

Spiritual Blindness

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41

Lent 2014

Sermon

Hobart, May 4th, 2014

Launceston, April 13th, 2014

I Samuel 16:1-13 *Samuel Anoints David as King*

16 Now the LORD said to Samuel, “You have mourned long enough for Saul. I have rejected him as king of Israel, so fill your flask with olive oil and go to Bethlehem. Find a man named Jesse who lives there, for I have selected one of his sons to be my king.”

² But Samuel asked, “How can I do that? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.”

“Take a heifer with you,” the LORD replied, “and say that you have come to make a sacrifice to the LORD. ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you which of his sons to anoint for me.”

⁴ So Samuel did as the LORD instructed. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town came trembling to meet him. “What’s wrong?” they asked. “Do you come in peace?”

⁵ “Yes,” Samuel replied. “I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Purify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” Then Samuel performed the purification rite for Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice, too.

⁶ When they arrived, Samuel took one look at Eliab and thought, “Surely this is the LORD’s anointed!”

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

⁸ Then Jesse told his son Abinadab to step forward and walk in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, “This is not the one the LORD has chosen.” ⁹ Next Jesse summoned Shimea, but Samuel said, “Neither is this the one the LORD has chosen.” ¹⁰ In the same way all seven of Jesse’s sons were presented to Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.”

¹¹ Then Samuel asked, “Are these all the sons you have?”

“There is still the youngest,” Jesse replied. “But he’s out in the fields watching the sheep and goats.”

“Send for him at once,” Samuel said. “We will not sit down to eat until he arrives.”

¹² So Jesse sent for him. He was dark and handsome, with beautiful eyes. And the LORD said, “This is the one; anoint him.”

¹³ So as David stood there among his brothers, Samuel took the flask of olive oil he had brought and anointed David with the oil. And the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David from that day on. Then Samuel returned to Ramah.¹

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (1 Sa 16:1-13). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

John 9:1-41

Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

9:1 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. ²“Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?”

³“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. ⁴We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. ⁵But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.”

⁶Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man’s eyes. ⁷He told him, “Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “sent”). So the man went and washed and came back seeing!

⁸His neighbors and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?”

⁹Some said he was, and others said, “No, he just looks like him!”

But the beggar kept saying, “Yes, I am the same one!”

¹⁰They asked, “Who healed you? What happened?”

¹¹He told them, “The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.’ So I went and washed, and now I can see!”

¹²“Where is he now?” they asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

¹³Then they took the man who had been blind to the Pharisees, ¹⁴because it was on the Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud and healed him. ¹⁵The Pharisees asked the man all about it. So he told them, “He put the mud over my eyes, and when I washed it away, I could see!”

¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man Jesus is not from God, for he is working on the Sabbath.” Others said, “But how could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?” So there was a deep division of opinion among them.²

² Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*.

INTRODUCTION:

I. TODAY WE ARE GOING TO CONTINUE OUR FOCUS ON THE SEASON OF LENT

A. THE TIME LEADING UP TO EASTER

1. In which we have the opportunity to take time to examine our hearts and minds
 2. To be reminded of our need for what God provides for us in Jesus Christ our Saviour
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S.P.S:

A. THIS TIME WE ARE GOING TO BE LOOKING AT TWO WELL KNOWN PASSAGES THAT DEAL WITH BLINDNESS AND DARKNESS SIGHT AND LIGHT

1. We are going to read through each story, and see what we learn from each on this topic, and the difference Jesus' new life makes to the way we view life and people

B. PRAYER

BODY:

I Samuel 16:1-13 Samuel Anoints David as King

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² But Samuel asked, “How can I do that? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.”

“Take a heifer with you,” the LORD replied, “and say that you have come to make a sacrifice to the LORD. ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you which of his sons to anoint for me.”

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⁶ When they arrived, Samuel took one look at Eliab and thought, “Surely this is the LORD’s anointed!”

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don’t judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

⁸ Then Jesse told his son Abinadab to step forward and walk in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, “This is not the one the LORD has chosen.” ⁹ Next Jesse summoned Shimea,* but Samuel said, “Neither is this the one the LORD has chosen.” ¹⁰ In the same way all seven of Jesse’s sons were presented to Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” ¹¹ Then Samuel asked, “Are these all the sons you have?”

“There is still the youngest,” Jesse replied. “But he’s out in the fields watching the sheep and goats.”

“Send for him at once,” Samuel said. “We will not sit down to eat until he arrives.”

* Hebrew *Shammah*, a variant spelling of Shimea; compare 1 Chr 2:13; 20:7.

¹² So Jesse sent for him. He was dark and handsome, with beautiful eyes.

And the LORD said, "This is the one; anoint him."

¹³ So as David stood there among his brothers, Samuel took the flask of olive oil he had brought and anointed David with the oil. And the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David from that day on. Then Samuel returned to Ramah.

C. SO WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM SAMUEL'S ANOINTING OF DAVID?

1. One clear point is that too often what we think to be the plain truth, the clear and obvious, just isn't

D. MOST OF US HAVE HELD TO VERY CLEAR AND BLACK AND WHITE VIEWS OF WHAT IS TRUE, WHAT IS LIGHT, WHAT IS GOD'S VIEW ON SO MANY MATTERS

1. Samuel did too

a) Why do you think he kept choosing the wrong sons?

2. Notice vs. 6

⁶ When they arrived, Samuel took one look at Eliab and thought, "Surely this is the LORD's anointed!"

a) What is the problem here?

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

3. This is the same issue we saw with Adam and Eve

a) We so easily jump to premature conclusions without really understanding God and his mind and heart

4. We misjudge other people because we look at the presenting situation

a) The way they dress, the way they talk, their race, their politics, their sexuality, their past actions, what they believe, who they associate with etc.

E. BUT EVEN MORE PROBLEMATICALLY WE TOO OFTEN MISJUDGE JESUS, AND WE MISJUDGE GOD

1. As we have been discussing in recent months, we tend to have particular entrenched views of God and his righteousness that aren't always wise or correct
2. It is hard for us not to see God and life through our own experience and perceptions
 - a) It is hard for us to see or admit that perhaps we aren't seeing or understanding God or the other person in their true light and reality because our vision is skewed by our own emotional issues, past experiences, or incorrect thinking
3. It is so rare to see the average human being, including Christians, approach a controversial personal or theological or lifestyle issue neutrally
4. To be open and meek, seeking to understand all sides of a matter and objectively seek the truth no matter what it might be

F. LET'S NOW READ THE STORY OF JESUS AND THE MAN WHO WAS BORN BLIND

1. As we read it lets keep in mind what we have seen in I Samuel 16
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II. JOHN 9:1-41

Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth.

1. So how do we view people like this who have been suffering all their lives from some problem?

a) Perhaps a better example today would be if Jesus came across a man who had aids, or was overly obese, or homeless or gay...

²“Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?”

B. WHAT DO WE SEE HAPPENING HERE?

1. What is the automatic presumption of the disciples?

a) The equivalent of Samuel’s reflex, one look conclusion

³“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. ⁴We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us.* The night is coming, and then no one can work. ⁵But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.”

⁶Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man’s eyes. ⁷He told him, “Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “sent”). So the man went and washed and came back seeing!

⁸His neighbors and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some said he was, and others said, “No, he just looks like him!”

But the beggar kept saying, “Yes, I am the same one!”

¹⁰They asked, “Who healed you? What happened?”

¹¹He told them, “The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.’ So I went and washed, and now I can see!”

¹²“Where is he now?” they asked.

* Other manuscripts read *I must quickly carry out the tasks assigned me by the one who sent me*; still others read *We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent me*.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

¹³ Then they took the man who had been blind to the Pharisees, ¹⁴ because it was on the Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud and healed him. ¹⁵ The Pharisees asked the man all about it. So he told them, “He put the mud over my eyes, and when I washed it away, I could see!”

¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man Jesus is not from God, for he is working on the Sabbath.” Others said, “But how could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?” So there was a deep division of opinion among them.

C. WHAT DO WE SEE HAPPENING HERE?

¹⁷ Then the Pharisees again questioned the man who had been blind and demanded, “What’s your opinion about this man who healed you?”

The man replied, “I think he must be a prophet.”

¹⁸ The Jewish leaders still refused to believe the man had been blind and could now see, so they called in his parents. ¹⁹ They asked them, “Is this your son? Was he born blind? If so, how can he now see?”

1. This is all too common when opinionated people are confronted with something that doesn’t fit their worldview, their dogmatic position on a matter
 - a) The Pharisees are trying to find other ways of accounting for the blind man having his sight restored
2. Their beliefs and prejudices will not allow for Jesus to have healed him, especially not for him to have been healed on the Sabbath
 - a) There was no way God would heal someone by breaking the Sabbath

²⁰ His parents replied, “We know this is our son and that he was born blind, ²¹ but we don’t know how he can see or who healed him. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself.” ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who had announced that anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue. ²³ That’s why they said, “He is old enough. Ask him.”

