***Youngest Child Syndrome***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 16, 2024*

*based on I Samuel 15: 34-16:13*

Who among you is the youngest child in the family you grew up in? Let us see your hands.

Here’s some accumulated wisdom on youngest children from child psychologists holding forth on the web.

*Youngest children generally crave more attention from their parents, as they may feel overshadowed by their older siblings.*

*They may have strong interpersonal skills from constantly interacting with their older siblings.*

*With less pressure to conform, the youngest child might develop a more imaginative and creative mindset compared to their older siblings.*

*As the "baby" of the family, the youngest child may feel more protected and therefore take more risks with less fear of consequences.*

Now, compare that with some anecdotal wisdom on younger siblings …

Being the youngest child means you have to ride on the hump in the back seat.

Being the youngest *boy* child may sound like this. Your older brother says, “Come here.” You say, “Why?” He says, “Just come here.” And you say, “No, you’re gonna hit me.”

If you were the youngest child in a large family this morning’s text about the young prince of Israel, the last of a glut of brothers, is for you. Here we get our first glimpse of David, the shepherd boy, long before he becomes a warlord and then a king. We are told that he is “youth, ruddy and handsome.”

He will eventually become Israel’s most beloved king, but this will take some time. The story begins with the judge … (judge in this case means “agent of God”) … with the judge Samuel, being told not to sit around and mope about the good old days. Wishing to make Israel great again under an old failure of a king is, it seems, a colossal waste of time.

The first king in Israel’s history, Saul, just hasn’t worked out. He was head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the kingdom, but the size of his body is matched by the size of his insecurities. It’s an old story.

Saul is a disaster. Samuel thinks he should be given another chance, but God isn’t having any of it. So God sends Samuel over to a little town called, Bethlehem, to the sons of Jesse. He is to select a new king from the large litter of sons and to anoint him with oil. The torch is about to be passed to a new generation.

Once in Bethlehem, Jesse parades seven of his boys in front of Samuel who is a one-man search committee. Now it gets kind of confusing because it looks like God is jumping the gun here. I mean, Saul is still very much on the throne, but God says, “You have to be proactive in this world. It’s time for Israel to cut its losses. It’s time to drive the head of a spear (that would be a new king) through the belly of the present moment, into an uncertain future.”

Well, Samuel, true to form, chooses Eliab, the oldest, because he is the biggest hulking fellow among them. Samuel hasn’t learned a thing from the past.

But God, who let Israel have a king right out of central casting in their first go round is hoping that Samuel and the rest of the people might look beyond appearances and not make the same mistake they made the first time.

God is saying, “C’mon, Samuel, don’t get sucked in by what Hollywood or Madison Avenue find appealing. Look for character. Look on the person’s heart.”

More young fellows parade by Samuel, but none of them is acceptable to God, either. Samuel finally seeks out Jesse, the dad, after seven have come down the runway. “”You got any more children around the place,” he asks?

“Well,” says Jesse, “Yeah, one, but he’s just a scrawny thing, the runt of our litter. You wouldn’t be interested in him. We let him take care of the sheep, that’s about it. His name is, eh, his name is, eh, David. That’s it, David.”

And Samuel says, “Go fetch him.” And in comes David. His face is red as a strawberry – he has blue eyes like Paul Newman. And God say to Samuel, “Arise and anoint him, because he’s the one.” And it says that the spirit of God came mightily on David from that day on.

But just because David is chosen and the spirit of God is flirting with him doesn’t mean everything is okay. We are dealing with human beings here – humans, especially narcissistic ones, adore being king.

That was certainly the story of Saul, in a nutshell. He was just like Gaddafi in Libya, and Assad in Syria, and Xi Jinping in China, and Putin in Russia. Nine out of ten of these guys cannot read the writing on the wall when their *sell-by-date* comes along. The only way they will leave the palace is in a coffin, and that will be the fate of Saul.

