an empty sanctuary, dreaming about better days when we were all here together.

Frankly, I don't like it.

I don't like not seeing you.

I don't like not hugging you.

I don't like not hearing you groan with disdain at my some of my poor jokes.

I don't like worshipping "remotely."

I mean, I usually hug so many people on Sunday mornings that I come home with your make up on my collar. In fact, Christen is worried when I *don't* come home on Sundays with makeup on my collar. But here I am not needing to scrub the makeup off my white collared shirts for the second Sunday in a row...

I miss you!

I miss Richard Dockum coming in before anybody else to get the building ready, blasting his music as he walks the halls – music, by the way, that ranges anywhere from the Beach Boys to Iron Maiden.

I miss Les Cummings coming in before Sunday school, shaking my hand, and saying "Hello, brother." I always ask how he's doing and he always tells me that if he "were any better, he'd be dead." I think it an allusion to eternity with God, but I'm not sure...

I miss having the Martinez girls come in and hug me profusely... unless they're wearing glitter. Then they know better than to hug pastor Dan. Pastor Dan hates glitter.

I miss the energy and spirit of excitement that our Praise Team brings to worship each and every week.

I miss Kris Turner's handshakes. If you didn't know, Kris Turner gives the best handshakes... and the best compliments. My head grows two hat sizes each time Kris talks to me.

I miss watching Sid hand out guest bags to first time visitors. Is there a better greeter out there than Sid? I doubt it.

I miss the chiming of the start of worship as the Christ Candle is lit. And I miss the small level of anxiety I feel each Sunday to see if the dad-gum candle will light this week!

I miss giving you an "open-eyed" benediction each week.

Heck, I even miss hearing Fred Jacobs talking through the entirety of the Welcome and Announcements. He's the only member we have who believes the greeting time starts the moment he enters the room and ends only when he has decided it's over. And I swear, you can hear his voice from anywhere in the church. It's like the man swallowed a megaphone.

I miss you. I miss hearing your voices. I miss seeing your faces. I miss embracing you.

I mean, Greek word for church is *ekklesia* which literally means, "gathered community." How can we be the *ekklesia* when we can't physically gather?!

And I think it's because of that that as I read this story this week, I'm drawn not to David — who is meant to be the central figure of the story — but to Samuel, the prophet who is faithfully obedient to God, even when it feels risky, even when he doesn't like it.

Saul, you remember, was the first king over the tribes of Israel. At God's leading, Samuel had anointed him, too. And the way scripture tells it, God chose Saul because Saul was so easy on the eyes.

"There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else."

Saul was tall, dark, and handsome — and he was rich! That's what 1 Samuel 9:1-2 tell us. Saul definitely looked the part of king — a real JFK type. He was good-looking, tall and strong, and many thought the most handsome man in all the land; Israel's first Prince Charming; real Disney leading man type.

There was only one problem: what Saul had in physical beauty, he lacked in substance.

Chosen by God and anointed as king at the start of chapter 10, God had rejected him outright before the end of fifteenth chapter — because of his disobedience. *Five chapters*: that's all it took for the first king of Israel's true colors to show through. What had looked so good to the eye, turned out not to have the right heart to lead God's people.

Where I grew up, we had a saying about such people. We'd have said that Saul was "all flash and no substance."

That is when God called on Samuel to fill his horn with oil and to set out south to Bethlehem. The prophet, Samuel, was to find Saul's replacement among the sons of Jesse, and to anoint him as king.

We know how that story ends. We know that each and every one of David's brothers was presented to Samuel like a show pony before little, bitty David was hauled in from the field and put before the prophet.

The last time I preached this passage, I enjoyed bringing some of our biggest and strongest young men to the front of the sanctuary. For those of you who remember, I had Cory Allen come up and play Eliab.

Eliab was the eldest son. When Eliab came before Samuel, he was so impressive looking — so big, strong, and handsome that Samuel thought to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." If you know Cory, you know that big, strong, and handsome is pretty dad-gum good description of him.