D. IT IS TRAGIC WHEN LEADERS HAVE SUCH AN INTIMIDATORY HOLD ON THEIR FOLLOWERS

1. This can be true in churches, in the work place, in politics, and sadly between husbands and wives, and parents and children
2. People down through the ages have taken the approach that a leader should be obeyed without question, no matter what
 - a) We see it in dictatorships and undemocratic countries still
 - b) We see it in the workplace too often as well
3. Some insist that the man is to be the boss at home
 - a) And get upset when governments insist that we not use corporal punishment on our children
 - b) Scriptures like “spare the rod and spoil the child” get misinterpreted and used to justify abusive behaviour
4. Back to John 9:

²⁴ So for the second time they called in the man who had been blind and told him, “God should get the glory for this, because we know this man Jesus is a sinner.”

²⁵ “I don’t know whether he is a sinner,” the man replied. “But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!”

²⁶ “But what did he do?” they asked. “How did he heal you?”

²⁷ “Look!” the man exclaimed. “I told you once. Didn’t you listen? Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?”

²⁸ Then they cursed him and said, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses!

²⁹ We know God spoke to Moses, but we don’t even know where this man comes from.”

5. Again we see their closed minds
 - a) They dogmatically justify their position by claiming to be Moses’ disciples
 - b) As Jesus told them another time, if they had truly listened to Moses they would have listened to him as well, because Moses and all the Old Testament pointed to him

³⁰ “Why, that’s very strange!” the man replied. “He healed my eyes, and yet you don’t know where he comes from? ³¹ We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. ³² Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he couldn’t have done it.”

6. The blind man presents the truth to them

- a) Which is John’s point in recording this miracle
- b) It brings out the irony of the one who could not physically see up until now, seeing spiritually clearly and those who claimed exclusive possession of the truth being utterly blind and in the dark spiritually

³⁴ “You were born a total sinner!” they answered. “Are you trying to teach us?” And they threw him out of the synagogue.

7. Again their only response is one of anger and emotive condemnation of the one who dared contradict them

³⁵ When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

³⁶ The man answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”

³⁷ “You have seen him, Jesus said, “and he is speaking to you!”

³⁸ “Yes, Lord, I believe!” the man said. And he worshiped Jesus.

8. Jesus is making clear that the man born blind now had true spiritual sight

E. NOW WE COME TO ONE OF THE KEYS TO ALL THAT WE HAVE BEEN SEEING TODAY

³⁹ Then Jesus told him, “I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”

F. WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT THE WHOLE MISSION AND PURPOSE OF JESUS’ INCARNATION?

1. How does Jesus describe his mission of judgment?

- a) ^{39b} “to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”

2. How is that bringing judgment or justice?

G. THE CLARITY OF WHAT JESUS HAS SAID BRINGS THE PHARISEES TO A POINT OF JUDGMENT AND A CLEAR CHOICE ABOUT THE SITUATION

⁴⁰ Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, "Are you saying we're blind?"

1. They can see that what they are saying and what Jesus is saying and doing are so black and white different, that if Jesus is right then they are completely in error, in the dark and blind

⁴¹ "If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty," Jesus replied. "But you remain guilty because you claim you can see."

H. JESUS' JUDGMENT IS UNEQUIVOCAL

1. Because you claim you can see, because you dogmatically claim to be right, and condemn and persecute those who believe or act differently, you are guilty yourselves

2. But his judgment says more than just condemning the self-righteous abusive religious leaders

a) His whole action towards the man born blind reveals the other side of the picture, the truth, the light

I. WHAT IS THAT OTHER SIDE OF HIS JUDGMENT IN WORD AND ACTION HERE IN JOHN 9?

1. That if you are truly blind, God doesn't treat you as guilty

2. In fact God will heal you from your blindness and give you spiritual sight, light and truth

J. JOHN IN HIS GOSPEL IS REPEATEDLY MAKING THE POINT THAT JESUS MIRACLES, ACTIONS AND WORDS WERE LIFE AND LIGHT

1. Jesus was the light of the world that came into the darkness to condemn the darkness and remove it in order to bring us all into the glorious light of God
2. Into the kingdom of God, the world of justice where God's love, mercy, giving and forgiveness overcome the darkness, hurt, abuse and suffering and bring light and life, healing and redemption

CONCLUSION:

K. JOHN JEWELL SUMS UP WHAT WE HAVE BEEN DISCUSSING;

Even Samuel, the great servant of God found himself mistaking the apparent for the real. The story fits well with the Pharisees who didn't get the point with the healing of the blind man. When we are so sure of our opinions and set in our understandings, we are sure to create darkness for ourselves. And if we stubbornly cling to our own understandings and allow our opinions to harden we gradually close the door to light that comes from beyond us.

Please be aware of a critical danger here. ...One can take something that is gospel truth, internalize it and mix it with personal preconceived ideas, shut the door to further insight from the Spirit of God and turn what was once truth into darkness. This is exactly what happened to the Pharisees. They took the good law of God - the law given by Moses, mixed it with interpretation, personal preconceived ideas and cultural prejudice and shut the door to any new insight from God. Jesus in one of his more scathing attacks on twisted religion said that these folks were, "...*blind leaders of the blind.*" [Matt.15:14]

God does not see things the way we see things! Even the intention here was that God looks at the human heart while we look at outward appearances, the fact remains that God sees all kinds of things differently than we do.

We often miss the significance of a person to God because they are not significant to the world around us. We miss the joy of a child's capacity for play and laughter because we are engrossed in "important" things. ...

And what of Christ? It is altogether fitting that we ask ourselves whether we are really and truly seeing the Savior who came to bring us light. Is it possible that we grow so accustomed to the prayers and hymns and words of scripture that we miss the blazing truth of his coming to us?

What a wonderful thing it would be if this Lenten season would be a time when we opened up our spirits to see the life changing, world transforming power of the fact that Christ came to take the darkness of this world upon himself. And as the darkness is taken into the light of Christ it becomes no darkness at all.

L. PRAYER

NOTES

III. FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 30, 2014

See Also:

[Year A](#)

[Year B](#)

[Year C](#)

Reading 1: I Sam 16: -1-13

Reading 2: Psalm 12

Reading 3: Ephesians 5:8-14

Reading 4: John 9:1-41

By Marjorie Suchocki

The texts deal with good versus evil, with I Samuel challenging assumptions concerning inward versus outward goodness, and the Psalm repeating the ever-present plaint: why do evil doers flourish while the righteous go unrewarded? The New Testament texts continue the theme of good versus bad actions, using imagery of moral light and darkness in Ephesians, and physical versus spiritual blindness in the gospel.

The focus is the passage concerning Jesus healing the blind man in John 9, with the consequent challenges to traditional notions of misfortune as the result of sin ("who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?") and the contrast between spiritual and physical seeing. The story is one of the culminating stories within what is called "the book of signs" in the gospel of John. The gospel is structured into two parallel sections--the "Book of Signs," beginning with John 1:19 and concluding with John 12, and the "Book of Glory" comprising the thirteenth through twentieth chapters. These two sections are "bookended" with the prologue of John 1:1-18, and the epilogue of John 21.

The point of the Book of Signs is to associate the work of Jesus with the work of God; typically each sign ("miracle") is followed by a discourse explicating the spiritual insight contained in the sign. The signs also prepare the way for the Book of Glory, in which our associations of glory with majesty and power are turned on their head: the cross of Christ is the glory of Christ and the glory of God. The cross, followed by the resurrection, is the greatest glory of all, and the deepest revelation of God's relation to sin.

Typically we associate God's relation to sin as one of punishment--witness the cry of the Psalmist, asking why the wicked are not punished. But if God is revealed in the glory of the cross, the revelation is that all sin is felt by God as well as by the world: it is God who feels every sin, every suffering, every evil. We are not alone in these harshest realities of our lives. The glory is that precisely by feeling the effects of evil, God is also the power of transformation. God experiences the world in order to enable us to move beyond evil into modes of redemptive life. God's answer to sin is not punishment, but transformation, resurrection.

The sign of this glory given in John 9:1-5 is twofold. First, the story opens by rejecting suffering as punishment for sin. Suffering is part and parcel of what it is to be human; it stems from our physical and moral fragility. Second, the power to see or not to see, and to distinguish light from darkness, leads to one of the great "I am" statements that John attributes to Jesus: "I am the light of the world." The details of the story in verses 6 through 34 are both humorous and instructive, suggesting that sometimes our theologies get in the way of seeing what is plainly in front of us. The end of the passage in verses 35-41 show the formerly blind man once again encountering Jesus. And once again the sign is given in the conundrum: the blind see; but those who think they see are blind to the spiritual truths so plainly given them in the Sign who is Jesus.

Fourth Sunday in Lent Year A

[Lectionary citations](#)

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Sermon Seeds

Focus Scripture:

John 9:1-41

[Additional reflection on Psalm 23](#)

Additional reflection material and conversation on our [Facebook page](#).

