

We like good appearances! Consider the beauty found in the animal and plant kingdoms; wonderful displays of color; the tiger's gorgeous coat of orange, black and white; the varied species of birds festooned with radiant colors; the many varieties of roses with their brilliant as well as sublime colors. Colors surround us here in southern Arizona; from the cactus flowers, to the birds and animals, from the desert floor to the mountains, from the morning sunrises to the evening sunsets.

We like good appearances! We like a shiny, new car; new shoes; a new shirt, dress or pair of pants; a new hairdo or manicure. I just bought my first home in Green Valley. It's NOT new; needs some fixing up. I want the interior completely painted before I move in. And I want to start working on the landscaping. I want the house to look good! I want to make a "*good appearance*" in my new neighborhood and for our church family when I have an open house.

We are told that first impressions make lasting impressions. When we see ourselves in a picture we might say, "O, that's not a good picture of me. I'm not smiling -- my hair's not right -- they got me from the wrong side." Pictures are just a snapshot of our outer appearance but we'd sure like them to show our best image. What is it that attracts you when you first meet someone?

Imagine the constant scrutiny of political candidates. In American Presidential campaigns everyone is trying to look good and sound their very best. The TV commentary is not only about the substance of what one says, but we also

hear about how they looked; did they appear confident, thoughtful, intelligent and of course, presidential? Front and center this year is “The Hair” as some call Donald Trump, who just made the cover of Time Magazine. Perhaps it’s just the influence of television – but it’s hard to imagine a candidate running for President today without an army of style and grooming consultants. We parade our Presidential candidates before the American public much like Jesse’s sons paraded before Samuel. Samuel was deceived by the outer appearances. This one looks good; they look and sound like the leader of the free world.

However, consider what some of our Presidents have looked like. George Washington was physically strong, over six feet tall, an imposing presence, but he wore a set of wooden false teeth that gave him tremendous pain and led him to adopt a grim, tight-lipped expression. Abraham Lincoln was well-known as being one of the homeliest men around. One of my favorite Lincoln quotes is when Lincoln was publicly criticized for being two-faced, he turned to his accuser and said, “Sir, if I had two faces do you think I’d be wearing this one?”

Franklin D. Roosevelt is well-known for spending much of his time in a wheelchair, due to polio. Yet, in those pre-television days, FDR’s political handlers did a pretty good job of keeping the newspaper photographers away from his wheelchair, crutches and leg braces. Most Americans knew little of his disability. In our age of TV that would be unthinkable.

Where would we be as a nation without Washington, Lincoln, and FDR? The simple truth is, if today's obsessive interest in physical appearance had prevailed back then, it's very likely that none of these three great leaders would have made it to the presidency. What would have happened to Israel without the leadership of a young, small king; ruddy and handsome David?

In the history of all nations there are times of changes and transitions. The two books of Samuel deal with a period of extreme changes for Israel. Changing times bring difficulties in the history of a nation; the national response to change can end up defining who they are, but the dramatic changes can also bring ruin upon a nation. It's never easy accepting change – God says to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul...?” It's time for a change. An example for us to think about is the changes that have taken place in the Middle East just over the past few years, let alone the past 50 years.

America with its brief 239 year history has had its turbulent times. The need for leadership in turbulent periods of change is always beckoning, whether it's a new nation struggling to stand strong in the world; or it's leading a nation during a Civil War or during a Great Depression.

In the book of Judges, pre- Samuel, we read that ancient Israel was a marginal company of tribes; unstable, open to religious idolatry and to political and military barbarism. Then in 1st and 2nd Kings after the two books of Samuel, we

read about Israel becoming a centralized political power; it pursued an economic monopoly, fostered an oppressive social system, and claimed theological legitimacy for its monarchy – the Divine right of Kings.

This time in Israel was a tumultuous period of change. How did Israel do? Not so well until a young king named David was chosen by God. King David becomes the central character in this period of transformation, as are most leaders during turbulent times. But, God plays a central part in this transition too. The question becomes for any nation, have you left any room for God’s involvement?

We could argue that the ancient Israelites were as image-conscious as Americans. After they arrived in the Promised Land, they started to look at the celebrity kings of the Canaanites and wondered why their own judges, like the old prophet Samuel and his sons, looked so scruffy by comparison. So, they lobbied for a king to govern them – a handsome celebrity action hero to go out and fight their battles for them. Despite Samuel’s warning, the people wanted the image of a king who would make them look, “like other nations.” They liked good appearances!

God wasn’t down on the idea of a king. From Deuteronomy 17, God laid out his prototype of an Israelite king as one who shouldn’t buy into the ancient *image-consciousness* of hoarding horses, wives or money, **but should instead keep two copies of the Torah with him to read as a constant reminder to obey God and**

not exalt himself over the other members of the community. Such a king would not be a celebrity, but a servant.

Israel forgot what God wanted in a king or they were willing to give it up for someone who gave them a good image. So, as God is often wont to do in Scripture, God punished the Israelites by giving them exactly what they wanted: the prototypical image of a tall, dark and handsome matinee-idol monarch -- King Saul. King Saul, however, was like so many celebrities whose shiny outward appearance hides a dark and broken interior life. Saul's reign quickly started to look like a bad reality TV show. He acted impulsively, swore, disobeyed God, killed priests, hurled spears at musicians, and consulted a witch among other things. The Israelites seemed to be pleased with the image their king was projecting. They badgered Saul into keeping spoils of war that God had commanded they destroy.

God's not happy; he commands Samuel to anoint a new king. Samuel travels to the village of Bethlehem for what can only be described as a runway fashion show of potential kings among the sons of Jesse. Eliab, the oldest, certainly looked the part -- tall and handsome like Saul. Samuel leans over to God, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But God, in one of the most poignant lines in Scripture, lays out the criteria for leadership of Israel. "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not at the things

people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

What matters to God is not the image we create -- **but God’s image in us; in our heart.** God cuts through all the appearances and the masks we love to wear for each other, and looks deep into the **real self**, that’s often hidden under layers of pretense and outward appearances. **The image of God is everything.** We were created in God’s image for a purpose. David is chosen for the specific purpose of leading his people with no pretense and with no resume. Each of us is chosen for a purpose that has nothing to do with fame, fortune or face time on TV. What does God see in your heart and in mine?

Our purpose is to reflect the image of God in us. We’re called to live as people who authentically love others and are loved by God. God defines our true identity as his created and loved image, and then calls us to live out that identity in community for the whole world.

In the case of the new king, God was looking for a man after his own heart – not the oldest, wisest, strongest or most handsome. David was that man, even though he was only the youngest boy.

Indeed, Scripture tells us over and over again that God does his best work through those whom the rest of the world wouldn’t give 15 seconds of attention: people like this poetic little shepherd boy, or a bunch of working class fishermen or

a host of sinners like us. It's through the weakest and least likely that God's glory is able to shine brightest. The apostle Paul wrote these words from 1 Corinthians, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God."

We like good appearances, but appearances can be deceiving. God looks at the heart. The only image that matters is God's image in us. Amen.