

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian

Trinity Episcopal Church

15 March 2026

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

“King of Heart”

It was time for a new king...and the great prophet, Samuel, has his eye on Saul, because, it was said, there was not a man taller or more handsome among all the sons of Israel.

But *looking* like a king and *being* a king are two very different things.

Granted, history shows that King Saul accomplished much, including the unification of the disparate Hebrew tribes into a cohesive national entity, the establishment of an organized monarchy, and a strengthened defense. However, it is also said that Saul’s ego swelled with the attainment of power, as he claimed more authority than was rightly his to take. Any humility he may once have possessed was corroded by a destructive pride, a tendency toward jealousy and suspicion, a rising paranoia, and impulsive behavior. Amidst all this, the welfare of his people became increasingly neglected.

Said to be plagued by an evil spirit when “the spirit of God left him”, modern day scholars theorize that this may have been a case of mental illness – always dangerous in one with unbridled power. Ultimately and tragically, military failures and personal losses led him to take his own life.

So, once again, it was time for a new king. This time, Samuel looks past appearances and seeks a man of good heart and soul. He looks toward Bethlehem – to Jesse – a prominent farmer with eight sons. He considers the first seven, but does not find the leader he seeks. So, he asks if Jesse has any *other* sons, and, as it happens, he *does* have one more son, his youngest...but he is just a shepherd boy, who plays the harp and sings to his sheep – clearly not king material.

His name was David.

Samuel immediately recognizes the one he has been waiting for. David may not have *looked* the part, but on that day, a young shepherd became a king. And what did the newly anointed King *do* with his newly conferred power?

He went right back the field and continued tending his flock.

From this side of history, we know that David grew to greatness and reigned over what was called a “golden age.” We also know that he was far from perfect, a man with very human flaws who made some very human errors.

Finally *looking* every bit the king, he now seems to have forgotten to be a *shepherd*.

Perhaps it was his frail humanity – triumph and sorrow, love and lust, loyalty and betrayal, grand courage and petty smallness – that evoked from within David’s experience so many of those moving songs which we know as Psalms.

And one in particular has struck a chord so resonant across generations that it may well be the most repeated song in history. In it, David looks to his God as the standard against which any would-be king is to be measured:

~ one whose people are not in want.

~ who does not foment chaos, but leads into the peace of green pastures and still waters.

~ whose rod and staff are not instruments of harm or retaliation, but emblems of guidance and discipline.

~ who will calm and feed the flock even amidst the worst fear and trouble.

~ whose goodness and mercy encourage trust in a long, safe, and promised future.

The timeless 23rd psalm reminds us that a good king is, above all, a good shepherd.

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David will not be the last of his line to hail from Bethlehem. From the root of his ancestry – the so-called Jesse tree – will come *another* who look even less like a king than he. This one will not be born to a wealthy farmer, but to a refugee mother, under threat of family scandal, and a realistic fear of deportation and exile.

But even as his public profile grows and his mission unfolds, Jesus will never forget his call to be a shepherd. And today's Gospel reminds *us* not to forget what that means:

He will challenge the flock to move beyond their enclosures – the fences of literalism, the gates of fear and prejudice, cages of greed, the entrapments of personal power. He will engage and embrace those deemed unworthy by the elite, devalued, mocked, or ignored by callous leaders. He will entirely reframe our understanding of blindness and sin, in relation to ego, pride, ignorance, and a lack of self-awareness. And he *will* not hesitate to publicly call out the governmental or religious authorities for their hypocrisy. He will even dare, as we read today, to heal on the Sabbath.

And even when he himself is unjustly and cruelly brought like a lamb to the slaughter, he will *not* abandon his call as shepherd. He will not speak an ugly word, nor call upon his disciples to retaliate. He will not stir up the crowds to storm the hill. That is not how he will make his mark on this world. He will, instead and incredibly, stretch out his arms in a fullness of embrace which enfolds every manner of human being.

Posing as a king and being a shepherd are two very different things. There has never been a time in our own history where we needed to be more clear on this. We are *not* called to follow any self-proclaimed monarch in love with the idea of wearing a gold crown. We *are* called to seek, find, and confirm a shepherd who will carry the rod of justice and peace and lift the staff of goodness and mercy – not only for his own, but for the entire human flock, who will finally come to graze, safely and abundantly, in green pastures of love...

... which *is* to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.