Weekly Theme:

Learning to See

Reflection:

by Kathryn Matthews Huey



In the story of the healing of the man born blind, John uses "seeing" as a metaphor for believing, for coming to see past outward appearances to the truth deep in the heart of things. (Remember his use of metaphors like "light and darkness," and "living water" in the readings for the past two Sundays?) The man whose sight is given to him by Jesus stumbles (like all of us) toward belief and understanding, not suddenly or easily but in the course of a long story that leads to another personal encounter with Jesus.

The former beggar's openness and growing faith contrast sharply with the fearful, hesitant questions of his neighbors (how cynical they are not to rejoice!) and the downright judgmental reaction of the religious establishment. Cure on the Sabbath, break religious rules – how can this Jesus be "of God"? And yet "the man born blind" sees God's truth so much better than those who spend all their time studying and talking about God. Metaphor, and irony. While the other characters in the story remain at the end where they were at its beginning, the healed man's life is transformed, and he finds himself in a very different place. And Jesus, of course, is in that very different place.

John told this story and used these images of seeing and not seeing, believing and not believing, to help an early Christian community "see" themselves in that story. They knew what it felt like to be driven out of the synagogue by the religious authorities, to be

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expelled from their "church home." (They were really feeling the lack of "extravagant hospitality"!) John helps them to connect their loss with the gain of grace in their powerful experience of conversion and healing, understanding and trust. But sometimes conversion and belief inspire judgment, rejection, and condemnation from those around us. It's a lonely place to be, and John's way of telling this story must have spoken powerfully to the people in that situation, reassuring them that they were not alone: they now belonged to a community that shared the same faith, and, ultimately, like the man born blind but newly sighted, they would encounter Jesus on their way.

John also pairs the categories of "sinner" and "not a sinner" in this story. Who is the real sinner, we might ask? (As if it were up to us to judge.) The authorities tried to judge both men, Jesus and the man born blind, and even tried to trap them both with their arguments, but the man born blind is amazingly clever in countering them. Jesus has done something amazing: giving sight to someone who had never seen. That alone is worth sitting and thinking about. How would you adjust to walking around normally and taking in all that new information that sight brings? And how would you begin to thank the One who had done this for you?

The tension in the story comes from judgment, of course, and the twists and turns judgment takes. The disciples see a blind man and right away ask for a judgment from Jesus about who the "real" sinner is – the man, or his parents. (Once that's established, presumably they can move on to "loving the sinner, but not the sin.") The twist comes when Jesus says "Neither" and uses the occasion, outside the religious building and the religious rules, to glorify God by healing the man, using means that remind us a bit of baptism, with water and mud and rising to a whole new self and a whole new life. That causes a lot of talk, and more questions and conjecture, instead of dumbfounded wonder and praise of God. Even the newly sighted man takes a little time to find his way to the truth, but he's persistent in his search, and delightfully clever in his defense before the powers that be. Richard L. Eslinger helps us find ourselves in the blind man's experience: There are many "who have been baptized but who, if asked where Jesus is in their lives today, would answer with the same poignant 'I do not know'...and even for ourselves, there are times and seasons when the honest-to-God answer to that inquiry would be the same" (*New Proclamation Year A 2008*).

The healing also prompts another judgment, this time from the religious authorities who, rather than praising God for such an amazing thing, start the interrogation so they can find the sin that they know must be there. Jesus has broken the law about the Sabbath (as they interpret it), so they know that he must be a sinner. The blind man claims to know only one thing, that "though I was blind, now I see." But the Pharisees "know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The response of the healed man is brilliant, of course: "Here is an astonishing thing!" (We might say, another astonishing thing, after witnessing something that had "never since the world began" happened before!) "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." The newly sighted man not only sees things clearly but can also "do the math." And the Pharisees don't appreciate the way things add up.

Now the question for us, today, is about finding ourselves in the story in more ways than one. Isn't it tempting to identify with the man born blind, rather than with the Pharisees? It's an especially uncomfortable question for pastors and other religious leaders, but it

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works for all of us inside the church. Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon on this text, "A Tale of Two Heretics," suggests that we might find ourselves so occupied with our own modern version of "ritual purity" and "preserving the law" that we fail to see what really matters. We might be blind to the truth right in front of us, especially if we don't expect it outside the normal bounds of what we think religion ought to be. The folks who think they have it all together and can judge others may be well-meaning and sincere, Taylor says, but they "are the people to watch out for, because they think they can see... better than other people, and they are not shy about telling you that you are not really seeing what you think you see, or that what you are seeing is wrong. They do not do this to be mean, either. They do this because they love God and maybe even because they love you too. They are doing it to protect you from believing the wrong things" (*Home by Another Way*).

Frederick Niedner wrote a beautiful reflection on this text in the *Christian Century*: "The Pharisees in the story, like the Pharisee in each of us, prove stubbornly blind to the reckless dispensing of mercy that takes place. It has come on the wrong day, to an unworthy recipient, from a maverick agent whom the Pharisees can't see for dust" (February 26, 2008). Religion, organized or not, seems to gravitate toward structure and limits, perhaps because of the power of mystery and our anxiety and eagerness to control it. "A reckless dispensing of mercy" plays havoc with our need for order and "decent" behavior. It also goes against our subconscious conviction that in some way, we deserve what we get (if it's good, that is), and those beggars on the street did something to get themselves into such a situation. The judging goes on, even today.

Niedner writes evocatively about the baptismal imagery in the healing, and how, even today, we can connect to the man born blind: "Baptized readers of every age find themselves in the man born blind, buried and reshaped in the mud of the new creation, washed in the water of the sent One. Now we see as never before, but we scarcely recognize ourselves, much less those around us or even the One who healed us" (*Christian Century*, February 26, 2008).

Such a long story, and yet Jesus appears only at the beginning and the end. In fact, he heard that the blind man had been driven out, and he went looking for him. We might sit with that line for a little while, too, and picture Jesus hearing about what happened to the man, and setting out to find him. It's not a question of whether *we*, sighted or blind, find *Jesus*, but of *Jesus* coming to look for *us*, and finding us (no matter) where we are.

What hidden truths and realities, perhaps just under the surface, do you need to see, in your own life and the life of your congregation? What might your church need to see in order to move more purposefully toward a new future, new hope, new possibilities? Are there unrecognized leaders and spiritual guides within the life of your church who are busy, on the edges, with "tending the sheep" while the "important" matters are discussed by experts and authorities? What are the standards we use to judge what we see, whether it's a person, a building, a mission or ministry, or whether it's an event or experience, such as a healing or transformation, or even a disaster? What are the core truths we depend on, as the man cured of physical blindness depended on when he reasoned that Jesus must be "of God," since he was able to make him see? And yet even that reasoning was not enough. He needed to *encounter* Jesus, to hear and understand what was happening. When – and how – does your church take time to encounter Jesus Christ and to hear the truth that transforms your life, to follow in a new path that you previously could not even see?

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Does it ever happen in the life of your congregation that there are some who question even the most wonderful turn of events – the miracles – and press for more information, details, rather than praise God and give thanks? Is it easier to say that something is "too good to be true" rather than to follow a new path? Is it tempting to claim our identity based on what has gone before and on our ancestry, rather than on who God calls us to be, to become, today and in the days ahead? How much does fear influence our inquiries, our wondering, our discernment? How do you sense a still-speaking God, calming your fear and calling you to a new boldness and a new faith?

What is the "one thing" that you know for sure?

Charles Schulz, 20th century

"I cannot fail to be thrilled every time I read the things that Jesus said, and I am more and more convinced of the necessity of following him. What Jesus means to me is this: In him we are able to see God, and to understand [God's] feelings toward us."

Madeleine L'Engle, 20th century (when asked, "Do you believe in God without any doubts?")

"I believe in God with all my doubts."

Paul Gauguin, 19th century

"I shut my eyes in order to see."

Helen Keller, 20th century

"My darkness has been filled with the light of intelligence, and behold, the outer day-lit world was stumbling and groping in social blindness."

Samuel Butler, 19th century

"A blind man knows he cannot see, and is glad to be led, though it be by a dog; but he that is blind in his understanding, which is the worst blindness of all, believes he sees as the best, and scorns a guide."

Thomas Hardy, 19th century

"There is a condition worse than blindness, and that is, seeing something that isn't there."

Additional reflection on Psalm 23:

In several of his books, Walter Brueggemann provides beautiful commentaries for anyone preaching on this familiar, and favorite, of psalms. While it's most often associated with funerals, the psalm sings of God's tender care throughout life, and so it describes an approach to living just as much as it provides comfort in the face of loss or the unknown.

Brueggemann contrasts "psalms of celebration" and "psalms of complaint," the latter focusing on enemies and threats, and the former lifting up God's awesome power and gracious care. With that kind of shepherd, why should a little sheep worry, indeed?

