

As a person of faith, a person who has spent much of her life poring over the scriptures and seeking out truth, I find there is one proclamation I can make with absolute certainty: my children possess the most annoying toys to be found on God's green earth. (Ellie & Noah, I know you're watching right now, and Mommy loves you, but your toys are bananas.)

Church, I'm talking about the "mess-free" kinetic sand that gets all over the rug. I'm talking about the toy vacuum that sounds like an uncalibrated chainsaw. I'm talking about slime. Play-dough. Something called "Rainbowcorn Poop." But the most annoying toy -- the *pièce de résistance* -- is this: Ellie's HeiHei chicken.

Why, Pastor, you might be thinking, *it's just a stuffed chicken. What's so annoying about that?* I'm glad you asked. Allow me to demonstrate. [HeiHei screaming] HeiHei chicken here was a gift given to our daughter from some relatives who apparently hate us quite a lot. Ellie loves her HeiHei chicken. Noah laughs at HeiHei chicken. Mama and Daddy once tried to "forget" HeiHei chicken at a hotel in South Jersey. (Give us a break... can you imagine what this thing sounds like at 3:00 in the morning?)

So if I find HeiHei chicken so annoying, why on earth have I brought him with me to church today? Well, HeiHei isn't just some random annoying chicken. He's one of the delightfully wacky animal sidekicks from Disney's *Moana* -- one of Ellie's favorite movies.

Have you seen *Moana*? If you haven't, and you have access to Redbox or Disney+, I'd highly recommend it for some Labor-Day-Weekend viewing. (Apparently it's on TV tonight at 7:00, on that "Freeform" channel that shows *Hocus Pocus* a thousand times every October. Check your local listings. And sometime, after COVID, we'll do a church movie night.) Like I said, *Moana* is one of Ellie's all-time favorites.

Even after watching it 187 times, she hasn't gotten sick of it... and I have to admit, stuffed screaming chickens aside, neither have I.

At the beginning of the movie, Moana's storytelling grandmother introduces us to the Polynesian goddess Te Fiti, whose very heart holds the creative power to bring lush islands into existence. Yet this creative power is threatened when the demigod Maui steals the heart of Te Fiti. He is confronted and thwarted by the fire demon Te Ka, and Maui, his magical fishhook, and the heart of Te Fiti are lost for a thousand years.

Over time, without the sustaining, life-giving power of Te Fiti's heart, the oceans begin to rage and islands begin to crumble. Spurred by her grandmother's stories and her love for her now-threatened island, Moana is chosen by the Ocean itself for a daring mission. She must sail across the sea, find the demigod Maui, and restore the heart of Te Fiti.

One small problem: Moana doesn't even know how to sail. She has never ventured beyond her island reef, let alone across the sea. Why on earth would the Ocean choose her? Well, that's just what the demigod Maui wants to know. At one point, Maui asks Moana why her people sent her on this mission. She replies, "My people didn't send me. The Ocean did." And Maui's sarcastic, mocking reply? "The Ocean. Makes sense. You're what, eight? Can't sail? Obvious choice." Moana, who seems to be struggling to understand that herself, declares, "It chose me for a reason."

So at this point, if you're wondering why your pastor is telling you pagan folk tales in the middle of her sermon... stay with me. Because Maui then says something... and he's talking about Moana's Ocean... but it's something so familiar, so fitting, that I swear he could just as well be talking about God. Maui says: "If the Ocean's so smart, why didn't it just take the heart back to Te Fiti itself? Or bring me my hook? The Ocean's straight-up kooky-dooks."

Straight-up kooky-dooks. Yeah, all irreverence aside, it's a phrase that captures God -- our God, the God made known to us in the scriptures, the God made known to us in Jesus Christ -- kind of perfectly. *Straight-up kooky-dooks.* You see, when it comes to choosing servants and leaders and heroes, God (like Moana's Ocean) is... I'll just say it... straight-up kooky-dooks. I mean, just think about it for a moment. Think about God's track record for choosing servants. It's right there in the scriptures.

When God needed a mother and father to give birth to a chosen nation... God chose a childless, infertile couple who were well past the point of qualifying for AARP. God's choice of Abraham and Sarah? Straight-up kooky-dooks.

When God needed a powerful leader to save the world from famine... God chose an incarcerated former slave who was sold out by his own family -- literally. God's choice of Joseph was straight-up kooky-dooks.

When God needed a messenger to stand toe-to-toe with the most powerful man in the world and speak a proclamation of freedom and deliverance, God chose a guy with a speech impediment! For a speaking job! God's choice of Moses was straight-up kooky-dooks.

