

God's Story: Plot Twist

[1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)

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Last week, we saw the people of Israel gather together and demand that their leader, the judge Samuel, give them a King. And that's exactly what Samuel did. Samuel appointed a man named Saul as King of Israel. And if you close your eyes and picture what a King looks like, that's what Saul looked like – he was movie star handsome, a full head taller than all the other people in Israel, strong and bold and brave. And yet, Saul was a disaster. Ever since Samuel appointed Saul as King, things have gone from bad to worse for the people of Israel, and the once warm friendship between Samuel and Saul, the Judge and the King, has fallen apart, to the point where the two are openly quarreling with each other. A power struggle between the two most powerful people in the nation, the old leader and the new one, is never a good thing for a country – one false move, one rash comment, and the whole nation could be plunged into civil war. And at these tense, pivotal moment in the history of Israel, God decides to send Samuel to Bethlehem.

And that is a surprise. Nowadays, everyone knows where Bethlehem is. Years of Christmas Carols, Sunday School Pageants and Charlie Brown specials mean that even people who've never been to

church probably know that Bethlehem is where Jesus was born. But Bethlehem also had a different claim to fame: it was a birthplace of King David, and of course that's part of those Christmas carols and stories as well – it happens once in Royal David's city, Mary and Joseph went to the city of David because they were David's descendants. David was Bethlehem's favorite son, their one claim to fame, because if you look even further back, before David became the first great king of Israel, back then Bethlehem was completely insignificant. It was a backwater little town, with no great importance, no influence on the rest of the nation, nothing to differentiate it from hundreds of other little towns in the land of Israel. The prophet Micah called Bethlehem the least of the villages of the tribe of Judah, not worth being included on a list of Judah's clans. Bethlehem is completely insignificant, so it's the last place that you would expect God to send Samuel. Samuel is in the middle of this huge battle with Saul to see who will control the nation, who will the people follow, Samuel or Saul, so you would think Samuel would be going to powerful people, powerful places, to win support for his side, to gain allies among the rich and influential, that's where you would think Samuel would go. But he doesn't do that. Instead, Samuel heads for Bethlehem, insignificant, backwater little Bethlehem.

And you can understand the reaction from Bethlehem's elders when they see Samuel heading down the road towards their little town. These elders are used to dealing with little everyday problems of small

town life – Sheltiel’s goat got into his neighbour’s grain again, that kind of thing – but now they see Samuel, one of the two most powerful men in the entire kingdom, the great and terrifying prophet Samuel is coming to Bethlehem. And Samuel is quarreling with the other most powerful man in the kingdom, King Saul, and the last thing anyone in Bethlehem wants to do is to get caught in between Saul and Samuel’s struggle for control in Israel. This is like the King or the President just rolling up unannounced with their entire entourage in the middle of nowhere, and when the King comes to town, everything changes – The elders know this has to mean something, and they’re convinced it’s bad news, so they head out to meet Samuel at the gate, trembling, cowering in fear at the approach of this cantankerous old prophet, and they ask him – do you come peaceably? Do you think we’re in league with King Saul, are you here to declare war and wipe us out, are you going to try and lead us in armed rebellion against the King? Samuel, please, tell us, what are you doing here? And Samuel tells them that he comes in peace – he just came to offer a sacrifice, to meet with the local people and eat with them and celebrate with them – he invites the elders to come and join him at the sacrifice.

Now, this is a big deal. This is one of the two most powerful men in all of Israel, and he is hosting a celebration in Bethlehem and inviting the whole town to participate – again, it’s like the Queen or the President arrives in town, pulls you out of the crowd and invites you to the lavish

celebratory shindig they'll be throwing. Everybody who was anybody in town would be rushing home, pulling out their cleanest tunics and the few bits of finery they save for special occasions, to go and sit and talk and eat with the prophet Samuel. Because hey, Who knows? Maybe one of your kids will catch his eye and impress him, and he'll take him on as a servant or as his apprentice – you never know, right? So Samuel and the whole town are all gathered together, the meat is roasting, the music is playing, the wine is flowing, and everybody, everybody, everybody in Bethlehem is there to meet Samuel.

