

What's in a Name? The Medium at Endor

June 13, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Rev. David Madara, Guest Preacher

1 Samuel 28:3-25

So I prepared this sermon, thinking about Saul and thinking about the medium at Endor. And it's important to have some backstory about Saul.

Saul was the very first king of Israel. And he was the first king coming about when the people of Israel said they wanted a king. Prior to Kings, there were judges who ruled over Israel. Some of them did well, some of them did not do so well. Some judges were holy, some were corrupt. Perhaps the most famous and powerful Judge of all, is Samuel himself.

And so the people came to Samuel and they said, "Samuel, your sons have become dishonest. The Philistines are fighting us, we want a king. We want someone big and powerful and strong, who will fight for us."

And Samuel said, "Oh, you don't want to king. The king will tax your land and tax your crops and take whatever he wants."

And they said, "but he will fight for us!"

"The king will take your children and make them soldiers and servants. And he'll rip them from your families!"

And they said, "but he will fight for us."

"The King may not be fair, as the judges at least try to be."

And the people say "but we won't have to worry, we'll have a king."

And the Lord says "the people want a king, Samuel, they will have a king." And Saul becomes the first king. He does well for a little while, and then there comes the battle with the Amalekites. God tells Saul and the army to go and literally take no prisoners, but kill everyone to kill all livestock to kill everything, destroy everything, kill the king. But instead, Saul thinks that he is wiser than God. And Saul decides that it might be good to have some booty or bounty or whatever you'd like to call it, and so he brings back the animals that are alive – the good animals – and he even brings back the king of the Amalekites to humiliate, and torture.

When Samuel gets word of this, he goes and he chops up the king of the Amalekites into pieces. And then says to Saul, "you disobeyed the Lord, and you shall no longer hear from the Lord."

At this very same time as Saul is struggling in following the Lord's goodness. There's a young man who's rising to prominence in Israel, a member of Saul's army, one who recently slayed a giant – named David. And as he is victorious in battle, as the Lord is with him. The people cheer: "Saul has killed his 1000s!" and... "David his 10,000s!"

And Saul becomes fiercely jealous. So jealous he tries repeatedly to kill David by throwing a spear at him. And so we come to this point in the book of First Samuel, where Saul is in conflict with David. Saul has not heard from God. And he is desperate, as the Philistine army is again encamping to fight him. So Saul, desperate for what he should be doing, goes and seeks out a medium.

A medium is someone who speaks to the dead, who hears the dead and can communicate with the dead. Here in Adams County, we have quite a few mediums just down the road in Gettysburg. All you have to do is search for hauntings and Gettysburg and ghosts. And you'll find many of them. So, Saul goes to this medium. Now, mind you also that by priestly law for the Jewish people mediums are considered illegal. And it even tells us here that Saul had expelled the mediums and the wizards from the land. Saul did not like mediums and wizards, at least according to the law. But yet, when he was desperate; when he heard from God, not at all – not through dreams, not by urim, (which is like casting lots or throwing dice), not by prophets – when God does not speak at all, to Saul, he seeks out a forbidden medium, and asks this woman to consult with Samuel, to bring up Samuel from the dead.

And the woman says, "you realize that this is illegal and I'm risking my very life by doing this for you." And Saul, in his disguises: "surely no harm will come to you. It's okay, go ahead." And so the medium brings up Samuel, and it's quite intriguing how this how Samuel comes up. His first words to Saul are, "why have you disturbed me by bringing me up from death?"

Saul answers, "I am in great distress for the Philistines are warring against me. And God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams! So, Samuel, tell me what to do!"

And Samuel says, "Well, if God's not talking to you, I'm not gonna talk to you either. Surely God's even more powerful than I am. So I guess you're kind of out of luck. But oh, by the way, you're going to die tomorrow at the hands of the Philistines."

And immediately, Saul falls full length on the ground filled with fear. Because of Samuel's words, he's shaking on the ground lying on the ground. And there was no strength, he falls completely weak.

Maybe you've been at this point, sometime in your life. When it seems like you're alone. You're lonely. Maybe you've done things or things have been done to you. And there's no hope. All you see and all you hear is doom. That's where Saul was. And he fell face-down on the ground.

The woman who is the medium, then comes to Saul. And when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, "your servant has listened to you and now I bring you food. Eat."

And at first Saul declines to eat. But then his advisors say, "No, please, you should eat. You've not eaten for a long time." And Saul accepts. And this woman, *that* woman – the medium – the woman wearing the label of something that she shouldn't be doing – provides grace and mercy to the king of Israel. To the *disgraced* king of Israel, to the king of Israel, who would normally have her killed. To the king of Israel, who is now so desperate that he's lying on her floor.

So Saul got up from the ground, sat on the bed. The woman had a fattened calf in the house. She quickly slaughtered it. And she took flour and kneaded it and baked unleavened cakes. She put the whole meal before Saul and his servants and they ate and then they rose and went away.

So I wonder, I have to wonder, is there a good person and is there a bad person in this story? They are both very flawed people in this story, are they not? I know I often struggle with labels and continue to struggle with labels – with labeling people and categorizing people and, and thinking, Oh, this person is good or bad based on their label. And of course, by Jewish standards, the medium would have been bad. But yet here, she's good.

And often I find that I don't know or fully understand a person until I've had a meal with them, until I've had a chance to talk with them and to be with them, and to share with them. But I do know that for a moment in the story of brokenness and hurt, and a story of despondency, and being cut off from God, this woman who is a medium is also the vehicle for God's grace. And to Saul who sure enough is going to die tomorrow, this woman shows compassion, and grace to the man who would have outlawed and killed her. She shows compassion, and grace.

And there is God. God showing up in the unexpected. God showing up in the unknown.

So where have you felt like Saul in this story? When in your life, have you maybe felt like the medium in the story? And no matter with whom you identify, wherever you go, may this story bring to you today an even fuller understanding of God's grace. May God's grace be with you in the hard times. And in the good times.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.