

Scripture texts:

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Mark 4:26-32

At his anointing, young David is completely unaware that God has magnificent plans for him; to become a great king who provides and cares for his people, who protects them from the enemy, and builds great cities and paves the way for their worship of YAHWEH in the Temple.

King Saul is unaware that David will be his successor, for the anointing takes place very quietly among the elders of Bethlehem and is kept secret.

David begins his service to King Saul not long after his anointing. Saul has continually disobeyed God and does not take responsibility for his actions. He asks for mercy, and promises to make amends, yet he doesn't change. He sets his own will above the command of the LORD, and fails to grow in God's wisdom. This ego-centric behavior grows to an all-consuming passion that threatens the welfare of the nation of Israel. God therefore brings forth a new king, one who looks after God's heart.

David's strength is in his reliance on the LORD, and his faithful obedience to all the LORD requires of him. David also makes grave mistakes during his life, but in contrast, David confesses his sin and truly repents for his wrongdoing. He looks after God's heart and, nurtured in Wisdom, he becomes wise himself.

This is comforting to know, that no matter how many times we err, turning our selves back to God in repentance and changing our habit, is all that God requires.

The Philistines are the enemies of Israel and regularly taunt and threaten the people unmercifully, causing them to live in stark fear. When David kills the Philistine Goliath with one stone, he quickly gains fame for his courage as a great warrior, despite his young age. David is introduced to Saul's court as a gifted musician and warrior; and with these two gifts he begins serving the court, growing under God's direction which after many faithful years of leadership eventually leads the nation to spiritual and political vigor. Throughout his life David does not hesitate to reach out to God regarding his personal life and the trials of being king; he thus prevails because of his unswerving reliance on God's power.

If we lived in Bethlehem during the time of David, which was more than 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus, we may have thought David was too young and inexperienced, and too insignificant in birth order to be king. His own father dismissed him as too young and therefore did not call him from his sheep-herding to attend the sacrifice with Samuel. It was Samuel who asked if there were any remaining sons of Jesse. But as we consider the end of David's gloriously successful reign, we finally understand that human perception is often flawed, or

deceived by preconceptions, jealousies and our own egos, or cultural expectations; and finally, 1,000 years later when David's grandson Jesus was born, the world did not recognize him because they saw him only with human eyes. Remembering these things gives us pause to make value judgments on others.

Has anyone ever perceived unique gifts in you that you yourself may not have recognized? This might be an interesting conversation over the dinner table among your family and friends. We may find that talents, opportunities, and gifts have been quietly, subtly nurtured in our own life by God's grace in our daily experiences with others. To embrace these gifts as our unique opportunity to share them will certainly bring deeper and richer meaning to our life.

Yes, we are nurtured by the grace of God; but also, like the seed, we must struggle to emerge from our hard shell before we can reach up through the dark ground, to the warmth of the sun and the showers of rain (or in the desert, a sprinkler!) to coax us out of hibernation. It isn't easy being a seed!

The mustard seed is the tiniest of seeds and the bush is quite ordinary to look at – straggly, even. It grows as a voluntary weed in most places of the Holy Land. There is not much to distinguish it as impressive or beautiful; but it grows easily, nurtured by the sun and rain, and grows to become a welcome habitat for birds --and other small animals, who burrow in the shade near the roots. This is the picture Jesus has painted for us – to hear, understand and take to heart as an assurance that the kingdom of God is filled with ordinary people who can do extraordinary things by basking in the wisdom and grace of God's love for his creatures.

We may be ordinary, but we are capable of understanding our place in this world, a place where we can accomplish great things as we move forward, trusting that our difficulties in life, when met with integrity and forbearance, will prove to be character builders for which we will be thankful. Our gratitude will come from the realization that our God abides and never fails to see us through. All we have to do is ask!

We are 1.5 years into a pandemic with an unknown outcome of its long-term ramifications. Certainly, we have felt discouraged at times. Complications continue in every aspect of our lives; how we manage our jobs, our inability to even find a job, and the difficulties of social distancing.

Consider high school students just graduating, who thought this would be the time to spread their wings and explore new horizons and opportunities, are now wondering if college is viable or even attractive.

The college student is also facing disappointments and hurdles of education: a favorite professor being forced to leave; administrators who seem to be out of touch with their constituents; failing research projects that are required in order to graduate; struggles to make it financially through graduate school.

Choral students at NMSU are losing a beloved choral director after many years of unfortunate turnover within the music department. As a former faculty member, I am disheartened by the effect this constant change has had on the students. Lack of continuity has left them demoralized and questioning the decisions of others.

Churches, whose congregations are facing the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic are praying for God's guidance as we search for the best approach to rebuilding.

These are situations in our community today, and they are both personal and corporate matters of the heart, in which we seek the wisdom of God. God's heart is with his people; and when we look after God's heart, we look after his people.

Our difficulty arises in confusing the way of the kingdom with our ordinary way of doing things. Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing.

Jesus tells us that Grace abounds, in the air we breathe; in the very essence of our being, God's spirit rests. When we recognize its constant presence, we come to trust it as newfound strength to persevere through all that life sends our way. Strengthened, and encouraged by this presence within us, we are assured. We worry less; we don't give up; and walk with hope and confidence to the next obstacle lying in wait; for we also are assured there will be a "next." This is life at its most basic, but grace can mentally lift us above the fray and give us the ability to grow into new possibilities. And often, good outcomes follow great disappointment. David became the greatest king in the history of Israel, who led the Davidic line and God's beloved community to the birth of Jesus Christ.

The perceived research failure for a thesis may finally show remarkable, unexpected results; and the next choral director at NMSU may prove to be the very best of all who have come before.

Jesus helps us to grow spiritually by the power of God's grace working through us. In Mark, Jesus tells us:

To hear and understand what he is saying,
To receive his wisdom within our hearts and make it part of who we are becoming,
To grow in faith, trusting that God is over all and working for our good.

God is always at work behind the scenes. And God is still at work in the world today. Sometimes it is difficult for us to see or believe that he is, and it is often clear only to those who have eyes of faith. God's work today is of a different nature only in that the story of David relates specifically to how he moved and worked in Israel in order to bring salvation to the world. It is a particularly significant step in salvation history, since through Israel's monarchy, God will eventually provide the great king, who will die for the sins of the whole world. But God's work is not finished – the present day is also part of God's purpose for mankind.

We are finite, simple creatures compared to the infinite wisdom and majesty of God! Our Lord Jesus sees all, and knows all; and we are to trust his judgment, and take his parables to heart; because in the end, when we are obedient to his purpose and grow in trust with him, we know

that he is the one who came, by his abundant love and grace, to help us grow spiritually -- and emotionally -- slowly, over a lifetime, to transform us, to work for our good; and to secure our ultimate salvation from all that plagues us.

Like a soaring bird, we are then freed – we can rise above the fray and smile benignly at all life's complications, and realize we are just a tiny particle in this vast universe; and we have a lifetime on earth to do our best to cooperate with joy in God's grand and intricate scheme.

Each of us is a tiny, ordinary seed, imperceptibly growing in grace and goodness to be a useful, and hopefully extra-ordinary, "bush" in the kingdom of God; a kingdom that shelters the lost from the storms of life and gives its heart to the damaged and torn; a heart for God, and his people, that imparts a sense of freedom to love and live abundantly so that, in its shelter, we may be beautiful songbirds for the kingdom. This will be our ultimate reward.

Let us pray:

Day by day, dear Lord, three things we pray:

To see you more clearly,

to love you more dearly,

to follow you more nearly,

day by day. Amen.