When God needed a valiant warrior-king to deliver God's people from the threat of their enemies... why not an untested, inexperienced shepherd boy with a slingshot, right? God's choice of David? You know it: Straight-up kooky-dooks.

Here's one: when God decided to be born among us and needed a mother... ah! Teenage virgin! Obvious choice! God's choice of Mary was straight-up kooky-dooks.

And when the gospel began to set the world on fire and God needed a church planter... God chose a church persecutor. God's choice of Paul was straight-up kooky-dooks.

Over and over and over again, our God makes HR decisions that to us seem straight-up kooky-dooks. God rarely chooses those who are skilled, experienced, talented, or even remotely eager. God rarely chooses the candidate with the best resumé or the right pedigree. God rarely makes the obvious, likely choice, the kind of choice we might make if we were running the cosmos. God chooses the unlikely hero. And maybe... maybe that's because God sees a little more than what we can see.

I'm reminded of that in our scripture reading for today, a scripture from the Old Testament book known as 1 Samuel:

[1 Samuel 16:1-7, NRSV]

¹The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' ²Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the LORD said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD." ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' ⁵He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD.' ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.'

In this scripture passage, we meet Samuel, the prophet and servant of the Lord. Samuel is in a bit of a funk, because the anointed king of God's people -- King Saul -- is turning out to be a total disaster. (Even God's hiring choices don't always pan out.) But God tells Samuel: *Hey, chin up! It's okay. We're gonna go find a new king, one of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem. Let's go find him.*

Samuel does what God says. He goes to Bethlehem. He searches out the sons of Jesse... and when he sees Eliab, the eldest son of Jesse, Samuel thinks: *This is the guy. This guy just looks like a king.* But God says no, that's not the one. In fact, God says, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7, NRSV). *The Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.* Translation? God doesn't see like we see. God sees more.

As human beings, we tend to see outward appearances. And I'm not just talking about physical appearance, though that's part of it. We certainly get hung up on that. But it's more than that. It's about how we perceive what people are capable of. We tend to see people in a limited kind of way: as the compilation of the skills and experiences and talents they already have under their belts. Nothing more than that. We tend to see ourselves that way, too. When it comes to what we think we're capable of -- and how we're capable of serving God -- we tend to think only of the skills we've already gained, the experiences we've already had, the talents we've already shown.

Yet in our meditation this morning, we learned: "God not only sees where you are, he sees where you can be." Our scripture for this morning affirms that. God sees more than what we mortals see. God sees big picture and big potential... and maybe that's why God makes these choices that *seem* "straight-up kooky-dooks." Maybe that's why, over and over, God chooses the unlikely hero.

And here's why that's important, not just back in the Bible, but right now: I'm convinced there are still things out there that God needs doing. We can agree on that, right? The world as it is... is not the world as God intends for it to be. Some six months into covid-tide, I think we can agree on that. If anything, the pandemic has turned a

spotlight on the pervasive injustices and inequalities of our world... putting into sharp relief this contrast between the world as it is and the world as God intends for it to be. So, yeah... I for one am convinced there are still things out there that God needs doing. Maybe, just maybe, to get those things done, God needs an ordinary, unlikely hero... an unlikely hero like you.

This week, I want you to reflect on that. Reflect on this phenomenon to which the scriptures bear witness, over and over and over: our God does not choose the servants and leaders and heroes who, on the surface, seem most qualified for the job. Our God is a God who chooses unlikely heroes.

That's step one. Reflecting on that is step one. But after step one comes step two, and step two is really important: Reflect on the number of times, and the number of ways, that you have dismissed yourself or turned away from God's call because you thought yourself too unskilled, too inexperienced, too inept, too unlikely. Reflect on the ways you've said, aloud or in your heart, "I can't do that, I can't do anything about that, I'm not _____ enough."

Reflect on the fact that God chooses unlikely heroes. Reflect on the ways that you have rejected yourself as "too unlikely." And then... reflect on God's world all around you. Take stock of all the ways that "the world as it is" is not the world as God intends for it to be... not yet, anyway. Consider the ways that God might use an unlikely hero like you to change one small part of this world, and offer yourself to God for that. (And if you're feeling so bold, get a head start on it.)

This fall, all throughout this sermon series, we're going to be meeting a lot of God's most unlikely heroes... and it's my hope and prayer that through their stories and their willingness and their downright unlikeliness, we may all discover the ways that God can use unlikely heroes like us.