Now, back to little David. In the days when the law of primogeniture is the rule, a law that says that everything a father has goes directly to his eldest son, the eighth of eight sons doesn’t stand a chance. This is why God has to step in. The God of the Hebrew Testament seems to love the underdog as much as Jesus does.

Parenthetically speaking, you know, the single most distinguishing thing about Jesus, as a man of first century Palestine, is not that he is tall and strapping. In fact, he’s probably not.

No, the thing that distinguishes him from everyone else is that he adores children – lets them climb all over him.

He is continually blessing their little heads. This in an age when kids were not only NOT prized – at least by men – they were, in fact, roundly ignored.

But Jesus loved them – and not just because they were oftentimes so cute. He said if we had any ambition at all in life we ought to become like them – which I’m sure to most people sounded patently absurd.

I love the story Jack Kornfield tells about childhood and the wonderful American painter, James McNeill Whistler in this regard.

*We are sent to school early to “grow up,” to learn to be serious about life. If we don’t let go of our childhood innocence the world will try hard to knock it out of us. A hundred and sixty years ago the American painter, James McNeill Whistler encountered this in his engineering class at West Point. The students were instructed to draw a careful study of a bridge, and Whistler submitted a beautifully detailed picturesque stone arch with children fishing from its top. The lieutenant in charge saw it and barked, “this is a military exercise. Get those children off that bridge.” Whistler resubmitted it with the children now fishing from the side of the river. His superior repeated his disdain, “Get those kids out of the picture all together.” So in Whistler’s final version you see the river, the bridge, and two small tombstones along the river’s bank.*

We don’t have laws of primogeniture anymore, but we still find ways to marginalize certain of our children. I remember when a friend of mine, Peggy Fletcher Stack, ran a piece on the front page of the *Salt Lake Tribune* about the plight of gay children who were Mormon. Her headline ran this way: *Booklet Teaches Mormon Parents How to Help Their Gay Children.*

Why was such a book needed? Well, Peggy described a much too-typical scenario -- *Teenage son, head hung down, tells his devout Mormon parents he is gay. Dad says, "You are dead to me." Mom looks away with barely concealed disgust. Son moves out and joins the hordes of homeless LGBTQ teens on the city streets. Eventually, he takes his own life.* This scenario is replayed over and over in the Mormon world.

The booklet notes that it doesn’t have to be this way. Here’s a bit of what it says: "Parents’ attitudes can have a dramatic impact on their gay and transgender children’s lives . . . Parents and caregivers who are capable of even a little change — being a little less rejecting and a little more supportive — can make an important difference in reducing their adolescent’s risk for serious health problems, including suicide and HIV."

Peggy adds the following: “While interviewing homeless gay Mormon youths, the author of the booklet was struck by their ‘profound isolation and despair. They were cut off not only from their family, but [also] from their faith, their community, their future."

Well, you don’t have to be Mormon for that to be true. To be fair, many Salt Lake City Mormons have gotten the message. Every year more and more of them walk in the annual Pride Parade there.

It always helps when your parents and or grandparents believe in you. If you were here yesterday for the celebration of Russ Mosser’s wonderful life you would have heard how much it meant to his granddaughter to have a grandfather who believed in her 100% and let her know it often. It was inspiring.

Now since it’s Father’s Day, I want to read something heartwarming from the opening chapter of Ozzy Osborne’s Memoir*, I Am Ozzy.*

“My father always said I would do something big one day. ‘I’ve got a feeling about you, John Osbourne,’ he’d tell me, after he’d had a few beers. ‘You’re either going to do something very special, or you’re going to go to prison.’

*And he was right, my old man. I was in prison before my eighteenth birthday.”*

Well, a father’s love doesn’t always turn the trick, if you’re Ozzy Osbourne.

Okay; seriously …. getting back to the story in the Old Testament, God shows God’s self to seldom be on the side of the establishment.

