7-15/16-17 Rev. Amy Haines

1 Samuel 16:1-13 The Heart of David Unlikely Heroes of the Bible Series

Those of you who love to read—can you ever truly judge a book by its cover? Nowadays, with so many books vying for shelf space, publishing companies will try splashy covers or unique images to try and capture a reader’s attention. Yet some of the best classics can be found with a nondescript cover.

Covers cannot tell a reader if the story inside will capture one’s attention or lose it in the first fifty pages. Covers cannot tell whether the written word will be thought provoking or mind numbing. Covers cannot tell whether the story will elicit emotions of connection or boredom.

What is true for books can also be true for television.

In 2009, a nervous, middle-aged, wild hair woman took the stage on the TV show “Britain’s Got Talent.” In a world where singers are often expected to be young and glamourous, at first glance the audience and judges dismissed her, some rolling their eyes while others snickered.

Then she began to sing.

The audience and the judges were shocked and spellbound. The smiles gave way to cheers and a standing ovation. All three judges gave her high marks. They even admitted their prejudices.

Overnight this matronly woman who learned to sing in church choirs became an internet sensation, as the world became captivated by Susan Boyle’s pure voice singing the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*.

It was a great, feel-good story; but it also revealed a flaw in contemporary culture. Too often we make judgments on the basis of external appearances.

-adapted from J Michael Shannon on preaching.com: appearances

We may meet a handsome athlete or actor and think, “Wow! What a hero!” only to later find out that underneath the flashy smile and handsome looks is a selfish, shallow man. Or we may meet a coworker that at first glance seems shy and homely yet as we get to know her come to find out that she has a deep faith that is shared through many mission trips and volunteer hours at the local shelter.

A few years ago at Blanchard Valley Hospital in FindlayI surprised one of the older desk volunteers when I told her I was a pastor. I could tell she has not had much experience with female pastors when she made a comment about being unable to know anymore who is clergy merely by looking at our appearances.

From Hollywood to politics to the office breakroom to the halls of the local high school, what brand names we wear, what makeup we use, what cars we drive, where we work, how much we weigh, how we exercise, how green are our homes, how happy are our families—all of these are criteria that some people use to judge others based solely on their appearances.

While there is nothing wrong with wanting to look good or with keeping a clean house,

appearances do not tell a person’s whole story. They do not tell how generous or stingy we are,

how much contentment or how much pain we are experiencing or how close or how far away we feel from the Lord on any given morning.

Can we tell by outward appearances if the persons sitting around us at this moment are having a good day or if they are wearing a mask to hide the pain inside of them? Can we tell by outward appearances if our neighbors are praising God for life’s blessings or if they are seeking God’s strength in a time of turmoil?

How often do we judge others on first appearances and neglect to see the unique child of God within each person? How often do we label others in our minds, even unconsciously, and therefore limit what God may be teaching us through that person? How often do we limit ourselves from what God is calling us to be or do? How much stock do we place on appearances when God chooses instead to look at our hearts?

I saw a biker’s story once that reminded me not to judge a person by their appearance. This biker was a big man who rode a big bike, and often parents who hurry their curious kids past the big bad biker dude. What these parents didn’t know was although he looked tough, he was a loving husband and father, a faithful Christian and hard working laborer, and he would be the first to run to help a stranger at any sign of trouble.

Appearances can be misleading. We may have it all together on the outside and inside be a nervous wreck, or we may be the sloppiest or slowest person in life but have a heart of gold and a deep faith within. Society has led us to believe that image is everything, but to God what matters is what is in the heart.

God does not care what brand we wear or what fake smile we place upon our face. When God looks at each of us God looks deeper—into our hearts, into our souls—to the place where our deepest dreams and deepest fears reside. And from the depth of who we are, from the deep well of our faith, God calls us to be who we are created to be, calling us to trust him, follow his Son, and hang on for the ride of our lives.

God told Samuel long ago, and God continues to tell us today, that looks don’t matter as much to God as the depth of our character and the willingness of our faith. God does not judge us by our appearances but judges our hearts. God looks deep into who we are, not fooled by the image we portray. God sees the quality of our hearts.

Many years ago the ancient Israelites were as image-obsessed as our society today. For years they had been governed by Almighty God through obedience to the Torah and through the leadership of judges and prophets lifted up by God at specific times for specific circumstances.

The Israelites knew they were God’s chosen people, but as they settled in Canaan and looked around at the other nations, they began to be obsessed with the idea of a king.

The last judge Samuel, who was also viewed as a prophet, he was getting on in years, and he and his sons looked scruffy and unappealing compared to the handsome heroic kings that surrounded the Israelites.

While God was not against the idea of a king, God’s kingly image was different from the image the people wanted. In Deuteronomy 17, God laid out his prototype of an Israelite king as one who shouldn't buy into the ancient bling of horses, wives or money, but should instead keep two copies of the Torah with him to read as a constant reminder to obey God and not exalt himself over the other members of the community. (Deuteronomy 17:14-20)

Such a king would not be a celebrity, but a servant.

But the people insisted. They wanted to be like other nations; they were tired of being different. They wanted to be seen as a legitimate nation and in their minds the only way to do that was to have a handsome heroic king.

So God gave them what they wanted: the prototypical image of a tall, dark and handsome monarch.

King Saul started off seeking to be faithful to God, yet quickly turned to follow his own desires as well as the desires of the crowd. He disobeyed God’s commands one too many times and God finally told Samuel that enough was enough. The time had come to anoint the next king of Israel, one who would be a man after God’s own heart, not a poster boy for the people of Israel.

