

“Awake to the Light”

March 15, 2026

Scripture: I Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14

Samuel is grieving when we find him in this passage. He’s grieving over King Saul of Israel, but it’s important to realize something. Saul isn’t dead. Saul is very much alive, but has been rejected by God. Samuel never wanted Israel to have a king. When the people came to him asking him to appoint a king for them, he warned them in no uncertain terms that a king would be their ruin. Everything they produced or consumed would be for his benefit. Their daughters would serve in his courts and their sons would die in his army. He tells them a king would make them his slaves. He wants nothing to do with appointing a king over them.

Yet he finds them someone nonetheless. He finds someone who looks kingly. Saul is taller than the people around him; he’s affable and charismatic. He comes from a wealthy family, though he doesn’t seem to have done much work himself. Still, people like Saul. He gives the impression that he’s in charge of things. So, what’s not to like? But it isn’t long before Saul proves himself to be a little chaotic. And he starts making decisions that line the pockets of his generals and cronies. He stops listening to his chief advisor, Samuel, and ignores God’s instructions. And finally, God is done with him.

Samuel is devastated. Not to mention a little scared. He’s fallen out of Saul’s favor and isn’t sure what to do next. So, yes, he’s grieving. He’s grieving for the Saul who might have been and he’s grieving for the future of Israel. What happens to them now if God has rejected their king? Samuel is in a very dark place; he’s sinking into depression and despair.

Into that darkness God speaks to Samuel and tells him to wake up. Wake up to the light God will reveal. Israel will have a future, will have a king of God’s own choosing. And so we begin the story of David, Israel’s most famous son, the once and future king. This is the first of no less than three introductions of David in the Book of Samuel. Each is memorable for different reasons, but they all have in common this description of David as a shepherd. He wasn’t raised in the lap of luxury. Being the youngest of eight brothers, he has to work for a living. He knows what it means to be responsible for more vulnerable subjects. He knows there are times when a leader must stand in the breach to protect the weak.

That’s the light of hope Samuel awakes to. He awakens to a future for Israel at a time when all seemed lost and he is sunk into grief. Finding and anointing David is the last thing Samuel does in his book. After this he returns to Ramah and presumably dies in peace. David goes on to become famous for his prowess in battle and begins to outshine Saul, who becomes very jealous even as he admires and relies on David. That tension eventually leads to civil war in Israel which ends in Saul’s death and David heralded as the new king of both the northern and southern kingdoms, so Israel is unified under David for the only time in its history.

In the context of Lent, though, this story gives us some insight into the ways God initiates change that brings hope into desperate circumstances. We’re told that God looks with the heart and not just the eyes, the way we do. God examines the inner person to determine our worth rather than relying only on outward appearances the way most of us do. Outward appearances can be deceiving. Saul, for instance, appeared to be everything you would want in a leader. He was tall and commanding and full of enthusiasm, yet in the end he wasn’t reliable. He became

corrupt and consumed with paranoia and jealousy. His inner life was damaged beyond repair and God rejected him as king.

Yet God does not leave Israel in darkness. God brings light; God supplies a future when everything seems lost. That's the message of the writer of Ephesians. "Once you were darkness," he tells them. There was a time when they were in despair. Were they aware of that? Did they know they were darkness? Sometimes we become so comfortable with our condition that we don't realize how dark our lives have become, how empty of hope.

I've shared occasionally that I was raised in an alcoholic home. My dad was alcoholic and his condition left a deep impression on our family. One of the realities of addiction is the effect it has on the people around the addict. Life centers around the mood and behavior of the addicted person and the rest of the family learns to adjust to it. A real common phenomenon in alcoholic homes is when the alcoholic starts to get help and their behavior starts to change, family members often become resentful and angry. You'd think they'd be relieved and happy over the changes but when light shines in a dark room the people in it usually shut their eyes. It hurts when the light shines in our darkness.

So, it's not that easy to awake to the light when you've been in the dark your whole life. The Ephesian Christians were having trouble getting used to the light. They wanted to hide back under the covers. I can relate to that. Awaking to the light means risking the unknown. And even if the light promises something better, darkness is more familiar and can be hard to let go.

But stumbling around in the darkness, sinking into grief the way Samuel had, is exhausting. God offers hope by bringing light to that darkness but waking to the light is up to us. Like Samuel we have to get up and do what's needed to bring God's light to the world. The Ephesian Christians are told to live as children of light. The darkness they've been living was expressed through division and bigotry. They're told earlier in the letter, "For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." That hostility, between Gentiles and Jews, has been their condition for so long that they're finding it hard to let it go. They're comfortable with it, even though it's destructive and obscures God's presence revealed in Christ.

The challenge of living in the light of Christ is to come awake to the light and to change our behavior so the world can see we are done with darkness. In a world where hatred and bigotry and fear are on the rise, a world plunged into darkness, living in the light feels threatening. When we stand with the vulnerable in our community, with immigrants and refugees who are being criminalized or with transgender people who are being harassed, the light we bring causes anger and resentment. But if we don't live in that light, how will Christ be revealed in the world? God is counting on us, just as God counted on Samuel, to be light in a world weary of darkness.

So, it's time for us to awake to the light. It's time for us to go out and claim the future God is preparing for us. That future lies on the path of compassion and generosity and justice revealed in Christ. We are God's hope for the world. Be children of light so the light of Christ will shine on you and through you for the sake of the world.

Amen