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Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
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## “The God of Surprises”

Scripture Text: 1 Samuel 13:13-14, 16:1-13

Dear people of God, the opening line of the splendid movie, *The Elephant Man*, is “Life is full of surprises.” How true that is. Many of the films we enjoy are those that have surprise endings, such as *Psycho*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *The Sting*. What causes us to be surprised? Surprise happens when we take things for granted, when we anticipate that things will happen in the future the way they have always happened in the past, or when we anticipate something beforehand according to the usual sequence of events. Some philosophers say that we’re hardwired to anticipate and assume things, such as a cause and effect relation between events. When I let go of this pen and it falls to the ground, we assume that there is a cause and effect relation between the two. It would be very surprising if I let go of this pen and it remained suspended in the air or went up, wouldn’t it?

The God whom we meet in the Bible is a God of surprises. So much of what we read in the scriptures goes against common sense. Today’s

Sermon Lesson is one of those stories that seems not only to go against common sense, but seems to make no sense at all.

The ancient Israelites noticed that all the nations around them had a king to rule over them. They wanted to have a king also. Though Yahweh announced to them that they were not to have an earthly king like the other nations because the LORD God alone was to be their king, the stubborn Israelites refused to listen. And so, God acquiesces and says to them, “Okay, nation of Israel, if you want a king, I will allow you to have one, but you’ll be sorry.” Even so, the Israelites answered, “We’ll take that chance. We want to be like all the other nations. We feel left out. Why do we always have to be different?” Thus God sends them a king, Saul.

At first the Israelites are in love with Saul. He’s tall, dark, and handsome, and so, the women adore him. He’s strong and courageous, and so, the men feel confident in his rule. But what often happens after a monarch rules for a long time, in this case, 42 years, he gets carried away with his power and it gets him into trouble.

Though God permitted Saul to be king over the United Monarchy of Israel, he was not to take over the duties of the priests. God wanted the functions of priest and king to remain separated so that no one person

could become the absolute sovereign over both politics and religion. That's a good rule to remember even today. Whenever religion and politics are united, such as in Iran, then you no longer have a free society. You instead have a totalitarian government where the political leaders are also the religious leaders. Those who adhere to a religion different from the official religion of the government, then, are automatically second-class citizens who do not possess the same rights as the others.

The ancient Israelites were never to start a battle unless they received the LORD's favor first, which was done by means of having a priest make a burnt offering asking for God's blessing. The king was never authorized to make the burnt offering; that was the priest's job. When the Philistine army confronted King Saul's troops in 1 Samuel, chapter 13, Saul was waiting for Samuel to offer a sacrifice before waging war. When Samuel didn't show up to perform his priestly duties, Saul took matters into his own hands and made the sacrificial offering himself, despite not being qualified to do so. Samuel finally shows up and chastises Saul for acting disobediently. Samuel declares at this time that God is very displeased with Saul and that the LORD will begin to search for a man after his own heart to rule over Israel.

Saul continues to make foolish mistakes. Though God is still gracious to him, even allowing him to triumph over the despised Amalekites--historical enemies of Israel--in 1 Samuel, chapter 15, Saul blunders by not following God's orders as he spares King Agag of Amalek and allows the Israelites to take some of the loot instead of utterly destroying it. As a result, God sets into motion the process whereby the kingdom is to be taken from Saul. Though he had been the ruler of the United Monarchy for 42 years, God was already searching for the next king, for one who would be a man after his own heart in ruling over Israel.

This ruler would be someone who would seek to know God, to please God, and to serve God in all he says and does. Samuel had confidence that this person was out there somewhere. It was just a matter of time before God would reveal who he is. Samuel had great hope and expectation that things will be better for the Israelites when this new God-fearing man becomes king. He's already anticipating and speculating as to whom this person might be. He's wondering what he looks like, what type of man he is, in what ways he's like Saul and in what ways he differs from Saul. Samuel is probably filling in a few blanks already in his head, making several assumptions about this new king's appearance and what he's been doing up to now. Is he a military

commander? Is he already in the royal court as an advisor? Is he a wealthy man, with thousands of cattle and sheep, or many possessions and servants? Many images and ideas are flooding through Samuel's mind.