Although Samuel grieved over the Lord’s rejection of Saul, Samuel obeyed when God told him to stop grieving and start doing the Lord’s work again. Samuel was then sent on a covert mission to Bethlehem, to share a sacrificial meal with the house of Jesse, and anoint from among Jesse’s sons the next king of Israel. This was a covert mission because if King Saul got wind of any challenger to his reign, all involved would be killed.

The prophet Samuel was human and judgmental like us, looking at height and appearance as he previewed the sons of Jesse. In that day and age, political leaders were prized for their height and for their looks. Those who looked strong were thought to be strong. Those who looked like leaders were expected to be the leaders. In biblical days the oldest sons were expected to inherit everything and the youngest sons received a mere pittance to help them survive.

So when Samuel saw Eliab, the firstborn, tall and good looking, Samuel thought to himself,

‘Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before me.”

Yet God responded with the most important line of this passage, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Can you imagine Samuel’s surprise and chagrin at hearing those words?!

Still Samuel continued to be influenced by appearance. Abinadab and Shammah both looked able, yet God passed them by. Four more sons of Jesse paraded before Samuel, and while all were still men in God’s favor, none were found worthy to be the next king.

Finally Samuel asked Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” Almost as an afterthought, Jesse replied, “The youngest is keeping the sheep.” David was still just a kid; he was out tending to his father’s flocks; he would have been the last one anyone expected to catch the eye of the prophet and of God.

Yet when David was summoned, and finally stood before the prophet, God surprised everyone by telling Samuel, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”

Ironically, our passage never tells us what God saw in David’s heart. Instead, the passage proclaims that he, too, was ruddy and handsome and had beautiful eyes. He would still pass the test for human appearance, but in God’s eyes, his heart is what mattered.

As a shepherd and as the youngest son, we can surmise that David had learned patience, gentleness and obedience. God knew that David would not be puffed up with pride in his own ability but instead would rely on the power and guidance of the Lord.

So David was anointed—secretly—as the future king of Israel. And Scripture records “the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.”

This is not to imply that later on David did not have his flaws. He became, after all, a military hero. Most of us know the story of his adultery with Bathsheba.

Suffice it to say, as one commentator wrote, “God’s choice of David and Saul, flawed as they both were, mirrors God’s choice of Israel, and God’s choice of us all.”

 --“Looking for Godzilla” 3-10-02 homileticsonline.com

God knows us. God knows our hearts, our flaws, and our dreams. And God can use us for ministry just as we are. Whether we are the youngest and most unlikely candidate or the outspoken leader of our community, God takes us as we are and molds us into a new creation—a child of God with a heart like God yearning to share a bit of heaven here on earth.

Young David reminds us that the only image that is everything is the image of God within each one of us. God does not look on our appearances or on our accomplishments; God looks on our hearts. God looks for clean hearts and willing spirits, knowing that we will not be perfect. God looks for men and women willing to listen, to learn, to follow God’s ways rather than the world’s ways.

The Bible is full of stories of average men and women chosen by God to lead God’s people.

Many were not the brightest or the best looking.

As one commentator noted, “If you read the Bible with an eye toward whom God chooses, you will see over and over again that God has let the gospel hang by a thread, committing the future to insignificant people, unnamed and unknown in many cases, but ordinary, not outlandish, in their talents.” -Homileticsonline.com, 6-2-91

Think about all of the unlikely heroes of the Bible who were called to fulfill God’s purposes.

..First it was Moses, a man with a stammer. God picked him as spokesperson.
Later the prophet Jonah ran in the opposite direction. God caught him, then sent him anyway.
Sarah couldn't have children. God made her the mother of a nation.
Jeremiah was speechless. God made him a prophet.
Caleb was 80 plus years old. God gave him a mountain.
Matthew was a social outcast. God made him a writer and apostle.
A little boy had only two loaves and five fish. God fed a multitude.
A widow had only two pennies. God financed the Kingdom.
Jesus appeared to be just a man. God made him -- our salvation.
Dorcas was a seamstress. God raised her from the dead.
Peter was a fisherman. God made him an evangelist.
Paul was a terrorist. God made him a theologian.
We just don't see as God sees. We don't get it.

 --“Looking for Godzilla” 3-10-02 homileticsonline.com

Yet this is the strange economy of God’s kingdom. The least likely are chosen as king, as prophet, as disciple, as leader. A cross gives way to an empty tomb. Death gives way to life on Easter morning. Resurrection and new life can occur not only for Jesus but also in the lives of Jesus’ followers.

God does not look at our outward appearance, although our appearance ought to reflect who we are and what we believe. Rather, God looks deep into our hearts to see the truth of our character. God judges by the heart and character of a person rather than by their appearance.

God chooses the least likely to be his leaders because God knows that they will rely on him rather than relying on their own merit. God is looking for disciples who will seek after God’s own heart.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Are we willing to seek after God’s own heart? Are we here today open to following God’s desires rather than our own desires? Are we open to loving God and loving neighbor? Are we open to being heroes who have heart?

That is what our VBS children will learn on Mondays the next two weeks:

*God’s heroes have heart!*

And when God’s everyday unlikely heroes have heart, then God’s work is done in this world—within, and among, and through us.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “You don’t have to have a college degree to serve.

You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve.

You don’t have to know Plato and Aristotle.

You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity.

You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics.

You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.”

-quoted in a sermon by Damian Phillips, sermoncentral.com

Our VBS kids will be encouraged these next two weeks to “do good, seek peace and go after it­­­.”

Are we willing to join them on this journey of faith and life and love, to be men and women, boys and girls, who seek to serve reflecting God’s heart in our hearts and in our lives?

May it be so. Let us pray.