I remember a Peanuts cartoon from many years ago, in which Charlie Brown is asked what "security" means. He describes the experience of riding in the back seat, while your

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parents are in the front seat, driving. You can sleep worry-free, because they're taking care of everything, Charlie Brown explains to Peppermint Patty. That might be another way, in our culture, to describe the feeling of utter trust and security provided by a reliable, loving, all-powerful figure. (Of course, Charlie Brown ends with the gripping realization that the day inevitably comes when "you grow up and can never ride in the backseat again." But that's another sermon.)

While the psalms of complaint use tears as a metaphor, Brueggemann writes, the psalms of celebration use a feast to convey God's goodness and power, a goodness and power that Christians experience in Jesus: "There is no gesture as expressive utter well-being as lavish food – as every Jewish and every Christian mother knows. Thus the feeding miracles of Jesus and the Eucharist are gestures of a new orientation that comes as surprising gift and ends all diets of tears" (*Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*). The table is at the heart of who we are as Christians, a community that blesses, breaks, and shares bread, a feast that remembers Jesus' sharing long ago and looks forward to that heavenly feast when all of God's children will have more than enough. Brueggemann again: "Thus 'table'...means all the good tables at which you have ever sat and the experiences of joy that happened there and the subsequent vibrations you have from them."

In a different book, Brueggemann focuses more closely on the shepherd, who "leads and feeds" the vulnerable sheep, an image full of "tenderness, gentleness, and attentiveness." While we may think of a shepherd as a man, Brueggemann hears in the psalm the suggestion that "the God who feeds and leads has maternal qualities, and in these verbs does what a mother does...." And in hearing about God doing "what a mother does," we hear the psalm's assurance that God turns situations of fear around, transforming them into situations of joy. The metaphor of the caring shepherd goes beyond herding or even leading to tender, life-giving care (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*).

John Hayes goes into more descriptive detail about the work of a shepherd, reading the expression "to set the table" as "preparing fields for grazing. Such activities included uprooting poisonous weeds and thorns and clearing the area of the sheep's enemies, such as snakes and scorpion's nests. In the evening, as the sheep were corralled, the injured or sickly ones were separated from the others and treated with oil and a curative drink made of fermented material and herbs sweetened with honey" (*Preaching through the Christian Year A*). Why do you think our tradition gives us a metaphor for ourselves that puts us in such a powerless position, a sheep that cannot do much at all for itself? How do you think that image fits us particularly well in our day and age? Does it clash with our sense of self-reliance, or does it touch our most vulnerable and fearful places, or does it bring us back to where we belong in relation to God?

Brueggemann helps the individual claim this text as well as the gathered community (the flock). Each little sheep, each believer receives the gift of faith, the gift of life that "begins in God, in God's good intent and God's utter reliability. Our role is to receive, accept, trust, and respond." This is no stranger but one whose voice we know and trust, one who knows each one of us by name. "Sheep need three things for well-being: good pasture land, adequate water, and safe paths," Brueggemann observes, but they're "incapable" of securing their needs and unable to defend themselves. In a dangerous world, the assurance

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that the shepherd is there and will never leave the sheep to fend for itself allows the sheep to graze and rest in peace (*Texts for Preaching Year A*).

Of course, within the same short psalm, we can shift from the image of shepherd to that of host, too, and this host really knows how to treat a guest: there's nothing perfunctory about the table-setting or the hospitality offered. It meets the needs of the guest who may be in danger, may be in need of vindication before an enemy, may be in need of rest, comfort and healing. It's all there, in this compact and elegant song. No wonder it is so loved and familiar, if it touches those deepest longings and needs of our bodies and spirits.

But Brueggemann doesn't leave it there, in a place of comfort and peace. As usual, he challenges us to read the text in light of our own situation, a world full of things we want and expect and often demand: "If the promise concerns only God's gifts, then God becomes only instrumental to human hope, and the hoper lives in a world of commodities, which in the end give neither joy nor safety. Thus it is affirmed that Yahweh is the true heart's desire of human persons, the true joy of human life, and the sure possibility of life lives in hope" (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*).

As we rest peacefully in the reassurance of this psalm, perhaps we might examine our hearts to see what has taken root there, what we have let ourselves long for, what paths we have wandered away from our "true heart's desire." Do we even know our "true heart's desire"? We might explore the possibility that God has become "instrumental" to our hope. What does this mean about our sense of God's awesome and providential power, and our place in the scheme of things? In a way, we move between two poles: on the one hand, as loved and known individuals precious to God, and on the other hand, as sheep struggling to take our own path and expecting the shepherd to handle all the difficulties and to smooth the way. How does it feel to "feel powerless"?

We preach this text right in the middle of the long season of Lent, a time of preparation for Easter and the celebration of new life in the Resurrection. While Christians look forward to, and even love, the promise of the empty tomb as much as the image of a gentle shepherd, a tomb is not just a happy, sunshine kind of place but one of death and hopelessness. It's the "empty" part that matters, the promise of resurrection and new life even in an image of death. Perhaps, then, this psalm is so loved precisely because it doesn't paint a rosy (and false) picture of reality. The psalmist faced dangers and threats, as Jesus did and as we hope to do, but it was God's presence at all times, good and bad, that's being celebrated in the psalm of celebration, and in our preaching, according to O. Wesley Allen: "At the center of the psalm are the words, 'for you are with me.' This should be the center of the sermon as well" (*New Proclamation Year A 2008*).

So we can read the psalm privately, as individuals alone in our room, or in small groups over a grave, so often that we almost become de-sensitized to its beauty and power. But that beauty and power is even more encompassing, as the church relies on its assurances. The church feels threatened, too, and there are plenty of dangers to our life as a community of faith. The church can long for abundance, for a feast, for more than enough, for reassurance that everything is going to turn out well in the end, no matter how discouraging or overwhelming the situation. This isn't just a promise about "the end," however; it says something about how we live our life today, Brueggemann writes, remembering God's long history of goodness and trusting the future to that goodness as

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well: "a community that breaks out of amnesia and despair will unavoidably live differently in the present" (*Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*). This "present-tense" trouble the church experiences, Brueggemann says, must not throw us off the paths of obedience and trust. God is with us always.

But that, of course, is not what the world says. In *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, Brueggemann provides another pairing for our consideration, the contrast between the dominant version of reality and the "sub-version" of reality. We live and breathe in the dominant version, and we are all "to some extent practitioners of that dominant version of reality [that] comes at us in many forms; if we conform to that dominant voice of reality, we may receive its surface gifts of well-being and security for a while." A sermon might explore Brueggemann's suggestion that what we see around us, what we're told and what we think we want and need may not be the real truth that underlies everything. In fact, as people of faith, don't we claim and rely on that sub-version, at some level of our souls? The difficult thing is that, for many of us, the dominant version has been very good, very reassuring, very comforting. The sub-version might be quite uncomfortable for us. Still, this is "a small counterpoint without great voice or muscle. It has been a minority perspective for a very long time...a poetic, elusive, delicate alternative even while the dominant voice of reality prevails in its facts on the ground" (*Mandate to Difference*).

That's why we come together in worship, in wider mission, in fellowship, but it's in worship especially that we make that claim about the sub-version of reality that may seem "vulnerable and foolish and exposed." Here the understanding of faith as trust (rather than acceptance of intellectual propositions) is the foundation of our shared life just as much as it informs our private relationship with a comforting God. What a wonderful irony that "sub-version" and "subversion" are so close! How are they related in your mind, and in the life of your church, to the needs of your community and the suffering of the world?

Lectionary texts

1 Samuel 16:1-13

The 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." Samuel 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.' Invite 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." Samuel 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?" He 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.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But 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." Then Jesse called

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Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Psalm 23

God is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
God makes me lie down in green pastures,
and leads me beside still waters;

God restores my soul
and leads me in right paths
for the sake of God's name.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of God
my whole life long.

Ephesians 5:8-14

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,
"Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe

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in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Liturgical notes on the Readings and Colors

In ecumenical liturgical practice, there are normally three readings and one psalm at each Sunday service, in this order:

First Reading: Hebrew Scripture

Response: Psalm (or Canticle) from the Bible

Second Reading: Epistle (or Acts or Revelation)

Third Reading: Gospel

The first two lessons are normally read by laypeople, the Gospel by a Minister of the Word or a layperson. In Roman Catholic, Anglican and liturgical Protestant churches, it is uncommon for an ordained minister to read all of the lessons.

The psalm is not a reading but a congregational response following the lesson from Hebrew Scripture: it is normally sung with a refrain or recited by the congregation as poetry. Occasionally, a canticle is appointed in place of a psalm; it is sung or recited in the same way. The New Century Hymnal provides a complete liturgical psalter with refrains and music.

A hymn may be sung as an introduction to the proclamation of the Gospel.

During Ordinary Time (seasons after Epiphany and Pentecost) two alternative sets of OT readings with responsorial psalms are provided. The first option is a semi-continuous reading through a book of Hebrew Scripture; the second is thematically related to the other readings.

Lent and Easter

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent. Violet throughout Lent is in wide use, but some churches have begun instead to use browns, beiges, and grays (burlaps and unbleached fabrics, for example) to reflect the mood of penitence.

