



“Not What You Expected”

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Hayward, California**

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1 Samuel 15:34–16:13 (NRSV)

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

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It could be that you’ve never heard of a woman named Susan Boyle. Until about two months ago, no one had. And if you’ve been nowhere near a television, newspaper, radio, or the Internet, you may not have heard about this latest singing phenomenon from *Britain’s Got Talent*, the British version of *American Idol*. When Susan Boyle walked out on the stage on April 11, what the judges saw—what the world saw—was an ordinary 47-year-old woman in a conservative frock appropriate for church-going, and a physique that could be described as “sturdy.” Her awkward appearance was matched by her awkward introduction of herself, and there was a good deal of eye-rolling and groaning from the audience as she announced she would be singing “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical *Les Miserables*. If you’ve seen the YouTube video, you know what happened next. From the first note, she blew them away. The judges’ eyebrows hit the ceiling, and their jaws dropped. In a culture trained to believe that only beautiful, polished people have talent, no one expected the amazing voice that emerged from the unassuming, decidedly unpolished Susan Boyle.

In some ways, our modern culture is not so different from that of ancient Israel. Like ours, ancient Israel was a culture in which the powerful—those with the most land, or wealth, or the biggest army—usually won the contest, whatever kind of contest it was. It was a culture in which power and prestige was often inherited through the family line, and a culture in which the oldest son typically had the place of privilege among his siblings. So it isn’t hard to imagine the eyebrow-raising and jaw-dropping that must have occurred in our scene from today’s Hebrew Bible reading.

Our scripture today happens right about halfway through the book of First Samuel, and is an important turning point in the narrative. The first half of the book tells about the rise of Samuel as Israel’s most influential priest and prophet and the rise of Saul as Israel’s first anointed king. At this point in the story, however, it has become apparent that Saul is just not working out, and God has decided to choose a new king, one who will be able to transform Israel from a scraggly collection of individual tribes into a single nation. God’s choice, however, is just not what anyone expected.

Even Samuel, the wise prophet, is charmed by the outward appearance of physical beauty and power, but in God's version of "Israel's Got Talent," the obvious contestants are not the winners. As the first of Jesse's sons are paraded before him, Samuel thinks, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, is tall and handsome and looks like a proper candidate for a king. But God reminds Samuel that human choices often miss the mark. "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him," God admonishes Samuel. "For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." One by one the seven sons of Jesse pass by Samuel, but none of them is God's chosen. Instead of any of the tall, handsome older sons, God has chosen David, the youngest, hardly grown, and not even invited to the party, but out in the pasture tending the family sheep. Forget for a moment that you know the rest of the story, what David will become. God's choice is not what you expected.

The choice of David is unexpected on a variety of levels. First of all, he's a younger son—not just a second son, but the eighth son. He's not a warrior or a man of power, but a young shepherd. His family, from the dusty little village of Bethlehem, is not prominent or wealthy or politically connected, and in fact, his family tree is not one that anyone would consider as royal lineage. At the roots of David's family tree is Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute in the book of Joshua. Choosing David to be king means dispensing with all the usual avenues of power and influence in the ancient world. And yet, our being surprised by the choice of David means that we are not really paying attention to a fundamental theme that is carried out again and again throughout the biblical narrative: "For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Over and over again, the Bible reminds us that God chooses the most unlikely candidates for transforming the world and shifting history.

Jacob was the rascally second son who cheated his brother out of his birthright and his father-in-law out of his flock of sheep, yet he founded the family that became the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses was a fugitive from the law and "slow of speech and slow of tongue," yet he became a leader who defied the Pharaoh and led his people out of slavery. Esther was an orphan member of the exiled Israelites, yet she became queen of Persia and saved her people from a genocidal plot. Jesus was born in a stable to a carpenter and an unwed teenage mother, and lived out in the sticks in Galilee, where no prophet was supposed to come from. Well, you know the rest of that story, too.

God chooses not the most likely candidate, but the least likely—the younger son, the one with the speech impediment, the woman without power, the poor one—as a constant reminder to us that the human channels of power and influence and success are not necessarily God's understanding of power and success. God chooses the marginalized, the dispossessed, the ones who do not have power, as a constant reminder to us that we are called to challenge the status quo, challenge those who use their power and influence in ways that promote the values of hate and conflict rather than love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

God chose David, and Jacob, and Moses, and Esther, and Jesus. And God chooses us, even when we are not what the world is expecting. In our moments of weakness and self-doubt, we may not believe that God can find possibilities for grace in us, but “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” We may think that we are unlikely candidates for communicating God’s grace and love, for transforming the world and shifting history, that we ordinary folk do not have the skills or connections or power or influence, but, my friends, there is no one else who’s going to do it. We may think to ourselves, “I am just a single individual—what can I do?” But when single individuals with a passion for justice and compassion get together, transformation happens, and history shifts.

Last night at the East Bay Gay prom, a group of unlikely folks was able to witness against the status quo of hate and conflict. Some of us were Christians, some of us were Jews, and some of us professed no particular faith at all. Some of us were young, some middle-aged, and some were grandparents. Some of us were there dressed to the nines, but most of us were pretty ordinary-looking indeed. We were all unlikely candidates for transforming the world.

When I arrived at 6:30, the red carpet was ready, the band was warming up, and a good crowd of supporters had gathered, carrying rainbow flags and homemade signs, ready to cheer for the kids as they arrived for their prom. At seven, just about the same time the kids started arriving, the protesters showed up, most carrying very large signs with very negative language.

Two of them, wearing clothing emblazoned with homophobic slogans, had bullhorns. They kept up a constant stream of hateful yelling, directed at the kids arriving for the prom. No one confronted them. No one yelled back at them or leveled the same sort of hatred at them. Instead, we all just cheered and whistled louder than they could yell, even with their bullhorns. Small groups of supporters, carrying flags and signs and whistles, kept up a constant dance around the protestors, obscuring their signs and covering their bullhorns, blowing their whistles anytime the protestors started their ranting. I cheered until my voice gave out. The protestors were persistent, but we were louder, and—this is what made my heart soar—there were more of us than there were of them. My favorite group of ordinary folks there last night was the group of Jewish women who held up their *talleisim*—their prayer shawls—to obscure the protestors.

My fondest hope is that as these young people look back on their prom, if they do remember the protestors, they will remember also the huge crowd of loving people who cheered for them and sheltered them from the worst of the hate speech—that they will remember that the crowd that cheered was far larger than the protestors who jeered, and that just maybe they’ll remember that a good number of the people lining the red carpet were clergy in robes and rainbow stoles, a living example of God’s grace and love in action.

We may not have power or influence. We may not have political connections or a royal family lineage. We may not have Hollywood good looks or charm and polish. We may not even have a voice like Susan Boyle. But God doesn't care about that. God chooses us anyway. God reminds us—through David, and Jacob, and Moses and Esther and Jesus, and ordinary people doing extraordinary things every day—that power and influence and appearance are not what matters in the world. What matters is that we hear God's call to be the transforming presence of God's grace and love in the world, even if all we can do is show up and cheer. Thanks be to God.