

4th Sunday in Lent, Cycle A
April 3, 2011
Fr. Joe Bambenek
Sacred Heart Cathedral, Winona, MN

1 Samuel 16:1b,6-7,10-13a Psalm 23 Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

Let me start by asking a question, especially of the college students: how many of you have seen the movie the Lion King? Those who have may recall that the primary character is a lion named Simba, who is someday to become the future king of the Pride Lands. The movie begins, in fact, with Simba being anointed the future king not long after his birth. As the song “the Circle of Life” is sung, the movie shows a ritualistic scene reminiscent of the story of David being anointed as the future king in today’s first reading.

Yet there are several important ways in which the story of David’s anointing as the future king of Israel differs from that from Simba in the Lion King.

The one on which I will focus is a difference of expectation. Simba’s selection as the next king was not a surprise pursuant to the tradition that the eldest son of the reigning king would become the next king. Simba was the eldest son of the reigning king, and so, upon his birth, he would be next in line for the kingship. On the other hand, David’s selection could not have been more of a surprise in a number of ways. First of all, when Samuel was out looking for the new king at God’s direction, there was already a king on the throne of Israel: Saul. Yet God did not send Samuel to Saul’s household in search of the next king. Furthermore, when Samuel went to the home of Jesse, David would have been the least likely candidate. Samuel expected that, just like with Simba, the future king would be the eldest son of Jesse; for that was the cultural norm. And so when Jesse’s well-deported eldest son, Eliab, is presented to him, Samuel immediately thinks that the search is over: “*Surely the LORD’s anointed is here before him*” we hear Samuel say to himself. But God tells Samuel otherwise. For God knows our hearts, we are told, and His plans are greater than our plans, His vision greater than our sight, and He created us each for a unique purpose. Returning to Samuel, when option A was not the chosen one, what does Samuel then use as the search criteria going forward? Samuel went to the next and then to the next son in line by age, each time learning that God had not chosen the son in question. David, as the 8th child, was such an unexpected choice that Jesse had not even bothered to have him around for the selection process until Samuel had him sent for. And once David was in Samuel’s presence, the choice was clear! God worked outside of what was expected; He chose a very unexpected man to be king. And not just any king, but the greatest king of Israel before Christ.

You might be wondering, why is that priest giving so much attention to King David’s selection over 3000 years ago? How is that significant to us here in Winona in 2011? After all, we don’t have a king anymore. So how does that impact my life as I approach the end of the school year; perhaps the end of my college years?

The story of David is important because it offers great insights on being called by God to a vocation. There are probably none of us who will ever be called to be an earthly king by God. But, God does have a calling for each one of us. In fact, He has a royal calling for each one of us. How do we know that? When we were baptized, one of the actions of the priest or deacon was to anoint the newly-baptized you with sacred chrism. This anointing recognizes that with our baptism, we were baptized into Christ’s priesthood, prophetic role, and kingship. As such, we are, as a priest, to offer our life in service as a sacrifice to God. As a prophet, we are to proclaim God’s truth to all through our deeds, if not our words. And as a king, we are to live our lives with royal dignity: we are to live moral lives and to be good stewards of all that God has given us in our temporal affairs. We live out our kingship by fulfilling our vocation.

For a few of us, such as Frs. Tom, Mike and I, that vocation is to the ordained priesthood. For others, it may be the religious life or some form of special, spousal like consecration to God. Yet for most here this evening, living out Christian kingship is through the vocation of marriage and through working in a job that in some way or another serves God and others. It can be tempting to think that who

I marry or what I do to earn money is not important to God; but they are important decisions. In fact, they are two of the biggest factors in determining whether a person will live out the unique purpose for which God created them; or whether they will live for themselves.

Today, as we discuss vocation, I return here to Sacred Heart Cathedral to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving for my ordination to the priesthood. It is a circle of life moment for me as I come back to the place where my parents celebrated the sacrament of matrimony. In fact, the tangible first fruit of that sacrament is my very life. I return here to celebrate that, just as David was chosen by God from his father's home to be anointed as a king, I was chosen by God from my parents' home to serve as an ordained priest. And just as David did not set out to be a king, but rather was called to it by God, I certainly did not set out in my life to become a priest. The ordained priesthood is not meant to be a career aspiration, it is intended to be a response to an invitation of God. My personal vocation story is a long one, and since we had a very long gospel reading, I will spare you the details this evening. But the most succinct way of putting it is that God called, and I finally said yes. With that yes I gave to God, as is hopefully evidenced by a smile on my face this evening and which has often been on my face since my priesthood ordination and even my diaconate ordination almost 2 years ago, there has been great joy and peace in my heart since have been anointed into the ordained priesthood of Christ. In that spirit of joy I come here with gratitude. Grateful, first of all, for the sacrament of my parents' marriage through which I was created by God. Grateful for their example of faith, as well as for the example of faith of others in my life and especially by many in my family, including my Godparents, who are also here this evening. Grateful for the faith of the people of the Cathedral. Our family has celebrated a majority of the Christmas Masses during my lifetime in this church... amidst the beautiful music present at those Masses, amidst the visible presence of the Knights of Columbus who visibly keep guard to defend Jesus and the faith at those Masses. I'm also grateful for those who pray at and work behind the scenes to keep the perpetual adoration chapel here going. Most of us don't have a prophet like Samuel who comes and anoints us with our vocation. God's will is most often made manifest through prayer, and while there are many ways we can fruitfully pray, few are better than Eucharistic adoration for hearing God's voice. Certainly my times of prayer in adoration chapels had a huge impact on my ability to hear and on my ultimate willingness to follow God's voice.

But a priest is not ordained for himself, but to serve. And I am not alone in being called here today. As I mentioned before, each one of us who was anointed as priest, prophet, and king at our baptism has a calling from God. And, as I mentioned, for most of us, there is not a prophet who comes and tells us exactly what our call is; although God will use the voices of others to help. We come to know our call by opening our hearts to God. To do that it is important that we make ourselves able to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd through quiet times of prayer. We also need to be careful that we don't prematurely restrict the range of options, for as we heard in the story of David, God might very well call us to do something we never would have imagined on our own. God ultimately knows our hearts, because He was the One Who created them.

Finally, once we hear God's voice we must act with courage. One similarity between David, Simba and myself is that it took us all a long time to get from the initial recognition of our call until it was realized. While David was anointed in today's story, it was many years, and many battles before he became king. Simba had to live time in exile before he returned to claim the throne that was rightfully his. And my journey to the priesthood was a very long one, in no small part due to my own weaknesses. The Evil One does not like us to follow our vocations, and he will undoubtedly make doing so a struggle. Hence, once we hear God's voice we must follow with courage. And to do so, we must, to use words from the Lion King, "remember who you are. You are my son." Those were the words that Simba's father, the reigning king, spoke to him in the movie... We know from the overall message of the Bible that our loving, heavenly Father desires to say something similar to each one of us who are baptized as we seek to follow the vocation He lovingly gave to us. In the face of fear or temptation, Our heavenly Father wants to tell us: "remember who you are. You are my beloved son or daughter."