There are many variations in the use of vestments and color during Holy Week. Some common practices: Red, the color of martyrs, for Palm/Passion Sunday up to Maundy Thursday, when White is used for Holy Communion; stripping of all chancel paraments at the conclusion of the Maundy Thursday service, with no adornment until the appearance of White and/or Gold at Easter Vigil or Easter Sunday; the use of Black, Red or no color for Good Friday; the use of Scarlet during Holy Week instead of the "fire" Red of Pentecost.

IV. MOVE ON (I SAM. 16:1-13; PS. 23; EPH. 5:8-14; JOHN 9:1-41) BY SCOTT MCKNIGHT

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Samuel, the Billy Graham of his day, was adviser to the political leader Saul, the Pete Rose of ancient Israel. Samuel anointed Saul to be the first king of Israel. But soon (to quote James Thurber), "confusion got its foot in the door" and went through the entire "symptom." Samuel observed Saul disobeying the explicit word of God, and it became Samuel's job to inform Saul that God had rejected him as king.

The Bible tells us that Samuel "grieved" (*abal*) over Saul. But Yahweh told Samuel that the time for grieving was over, and that it was time to appoint a new king.

Sometimes we just need to move on.

The Amish resist certain aspects of "moving on." I appreciate the Anabaptist resistance to the inhumane features of "progress," the Anabaptist call to simplicity and fidelity to ancient traditions. But why stop with the 19th century? Why not go to a period prior to buggies, ovens, cupboards and battery-operated adding machines? The operative word here, as Donald Kraybill so ably demonstrates, is the German word *Gelassenheit*, or "yieldedness" -- to God's loving, providing and guiding will. But sometimes what is perceived as *Gelassenheit* is actually a stubborn resistance to the inevitability of change.

The gospel proclaims an alarming fact about historical movement -- it is what God is all about. The entire Bible hinges on one undeniable reality: *reality* is God's workshop. God doesn't give Abraham a set of beliefs but an event (a smoking fire pot) and a rite (circumcision). And God gives the Christian church a son -- a child born of a woman whose reputation was stained, and reared by a father who surrendered his status as a *tsadiq* or "righteous man." Yet this son does not just teach the gospel: he embodies it.

In acting this way God sanctifies history, making it something to embrace instead of resist. When Samuel resists he hears the voice of God directing him to a future that will be better. That future will include David the shepherd boy. Like all shepherds, he is often on the move. As the author of Psalm 23, David the shepherd lies down, is led beside still waters, walks through the shadow of death and sits in the presence of his enemies. David will do whatever it takes to guide his sheep even as he remembers that Yahweh is *his* shepherd, guiding him.

Then another shepherd will arrive. Jesus the Good Shepherd will be the Light of the World, removing darkness and trumping, for example, the darkness of the man born blind.

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Like Samuel, the disciples will "get stuck" because they'll wonder whose sins have made the man blind. But Jesus, pushing them into the "Shepherd's era," will lead them to see that simplistic correlations from the past (sin leads to curse, obedience leads to blessing) do not always work.

He will guide them with his light, and when that light is turned on, three things will happen. First, those who live in that light "try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord." Samuel was stuck for some time in wanting Saul's era to be the kingdom era, but God gave him a horn of oil to search for the Shepherd's era. It does no good to apply more and more oil to the old era, God said. It is gone; it is history. We please God by moving on.

We do this too by taking no part in the "unfruitful works of darkness," but instead exposing them. Like many others, I am deeply saddened by Americans' tendency to gloat triumphantly in its victories. I am also saddened by Christians who, instead of weeping over current world affairs, have picked up a new sword of Constantine, a wicked instrument of triumphalism.

We need what John Howard Yoder calls the "politics of Jesus" and what Stanley Hauerwas calls the "peaceable kingdom." Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says it well: ">From now on, all that can be said of God's action in the past or the present must pass under the judgement of this fact [the cross]." He also says, "God is known in and by the exercise of crucifying compassion; if we are like him in that, we know him." These theologians are calling us out of the old era of warfare, the Saul era, into the Shepherd's era of justice, peace and love.

This future kingdom is marked by "justice," a word that is fast losing its robust Christian profile. It has, as Flannery O'Connor said of another word, "a private meaning and public odor." Some use the term in the sense of "retribution"(bring them to justice), and some in the sense of "rectification"(give the victims and the marginalized an equal opportunity). Neither of these senses is adequately Christian. The Christian sense of "justice" is "what is right before God and others." And, according to Jesus' own creed, what is "right" is to love God and to love others (Mark 12:29-31). In the Christian sense, justice means providing our world an opportunity to love God and to love others.

We need the words of the apostle Paul, who said, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." We need a renewed commitment to listen to Jesus Christ, to let him be the good shepherd who can dispel the darkneses of war and bring in the Shepherd's era. Peace and justice embrace one another because they will be empowered by love on a day when, to quote Samuel Johnson, "we shall not borrow all our happiness from hope."

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**V. LENT 4: 30 MARCH JOHN 9:1-41 WILLIAM
LOADER**

**A. FIRST THOUGHTS ON YEAR A GOSPEL PASSAGES
FROM THE LECTIONARY**

B. LENT 4

William Loader

It is a refreshing reminder to hear again Jesus' rejection of a necessary causal link between disability and sin. While it is clearly outrageous to think otherwise, it often appears to inform attitudes and has been given broad application. So we will hear that people for whom life does not go well are at fault, whether that is about a disability, unemployment or sickness. Its corollary usually holds such an attitude in place: people who prosper are blessed; people blessed are good people. Other people are bad people! Biblical texts can be cited to support the claim.

In the drama which John unfolds here for his congregations the rime and reason for the disability was a matter of promoting the importance of Jesus. Whether the historical Jesus would have seen the needy as opportunities for promotion is doubtful. We need not have an explanation of others' ills in terms of God's benefit. God more likely weeps at others' ills than sees an opportunity for enhancing reputation. But then as now people found many ways of detracting from the dignity of others.

Coming through the narrative is the strength of its source which doubtless portrayed the deed as an act of Christ's compassion. John's story lifts our eyes to a wider perspective. Jesus is not just a healer, but light for the world's darkness, which was another language for saying: God so loved the world! The response of Jesus in 9:4-5 also reminds the hearers that even Jesus would fail. That, too, would not mean he is bad!

Perhaps the old tradition John used contained the details about how the healing took place. It is not unlike techniques used by others in the ancient world (see also Mark 8:23). John cannot help lifting our attention again to the symbolic level when he translates Siloam. The scene which follows in 9:8-12 playfully repeats the story of the healing and ends with a typically Johannine ambiguity: the healed man does not know where Jesus is. It reminds us of the saying about the wind/spirit in 3:8. Finding Jesus is much more than finding his location.

There are doubtless deliberate echoes of the healing in John 5, also linked to a pool, when John 9 tells us that a deed of healing by a Jerusalem pool took place on a the sabbath and that this upset the Pharisees. The to-ing and fro-ing of the drama in 9:13-17 and 9:18-23 expose the Pharisees as obsessive about their laws. 9:22 mentions the parents' fear that becoming off side with the Pharisees could lead to expulsion from the synagogue - probably a real experience for many in John's congregations.

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

The drama heightens in 9:24-34 as the Pharisees urge that glory be given to God. It had been Jesus' intention all along according to 9:3 to glorify God's works (see also 11:4). The Pharisees profile themselves as righteous and Jesus as a sinner, but in the process further expose their obsession. Hearers of the gospel thus far would know that rather than remaining faithful to Moses and the Law these Pharisees betray it. Its sole function now was to point to Christ's validity. The former blind man makes simple responses which unmask the critics. For that he is expelled. All it needs is for Jesus to find him and tell him the truth about himself as the Son of Man (9:35-38). The drama is nearly over.

Jesus' final words are about judgement, which probably explains why he referred to himself as the Son of Man in speaking with the blind man. In a different way Matthew shows the two are closely linked: the Son of Man will be the judge. It is then scarcely subtle when the Pharisees ask: 'We are not blind are we?' Answer: a resounding: yes! They are the sinners! The situation has been reversed.

This carefully crafted piece would have reassured John's hearers who had experienced the pain of being forced out of the synagogue communities. Their claims about Jesus had gone too far. They had in effect set aside the biblical Law or, better, redefined its role as now to function only as a witness to the Messiah. They now attributed to him claims once made of the Law: that he was the (in fact the only, the true) light, life, truth, word and bread.

It is not difficult to see the passage mirroring the experiences of John's community. Here were Jews in conflict with Jews. Like many passages in John the images, loosed from their Jewish moorings, can sail off to join the armada of anti-Semitism. The Pharisees, like Nicodemus in John 3, are stereotypes. Once we see this, other doors open and we recognise conflicts of our own day - also within Christianity. Wherever rules matter most and people take second place, we have darkness, even if they are divinely warranted in scripture.