Finally God's call comes to him. Samuel is to travel to Bethlehem to the family of Jesse, where one of Jesse's sons is to be anointed king. Though he's excited about the prospect of meeting this new king chosen by God, Samuel is also fearful. After all, Saul is still king and very powerful. Samuel said right to Saul's face that he wouldn't be king much longer. If Saul hears that Samuel has gone to find the new king, Saul will try to kill him along the way. No wonder that Samuel is quite apprehensive about this mission. God knows this, and comes to Samuel with some advice as to how to go about the business of discovering God's choice to be the next king of Israel. The advice consists of inviting the host, Jesse, all his sons, and the elders of the city of Bethlehem to participate in a worship service with him.

How many of you when you need to make a major decision in your life bring that concern to church here on Sunday mornings? You don't need to tell me to pray for it and to announce it so that others may pray for it as well. But you should bring it here and lift it up to God silently. It makes a difference whether you pray for something at home alone or

whether you pray for it here in church. You may be surprised that the answer might come to you here in this chapel as you are communing with God's people when you haven't heard it at home alone.

Samuel, no doubt, remembers that an important criterion for Saul was his height, and so, assumes that the new king would have a similar appearance. How often do we assume that because God worked in a certain way before, that God will work in the same way again? Making that assumption makes life easier for us. We don't need to think as hard. We don't need to pray as hard. We don't need to grapple with God's possibilities for us as much . . . until we see that what we thought was God's answer turns out not to be. And so, we're back at square one. And that's what happens to Samuel. After seeing Eliab, Jesse's oldest son, Samuel assumes this is God's choice. He's tall, handsome, strong, and mature. He's the oldest, the most obvious choice, the safest choice, the logical choice. He's got all the right stuff. But God says no, for God looks on the heart, not on one's outward appearance.

We today also shouldn't always assume that the most obvious choice, the safest choice, the most logical choice is the right choice. We must always be open to God's leading, even if God seems to be saying something we would not imagine. Especially if God seems to be saying

something we would not imagine.

And so Samuel directs Jesse to have seven of his sons pass before him. But God rejects all seven to be the future king of the United Monarchy. Samuel, no doubt, is utterly confused at this point. He's wondering what's going on? God sent him to Jesse's house in Bethlehem to find the new king among his sons, and yet God has rejected all of them. Samuel finally asks Jesse in desperation, "Are all your sons here?" Jesse answers, "There is only the youngest left. But he's out in the fields watching over the sheep." Samuel, thinking that he has nothing to lose, says dejectedly to Jesse, "Oh well, send for him and let's take a look at him." Samuel isn't expecting much, and he's not disappointed. David finally arrives. Though he's handsome, he's not much to look at in any other way. He's not very tall and not very muscular. But Samuel hears the voice of God, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one" (1 Samuel 16:12).

"Say what, LORD?" asks Samuel. "Are you sure? Are you looking at the same person I am? Why he's still just a boy!" But Samuel obeys and anoints David. From that moment, God's spirit rests mightily upon David.

Our assumptions can sometimes get us into trouble. Our assumptions can often lead to disappointment. We think we have God all figured out. And then God doesn't do what we expect. A prayer goes

unanswered. Something doesn't happen that we think should have. And so, we get frustrated. We begin to become mistrustful. Maybe we feel that way because we assume that God is accountable to me and my desires and not the other way around. We don't think that maybe God wants to surprise us. We don't imagine that maybe God has something in store for us that's better than what we supposed.

It would be very sad if we missed these wonderful surprises that God intended for us. But we could have missed them if we weren't paying attention. We could have missed them if we've supposed we had God all figured out, that God had to act in a certain way, that God had to do our bidding rather than we doing God's bidding. Even the aged Samuel who had served God faithfully his whole life had to learn the lesson that you can never anticipate what God is going to do next.

Don't ever assume that God must see things the way you see them. Don't ever assume you know more than God knows. Don't ever assume how God will use someone. And don't ever assume that if something happens the way we desire, then God wanted it to happen that way. What wonderful surprises have we missed in our life because we have made those assumptions?

God will surprise us. He is the God of interruptions, the God of the

unexpected. Don't ever presume to know the mind of God. God is going to surprise us. But we can't just live our life aimlessly and wait for it to happen. We must remain open to such surprises. That means we must keep close to God. We must allow God to draw near to us. We must be focused on learning God's will for our lives and keep attuned to what God is doing and what God is saying to us. When we do those things, we may discover what that wonderful surprise is that God is waiting to reveal to us. It might even be better than the movies! Amen.