But the LORD didn't choose Eliab...

On that day, Wayne Koski played the part of the second brother, Abinidab. But the LORD rejected Abinidab...

James Dockum stood in for the third brother, Shammah. But the LORD hadn't chosen Shammah...

And then Reyes, Geoffrey, Ryan Winstead, and Chris Koski came up — but it wasn't any of those brothers either.

"The LORD has not chosen any of these," Samuel proclaimed. "Aren't there any others??"

The youngest of the brothers was out shepherding the flock. The "youngest" is the Bible's way of saying the "smallest." The little boy, David, was the smallest of his brothers. He was the least likely to lead an army or overthrow a standing king. That Sunday, he was played by little Josh Koski — the "youngest" of the Koski clan, who only stood a full head shorter than anyone else that morning.

And the moment Samuel saw David, he knew. He knew this young, small boy, was Israel's new hope for the future.

That's how today's story ends – but it's not where it started...

We forget...we forget about how Saul's kingship ended. And we forget about how Saul's rejection by God effected Samuel.

We need only look back one verse. One small verse just before our passage this morning gives us a glimpse of how Saul's kingship *and his relationship with Samuel* came to a tragic end.

1 Samuel chapter 15, verse 35 reads: "Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but *Samuel grieved over Saul...*"

Today, I relate with Samuel.

I know that "this too shall pass," but I am grieving the loss of the way things were.

I am grieving the loss of hearing our choir and praise team live and in person.

I am grieving the loss of hearing some of you read scripture and offer a prayer over the offering.

I am grieving not seeing your faces in the pews this morning. I keep looking for you past this camera and you aren't there.

But I am also feeling a tug from the LORD to get up out of my grief and to get busy figuring out how we will be church when we cannot physically gather together.

What was it that the LORD said to Samuel at the beginning of the passage?

He said, "How long will you grieve over Saul? ... Get up, Samuel. Fill your horn with oil and get ready for the next thing."

I can almost hear LORD this morning: "How long will you grieve, Dan? So you can't gather for a season. So Easter might have to be postponed. So you don't get your fill of hugs. Get up, Dan. Fill your horn with oil and get ready for this new thing."

And the thing is, God isn't just tugging at me. God is tugging at *us*.

Church family, we are going have to figure out a new way to be church over the next few weeks. We will have to check in on each other. We will have to think about our

newest members who aren't plugged in just yet and our oldest members who can be so easily forgotten because we so rarely see them in worship.

We will have to learn how to have meetings virtually. We will have to get into the habit of not only checking social media with our phones, of not only texting with our phones, but also making actual phone calls with our phones. What a novel concept!

We will need to mobilize our younger members to be ready to help our more at risk members. We will need to consider how we can help parents whose children won't be going back to school before they have to go back to work. We will need to get creative with how we do worship together.

And we will need to commit ourselves to one another at a deeper, more impactful level than at any time in recent history. Because we are not just a "group of ten or more" who happen to cross paths once a week. We are the church – and no virus can stop that.

At the start of this sermon, I asked you what you gave up for Lent.

Was it eating out? Or sports? ... Was it church?

This lenten journey has asked us to give up more than we ever expected. But maybe now is the time to reframe the way we ask that question.

It was our former Pastoral Resident, Rev. Jennifer Rutter, who said: "We give up all sorts of things, not to lose weight or clean house [spiritually speaking], *but to make space for God.*"

Maybe the question for us in this incredible time isn't what are we having to give up, *but in what ways can we be making space for God?*

Can we experience the Lenten journey if we think we already know where it ends?

I don't believe we so. But we can take the next step faithfully, even if we're still grieving over what has been lost.

We can get up, fill our horn, and set off on this new adventure *together* – ready to bless and anoint whatever it is that God is leading us to.

And at the end of it all, do you know what we will be?

We will be a stronger, more nimble, more pliable, closer-knit, and love-filled community of faith in spite of COVID-19 than we ever were before it knocked on our door.

Keep the faith, First Baptist family. God is not through with us yet. Amen.