Obsession with observance is a characteristic of religion which makes it very dangerous, as many forms of fundamentalism have shown, not least the recent most violent. Such rigidity at the expense of people is not, however, limited to certain widely acknowledged types, but can flourish on both the left wing and the right, among the biblicists and among those serving other ideologies. It is also at home where people read John and the Bible as vehicles for propaganda for their Jesus and their God, to 'win', instead of as testimony to divine compassion which puts people first. As the blind man might have said: 'Well I don't understand much about all of that, but I know when I see people getting helped and I'll run with that!'

Epistle: [Lent 4: 30 March Ephesians 5:8-14](#)

[Home](#)

VI. "SEEING AGAIN FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME"
JOHN 9: 1-41 / EXODUS 17:1-7

["A Blind Man,"](#) John Jewell, 1999.

["Seeing Again for the Very First Time,"](#) John Jewell, 2002.

March 10, 2002

Fourth Sunday in Lent

**LECTIONARY READINGS
from the Revised Common Lectionary**

1 Samuel 16:1-13

[Psalm 23](#)

Ephesians 5:8-14

[John 9:1-41](#)

The underlined texts will take you to additional sermons.

Losing, Seeking and Finding - III. Finding - Life as Light

"Surely we are not blind are we?"

The question was put to Jesus by Pharisees who could see quite well in a physical sense. Their problem was that they absolutely did not have a clue when it came to seeing God's activity in their midst.

They could see.. but they were blind to everything God was doing. On the other hand, the gospel reading tells about a man who was blind from birth and received his sight from Jesus. In the end, he gained much more than physical sight however, when he gained his sight in a spiritual way -- for the very first time.

In other words, it is possible to be sighted physically, while at the same time being blind to spiritual things. The religious professionals of the day illustrate the fact that one can have physical eyesight and still live in an inner world filled darkness. The religious authorities Jesus confronted were so religiously hard headed and spiritually blind that they were inwardly and spiritually blind. Jesus had to penetrate a lot of density before it dawned on his adversaries that he was talking about them.

"Surely we are not blind are we?" they ask. [Well duh!]

A young man came to my office not so long ago and poured out his heart. A self-admitted workaholic, he was increasingly distant from wife and children and his marriage was in jeopardy. He had gotten himself into a vicious circle whereby the harder he told himself he was working for the people he loved most, the further away from them he grew.

I really did not have to say too much. He was rehearsing an inner dialogue in the presence of a trusted friend. His job had become an obsession and his efforts to gain all the things for his family that he never had as a child became an enemy of everything he loved most. He finally looked up at me and exclaimed, *"I've lost sight of everything that matters most!"*

He left with a promise to himself to line up his inner priorities with his outer behavior.

"Thank you so much," he said, but I had only been a silent listener to something he already knew. He had lost his vision. Not his outer vision, but the inner vision that sees the purpose and meaning of life.

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

There is another kind of blindness that has more to do with the incessant searching people do when they are trying to find purpose, or direction in their lives. Nothing seems to fit, or add up. This feeling of being lost is reminiscent of an old Peanuts comic strip where Charlie Brown is saying, "*I feel like I was born on the wrong planet!*" The emotional sense is one of groping around in the dark.

There is an amazing story in the gospel of John where a woman had been groping around in the darkness of her life. It is the story of the woman caught in adultery. Once again the story has the religious authorities in conflict with Jesus. They gather to see if he will enforce the death penalty against the woman. Yet, instead of condemnation, he offers an opportunity for new living. Jesus uses the woman's situation as a mirror which he holds up to the crowd. "*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" [John 8:7] As it turns out, all of them, including the outwardly religious are walking about in spiritual darkness.

Jesus says to the gathered crowd and especially to the Pharisees, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*" [John 8:12] Light not only illuminates the path we tread - it is life itself. "*Follow me,*" Jesus says, "*And you will have the life you were designed to live.*"

To follow Christ is to develop clarity about who we are and who we are meant to be. The first letter of John is clear on the issue of choosing to follow Christ - which means to choose light over darkness. Once we encounter the good news about Jesus Christ, groping in the darkness is no longer an unfortunate circumstance. It is a choice:

"God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true..." [1 John 1:6-7]

During these lenten days we draw closer to the day of greatest darkness - the day when darkness covered Jerusalem and the "Light of the World" was briefly extinguished. Yet, as John's gospel says, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*"

God's good purposes for our lives are that we have light for living and a deep sense of knowing why we are here. The Westminster catechism states, "*The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.*" In order to arrive at our "chief end" or essential purpose, we need the light of Christ that leads us out of darkness.

There is yet another kind of blindness that keeps us from the fullness of God's purpose for our lives. Our reading from 1 Samuel goes to the heart of this kind of darkness -- the darkness of mistaken perception. If we are too locked on to outward appearances, we are vulnerable to this blindness.

Even Samuel, the great servant of God found himself mistaking the apparent for the real. The story fits well with the Pharisees who didn't get the point with the healing of the blind man. When we are so sure of our opinions and set in our understandings, we are sure to create darkness for ourselves. And if we stubbornly cling to our own understandings and allow our opinions to harden we gradually close the door to light that comes from beyond us.

Please be aware of a critical danger here. We are all vulnerable to this devastating spiritual malady. One can take something that is gospel truth, internalize it and mix it with personal preconceived ideas, shut the door to further insight from the Spirit of God and turn what was once truth into darkness. This is exactly what happened to the Pharisees. They took the good law of God - the law given by Moses, mixed it with interpretation, personal preconceived ideas and cultural prejudice and shut the door to any new insight from God. Jesus in one of his more scathing attacks on twisted religion said that these folks were, "*...blind leaders of the blind.*" [Matt. 15:14]

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

The story of Samuel's search for the one who would become king of Israel is set in circumstances that occurred over twenty five hundred years ago. The lesson it teaches however, is as fresh as the day God told Samuel what was missing in his perception.

Samuel was was grieving over the fact that God was going to take the throne away from Saul. Samuel's attachment to Saul and his clinging to what he wanted instead of what God wanted brought about a kind of darkness to his spirit. When God sent him to the home of Jesse in Bethlehem to anoint the next king of Israel, something surprising happened.

As it turns out, you can't judge a book by its cover - or outward appearances can be deceiving. God had told Samuel that he would show him which son of Jesse would become king and when Samuel laid eyes on the impressive Eliab, he thought, *"This is the new king for sure!"*

God's response to Samuel is classic. It addresses a key factor in spiritual blindness. It is something every one of us can take to heart and use to do a quick analysis of our own way of looking at the world.

"... 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." [v.7]

God does not see things the way we see things! Even the intention here was that God looks at the human heart while we look at outward appearances, the fact remains that God sees all kinds of things differently than we do.

We often miss the significance of a person to God because they are not significant to the world around us. We miss the joy of a child's capacity for play and laughter because we are engrossed in "important" things. We watch the evening news and read the newspaper and somehow do not see the abject poverty and desperate conditions of much of the human family.

And what of Christ? It is altogether fitting that we ask ourselves whether we are really and truly seeing the Savior who came to bring us light. Is it possible that we grow so accustomed to the prayers and hymns and words of scripture that we miss the blazing truth of his coming to us?

What a wonderful thing it would be if this Lenten season would be a time when we opened up our spirits to see the life changing, world transforming power of the fact that Christ came to take the darkness of this world upon himself. And as the darkness is taken into the light of Christ it becomes no darkness at all. The Psalmist captured the heart of how the light of God overcomes all darkness: *"If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to YOU.* [Psalm 139:11-12]

As we understand and embrace this truth we might even come close to the experience of the man in John's gospel who, though born blind was able to see again. His healing was a cause of rejoicing for him and his family and for the ordinary people who had known him. However, it was just another occasion for the deepening of darkness for the religious officials. Rather than rejoicing in the work God was doing, they actually threw the man out of the temple.

The amazing thing is that the man who was born blind didn't lose a thing - except for his physical blindness and the darkness of the religious community that could not see. Then, having gained his physical sight, he came to see something far more valuable. Listen once again:

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. [vv.35-38]

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

The man who was blind from birth saw something again - for the very first time!

May God give us the grace to so open our hearts and minds to the life changing light of Christ that we too may renew our vision and worship the one who came to give us light that can not be overcome by darkness. When Christ truly dwells within us and our lives are open to his life changing presence, darkness can not dwell in us because there is no darkness where Christ is!

Reflection on the Texts

[1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)

The last verse of this reading tells the whole story of David and the decline of Saul. *"Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward."* With the rising of David comes also the rise of the Messianic foundation for Israel. It is not Saul's kingdom nor lineage that will become the hope of Israel throughout the ages, but that of David.

Saul brought the monarchy to Israel, but David brought the messianic throne. The verse immediately following today's text tells the whole story of Saul as verse 13 tells the whole story of David. *"Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul..."* [16:14]

There is a connection with our theme from the gospel and 1 Samuel concerning spiritual blindness. Without the Spirit of God, Saul will become increasingly blind to God's actions and he sinks deeper into his own despair and darkness. Without the spirit of God, there is no spiritual light.