God is seldom, if ever the keeper of the status quo, or legitimator of what your parents might want you to do on a Saturday night. God is always turning things upside down, just like the tables of the money changers in the Jerusalem temple Jesus was so fond of knocking over.

That needs to be said, but again, it’s not just because kids can be cute that they get chosen over their elders, or that God just wants to surprise us. Here’s why.

I remember one thing from my first day of college. I had signed up for an intro to literature class taught by the most charismatic of all teachers at my little college; a man who to this day is known by his first name -- Leonard. Leonard had tons of nervous energy – he was brilliant and earnest and somewhat intimidating.

He loved teaching and told us, the first day of class, that he adored teaching this intro class because he just loved teaching freshmen. I remember he said, “when you are sophomores you will be much less interesting as people.”

His answer had something to do with the fact that there is an innocence and a vulnerability about young people who know they are on the bottom rank. As such, those kind of young people are often guileless. They are, on the whole, less guarded; more genuine, and more human in the best sense of that word. They can be excellent truth-tellers when truth-tellers are scarce.

The Japanese have a word for this– *Shoshin* – which means, “beginner’s mind.” Zen Buddhist’s always urge this on adherents of Buddhism. They understand so well that we all quite naturally become less sensitive to the world as we grow older. We think we know it all, and so we miss things.

But when you are a beginner at something you have fresh eyes, You see things that masters of an art you are just taking up, often miss. A book on the subject called, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* puts it this way – “In the expert’s mind there are few opportunities. In the beginner’s mind there are many.”

The composer, Eric Satie said it in 6 words: “Experience is a form of paralysis.” It’s good to start fresh sometimes. It’s good to listen to beginners as well as experts. Dummies as well as geniuses. In fact, it’s imperative.

Let me bring this to an end with a story that illustrates the spirit of this better than anything I know. It comes from the Russian Orthodox tradition.

*A bishop of the church was traveling to a remote area of his territory when he stopped at a remote island for a day. He determined to use the time as profitably as possible. He strolled along the seashore and came across three fishermen mending their nets. In pidgin English they explained to him that centuries before they had been Christianized by missionaries. “We, Christians!” they said, proudly pointing to one another.  
  
The bishop was impressed. Did they know the Lord’s Prayer? They had never heard of it. The bishop was shocked.  
  
“What do you say, then, when you pray?”  
  
“We lift our eyes in heaven. We pray, ‘We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.’ The bishop was appalled at the primitive, the downright heretical nature of their prayer. So he spent the whole day teaching them the Lord’s Prayer. The fishermen were poor learners, but they gave it all they had and before the bishop sailed away next day he had the satisfaction of hearing them go through the whole formula without a fault.  
  
Months later the bishop’s ship happened to pass by those islands again and the bishop, as he paced the deck saying his evening prayers, recalled with pleasure the three men on that distant island who were now able to pray, thanks to his patient efforts. While he was lost in the thought he happened to look up and noticed a spot of light in the east.*

*The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the water. The captain stopped the boat and everyone leaned over the rails to see this sight.*

*When they were within speaking distance, the bishop recognized his three friends, the fishermen. “Bishop!” they exclaimed. “We hear your boat go past island and come hurry hurry to meet you.”  
  
“What is it that you want?” asked the awe-stricken bishop.  
  
“Bishop,” they said, “we so, so sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say, ‘Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come ...’ then we forget. Please tell us prayer again.”  
  
The bishop felt humbled. “Go back to your homes, my friends,” he said, “and each time you pray, say, “We are three, you are three, have mercy on us!’”*

In a poem I’ve quoted from before called "When Death Comes," by Mary Oliver, the wise poet says, "When it's over, I want to say I have been a bride married to amazement, I've been a bridegroom taking the world into my arms." This is beginner's mind. Maybe David had it. I’ll be sprinkling a few sermons on him throughout these coming summer Sundays.

Amen