Well, almost everybody. Somebody has to keep an eye on the sheep, right? Parties come and go, but tomorrow when Samuel leaves, life will go on, the livestock still need tending, so of course somebody has to miss this party, the biggest party, maybe the only party that Bethlehem has ever seen, to keep an eye on the sheep. And that somebody would be the most insignificant person in that insignificant little town, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, a nobody named David. So when Samuel is introduced to Jesse's sons, he looks them over carefully, one after another, and each time the old prophet shakes his head and looks on to the next one, and the next, until all seven have been inspected and rejected, and Samuel turns his eyes on Jesse and asks "Is this it? Are these all your sons?" And Samuel refuses to continue the celebration until Jesse calls in that nobody from the field, until David enters his presence, and as soon as he does, Samuel does the last thing

anyone could have expected – he pulls out a flask of oil and pours it over David's head, which in Israel was the official way of crowning someone King. There in that insignificant little town, Samuel finds the most insignificant person possible, and then and there makes him King of Israel. Now, of course Israel already has a King. Saul is still in command of Israel's armies, he's still got all the power and wealth and control. In that moment, anointing David as King doesn't change anything for Saul. It changes something for David. From this moment onwards, David is no longer insignificant, an afterthought, a forgotten son out in the fields while everyone else enjoys the party. From this moment onwards, David is the blessed and anointed and chosen agent of the Lord God Almighty, the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward, and that Spirit will lead him through every trial, every blessing, it will lead him to become the greatest king the nation of Israel will ever know. And just as David is forever changed by this moment, so too is Bethlehem, because there's now a king in Bethlehem, in the most unexpected place, in the most unexpected way, the King arrives in Bethlehem, and when a King comes to town, everything changes. The elders of Bethlehem were right to tremble when they saw Samuel coming, because what that prophet did in Bethlehem changed the course of history, it uprooted one kingdom and planted the seed for another, a new kingdom chosen and blessed by the Lord God Almighty, a kingdom that would provide the foundation for a

far greater kingdom, ruled by a far greater king, descended from King David and born, again, in the little village of Bethlehem. From such humble, insignificant beginnings, the spirit of God moved, and in the person of Jesus Christ, our world would be changed forever.

Now, none of us gathered here today are kings or judges or prophets – we don't have the kind of power that people like Samuel and Saul and David had. We're just Presbyterians, and sometimes we can seem pretty insignificant, one little church, one little cluster of people in one little corner of the world. But the thing is, we are servants of the same God who led the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem, we are servants of the same God who called David out from the fields and brought him to the throne, the same God who became a child in Bethlehem and the King of Kings at Calvary. The same Spirit of God that moved mightily on David that day is moving here today in this place, among us. There is a King here in Richmond just as surely as there was a King in Bethlehem, and when a King comes to town, everything changes. We have been anointed as God's representatives, God's ambassadors to this world, agents serving the King of Kings, and that anointing doesn't mean that everything is easy – it doesn't change all the trouble and pain that still seems so strong out there in the world. It changes things here. It changes us. God's anointing power comes to us, weak and insignificant as we are, because our God is a God who loves to take hold of insignificant people in insignificant places and use them to change the

world, to recreate and restore and redeem those who are fallen, those who are weak, those who are in despair, so that they can carry that power and love on to those around them, so that the Spirit of God can move mightily through the People of God to build for the coming Kingdom of God. We are gathered together here to offer ourselves, small and insignificant as we may be, as anointed servants of the King, to let his power move in us, to let his love grow among us and between us so that we can serve the people in our lives with such unity and passion that everyone who sees us will know that Jesus Christ is King in Richmond and throughout the world. And as God's people, anointed to serve even in our weakness, God gives us the strength to see the world through divine eyes, to see the people around us as no longer insignificant, no longer irrelevant, but to see them as God sees them, not outward appearances, but to see the heart. As the people of God, anointed and called and blessed for his service, filled with his Spirit, let us live from this moment onwards as people who will change our churches change our city, change our world for Jesus Christ, as people who are no longer insignificant, because we belong to the King of Kings. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.