It does not escape the reader that Samuel goes to Bethlehem (Beit Lechem - "House of Bread") to find the leader who will guide Israel. There is also a parallel with the fact that Christ is born in Bethlehem. David is the youngest son of Jesse and his choice is a surprise - not yet old enough to go to battle, David the shepherd is a virtual child. A child of Bethlehem who will rise to bring Israel to its greatest glory. **Because** ... the Spirit of God is with him to bring about the purposes of God for the nation.

Samuel's clinging to Saul is instructive for us. We too are vulnerable to this "clinging" to things that are not "of God." Yet, the key for Samuel is obedience. God does not always need us to like the Divine direction - obedience is the key to pleasing God and to finally arriving at the joy of God. Unlike Jonah who runs from God's direction and is swallowed up in darkness - Samuel obeys God and participates in the beginning of Israel's glory.

[John 9:1-41](#)

Choose the NIV reading at Bible Gateway for IVP commentary on these texts

This is another amazingly long selection of scripture as chosen by the Revised Common Lectionary. The Roman Catholic Lectionary suggests John 9:1-41 or 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38. The Episcopal (BCP) uses John 9:1-13, (14-27 if desired) and 28-38. The latter two deal mainly with the blind man's healing and subsequent difficulty with the Pharisees.

There is a strong similarity with the story last week of the woman at the well. As Jesus revealed himself to the woman as Messiah, so also Jesus tells the blind man that he is the son of man. The blind man then "worships" Jesus -- who does not turn the worship away. This is John's "divine viewpoint" telling of the gospel with the avowed purpose "that you may believe." In 9:17, the blind

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

man affirms that Jesus is a prophet as the woman at the well said, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

The passage calls to mind the passage in Isaiah; *"And He said, 'Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' 'Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed.' [Isa. 6:9-10 NKJV]*

v.1-2 It is evident that Jesus and the disciples were aware of this blind man -- the disciples knew that he had been "blind from birth." The blind were permitted to beg alms of passers by. They had appointed places and almsgiving to these "unfortunate" was a means of righteousness. They were frequently the unnoticed or invisible persons of their time and the disciple's rather theoretical theological questions shows no compassion for the man as a person. After a response to his disciples, Jesus begins a very personal encounter with the man which brings about the central conflict of the story.

vv.13-34 This is the most protracted discussion of the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus and offers insight into their persistent refusal to see the action of God in the work of Christ. As Jesus says he does "God's work" -- the Pharisees insist that he is a "sinner". They are a perfect example of, "Don't confuse me with the facts." Verse 16 points out, however, that there was division over Jesus. Obviously the majority opinion rules and the "party line" is that Jesus is on the side of evil. Immediately following this episode, Jesus will speak of the Good Shepherd who "lays down his life for the sheep." The last days of his ministry are enjoined.

v.40 "Surely we are not blind, are we?" See Matt. 23:16 and following where five times Jesus calls the Pharisees blind.

Additional Ideas on the Gospel Reading

You might take a completely different slant on this text and deal with the disciple's question. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" "Neither," Jesus answered. He went on to say that the purpose of the blindness had to do with God's plans to be glorified in the man and not with the man or his parents.

The disciple's question relates to the idea that physical infirmity related to a person's iniquity. Job's "friends" (who needs 'em) spend their time trying to convince Job that he needed to repent -- that there had to be some sin in his life to cause all his troubles. The Gospel account of the Rich Young Ruler who wanted to follow Jesus and was told he "lacked" something absolutely shocked the disciples. When Jesus said it was easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter the kingdom of God -- the disciples were absolutely shocked. This was a "good" man -- a man whose wealth showed that he was blessed by God -- "WHO, then, can be saved," they wanted to know." (Mark 10:17 ff)

There is a thread in this text that supports the contention Jesus came to smash barriers of hatred and prejudice. One of the strong elements in oppression in much human oppression is religious justification for the plight of the poor and dispossessed. If someone is living in poverty, for instance, it is because they have accumulated so much "bad karma" they simply have to live through.

Jesus points to a truth which is seen throughout the gospels in all the healing stories. All healing is to bring glory to God. The text here does not literally mean that God singled out this one man with congenital blindness -- but rather, there would be purpose in the blindness to point people to the "works of God". Namely the work of restoration, renewal and reconciliation.

For additional possibilities with this theme, see: ["Why Does God Permit Suffering?"](#)

Ephesians 5:8-14

Paul addresses the practical implications of what it means to have the light of Christ. In chapter 4 says that the new Christians of Ephesus must live as the (other) gentiles do because, "...they are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts." [4:18] This inner darkness and hardening of the heart which brings about darkness is addressed in our sermon. The Pharisees chose the hardness of heart that brings about darkness.

So also Paul says that the Christians at Ephesus not only were *in* darkness - they were darkness. "For you were once darkness!" But all that has changed, "...but now you are light in the Lord." [5:8]

Now they (and likewise we) are called to a new kind of living which is based on light instead of darkness. This is not a suggestion, it is written in the imperative mode: "Live as children of light!" Meaning -- we are to live in goodness, righteousness and truth.

The conclusion of the text takes us into the key theme for Lent which comes up next week. Living in relationship with Christ - is literally to gain life. In chapter 2:1-3, Paul says that the Ephesian Christians were formerly "dead" now they are alive. The light of Christ literally is life. The lesson concludes with a quotation. There is no corollary in the Old Testament and this quotation is likely from a liturgical source - perhaps an Easter hymn sung when converts were baptized.

*"Wake up, O sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."*

Light is life!

Worship Helps

A Call To Worship (Based on Psalm 23)

Leader: We come to praise your name, Shepherd of our souls!

People: From your hand we have received life's treasures;

Leader: You have given us rest in our toughest times,

People: Renewal when life has brought us low.

Leader: You give us guidance when life is confusing,

People: And show us the way we should go.

Leader: Your goodness and mercy shall surround our days,

People: And our spirits are yours forever and ever! Amen!

A Prayer of Confession

Give us courage, Lord, that we might search the deepest and darkest corners of our being for anything that offends your holy name. Give us mercy that we might stand in the brilliance of your light. Give us grace that we might go from this assembly cleansed from our sin and refreshed for your service. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

May the Lord God Almighty have mercy on us and forgive us of all our sins, strengthen us by the power of the Holy Spirit to live a new life in Christ. Amen.

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

O Divine Redeemer, we praise your Holy Name for the amazing love which reached out to us in your Son Jesus Christ. How much you must love us! We can not begin to fathom just how deeply we are loved. Can a child possibly become aware how much a mother or father loves them? They are so unaware. Do they fully understand what grief and sorrow comes to a parent's heart when they are wounded?

O God, it is in our experience as parents that we more fully understand Your love for us. How it must break Your heart when we persist in doing the things that finally erode the meaning and the joy of our lives. When we see our children heading in directions that will be their undoing, it worries us so. Yet, we can not control the what, where, how, when, or why of their living without doing damage to their persons. Is this what *free will* does to Your heart?

God... help us to listen today. Not only with our ears. We've seen the faces of our children when they are listening with their ears alone. Help us to listen with our hearts. And hear with our souls. And act with our wills.

Finally, may we allow the light of Your Holy Spirit into the dark recesses of our spirits that Your Son Jesus might break the stubborn rebellion of our souls. And we will give the glory, the honor and the blessing to You.

Amen.

A Prayer Of Dedication

You, O Lord, are the giver of abundant life. We are the recipients of grace and mercy overflowing. What can we offer in return for all these things? You bless us again by taking pleasure in the gifts we bring. Whether great gifts or small, when we do our best, you take joy in them all. We bless and praise your holy name. Amen.

VII. JOHN 9: 1 – 41 PARADISE LOST AND FOUND ONE THE WAY: "A BLIND MAN"

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<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/mar993-14.html>

Sunday March 14, 1999
John 9: 1 - 41

[Or selected verses as in BCP and RC readings in notes below]

Focus Text: "Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind are we?" [John 9:39-40]

Paradise Lost and Found One The Way: "A Blind Man"

Psychologists say that people who live in Alaska have a much higher incidence of depression during the days of prolonged darkness than the average U.S. population. They call it Seasonal Affective Disorder. SAD for short. (How's that for an appropriate acronym?) One successful treatment is to sit under a natural light bulb for a certain time each day. The treatment also works for many depressed persons during the late fall and winter months when the days are shorter.

In other words we need light!

Last week we looked at the fact that we need water and our need for water has a strong spiritual lesson. Many people are spiritually dehydrated and have a need for something Jesus called "living water" -- namely a relationship with God that fulfills our inner longings for hope, joy and love.

As we continue our Lenten journey toward a recovery of Paradise -- or intimacy with God, we turn to the issue of light and the ability to see. Physical sight (as physical thirst) has a strong spiritual parallel.

Blindness is an awful thing. The ability to see is a wonderful blessing. One we likely take for granted much of the time. A woman in our parish has gradually lost her sight over the past two years. She is now totally blind. During the months when the darkness was increasing she said, "I feel like the whole world is closing in on me." When blindness finally came, she said, "Now the door is closed and I am in here alone!"

Blindness is terrible and ability to see the light is wonderful -- isn't it? When you translate this to spiritual terms, there is a very powerful concept we need to be aware of. There is an intense resistance to spiritual sight in our culture today! This isn't an alarmist thing -- it's reality. It is as though "something" does not want us to "get it" spiritually.

Resistance to the Light

An ancient Greek fable tells the story of people who had lived in caves beneath earth's surface for generations. Living conditions on the surface demanded this sub-terranean lifestyle. But -- there was always a longing within the people for the light. Stories were told about the sun and how on the "surface" there was light everywhere and everything flourished in the light. Sitting around the fires beneath the surface, children could only imagine what it would be like to live in the light.

Then stories began to be told about someone who would come and lead the sub-terranean dwellers to the surface where there was light. A deep longing was felt within the hearts of the people for the time when they could journey to "the surface".

Then it happened. A young man began to inspire hope in people's hearts about life in the light. He said that if people followed him, they would find a way to the surface and to the light. As the good news spread, so also hope spread and expectation was at an all time high.

And the day came. The young man announced that people should follow him to the surface. The journey was long, but finally the first few sub-terranean dwellers emerged into the light of day! And more followed.

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

They did not like the light! It was too bright. It hurt their eyes. They complained that it was better in the shadows of the sub-terranean caves. They wanted to go back. They demanded to go back!

And so was the light rejected! ¹

One of the central points in the whole Gospel story today is the incredible stubbornness of strongly held religious ideas which not only do not lead people closer to God -- they actually separate people from God. Jesus confronts this over and over again in the Gospels. It is one of the most persistent themes in the New Testament.

In Mark Jesus says, *"Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition..."* (Mark 7:6-8)

Of course, the Pharisees had decided early on that they had to get rid of Jesus. (Mark 3:6)

Today's reading tells an almost unbelievable story of people who are so imprisoned by their religious prejudices, they will reject the strongest possible evidence against their prejudices. The reading also contains a very strong "between the lines" warning. *You must have a willingness to examine even your most cherished and deeply held ideas and suppositions.* A willingness to engage in self examination is one of the key virtues of the Lenten season. And, it is one of the surest ways to escape spiritual blindness and begin to see the long way home to God.

Light and Sight

There are two components in the ability to see. Light and sight. Someone may have the ability to see (that is they are "sighted"), but if there is no light in the outer world, they can not see in fact. There has to be a source of illumination. On the other hand, all the illumination in the world does not help a person who is blind. Light in the outer world does not translate into an ability to see.

The scripture lesson for today is long and the twists and turns are many -- nevertheless there are two statements of Jesus which can help us understand the key point of the relationship between light and sight.

Near the beginning of the story, Jesus says, *"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."* [9:5]

At the end of the story, the man who had been given the gift of physical sight also received the gift of spiritual sight. Not only did he encounter one who gave sight, he came to *know* the Sightgiver. Then Jesus says, *"I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."* [9:39] ²

Jesus tells his disciples that he is the Light of the world. There is an expansion of this thought in John 8:12; *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."*

What happens next is crucial. Jesus gives the gift of physical sight to the blind man. (Notice the man didn't ask for this -- perhaps did not even consider that his congenital blindness could be healed). Now the man and the Pharisees are both able to see in the physical sense. The remainder of the passage shows how the Pharisees are spiritually blind while the man who was physically blind now moves on to spiritual insight. *"He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him."* [9:38]

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

The man who was once blind now has light and sight. The Pharisees have light, but they persist in darkness.

The Light of Life

Last week we were privy to the encounter of Jesus and a woman at the well. Jesus offered "living water" to her. Living water is that which quenches our deep desire for meaning and substance in our living.

Now we witness a blind man who not only gains physical sight, but discovers Jesus as the Messiah. She found "living water". He found "the light of life." Both of them emerged from difficult life circumstances and found a whole new dimension of life. Both of them were able to make gains on the long journey home to God.

What is the light of life? Today's story makes it clear that the light of life is to come to an understanding of who Jesus is. That is a joyful discovery that leads to worship. But, there's more. At the heart of the story is a message that speaks to our souls.

- * God is attentive to and understanding of our particular life circumstances.
- * God cares for a rejected woman, a blind beggar and you and me!
- * God has a unique design for our lives. (The woman, the blind man and you and I all have unique circumstances and differing needs. God may or may not *change* our circumstances, but *will* help us to make sense of, get through or change them!)

The Pharisee Who Saw The Light

There is a wonderful story in the book of Acts about a "super-Pharisee" who was quite spiritually blind. Just like the Pharisees in John's story. This Pharisee was bent on destroying the infant church. Then one day he was literally knocked off his high horse and blinded by the light!

Have you already identified Saul of Tarsus? On his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and drag them back to Jerusalem in chains, he is suddenly knocked to the ground by a blinding light and the voice of Christ. He spends the next three days in darkness (probably like the darkness you experience when you stare at the sun or have a flashbulb go off in your face). Saul (who is renamed Paul by Christ) has a return of his sight when a Christian named Ananias prays for him. The spiritual sight he received, however, changed his life and indeed the world. From that moment his whole life is directed at bringing the "light of life" to others. His ministry would be responsible for taking this light to the ends of the earth.

The Light of Life for John and Jane Doe

Most of us will not have the dramatic encounter with the light that Paul did. Yet, Jesus promised that all of us who follow him would have the "light of life". That is we would be able to "get it" -- in a spiritual way.

Sometimes we will -- pay attention to the words here -- "*loose sight*". Of what's important, what truly counts. In fact, it occasionally takes a tragedy to "wake us up". One of my constant prayers is, "*Lord, help me not to get so wrapped up in the little things that I miss the big things. And above all, please help me not to loose sight of you in my daily living.*"

One more thing John and Jane Doe! In your lives there are some people who can not see in a spiritual sense at all. When you talk with them, it becomes apparent that there is not much more to life than what is "apparent" to physical sight. Like the man in our gospel story, they are blind. You may be their only chance to "see". Not that you hammer them over the head with a bible and drag them to church. But your life *can* point to "something more." So here's another great Lenten payer; "*Lord help me to live my life in such a way that someone I know and care about will be able*

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*

to 'see' you in me!" This makes you a "light bearer" -- someone who would rather light one candle in the darkness than curse the darkness.

One last thing. There are lot's of Pharisees in our lives today. There always have been. By definition they will be "religious" persons. They are "religious" people who can't see. They are harder to reach than the "unchurched". Why? They are so convinced that they are right and that others are wrong, they have no room for self examination. Do not let them discourage you. Do not let them make you believe they have a handle on the truth. Do not let them make you feel unworthy or unacceptable.

Do remember that the Lord Jesus Christ himself was not able to penetrate their darkness!

Meanwhile -- as Paul says in the epistle for today, "Live as children of light." (Eph. 5:8) In other words live like people who "get it".

Notes On The Text

This is another amazingly long selection of scripture as chosen by the Revised Common Lectionary. The Roman Catholic Lectionary suggests John 9:1-41 or 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38. The Episcopal (BCP) uses John 9:1-13, (14-27 if desired) and 28-38. The latter two deal mainly with the blind man's healing and subsequent difficulty with the Pharisees.

There is a strong similarity with the story last week of the woman at the well. As Jesus revealed himself to the woman as Messiah, so also Jesus tells the blind man that he is the son of man. The blind man then "worships" Jesus -- who does not turn the worship away. This is John's "divine viewpoint" telling of the gospel with the avowed purpose "that you may believe." In 9:17, the blind man affirms that Jesus is a prophet as the woman at the well said, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

¹ I can not give the exact reference for the origin of this fable. It recall of a Greek fable told by Plato which was from a hand out in third year Greek -- notes I no longer have.

² This calls to mind the passage in Isaiah; *"And He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' "Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed."* [Isa. 6:9-10 NKJV]

v.1-2 It is evident that Jesus and the disciples were aware of this blind man -- the disciples knew that he had been "blind from birth." The blind were permitted to beg alms of passers by. They had appointed places and almsgiving to these "unfortunate" was a means of righteousness. They were frequently the unnoticed or invisible persons of their time and the disciple's rather theoretical theological questions shows no compassion for the man as a person. After a response to his disciples, Jesus begins a very personal encounter with the man which brings about the central conflict of the story.

vv.13-34 This is the most protracted discussion of the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus and offers insight into their persistent refusal to see the action of God in the work of Christ. As Jesus says he does "God's work" -- the Pharisees insist that he is a "sinner". They are a perfect example of, "Don't confuse me with the facts." Verse 16 points out, however, that there was division over Jesus. Obviously the majority opinion rules and the "party line" is that Jesus is on the side of evil. Immediately following this episode, Jesus will speak of the Good Shepherd who "lays down his life for the sheep." The last days of his ministry are enjoined.

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v.40 "Surely we are not blind, are we?" See Matt. 23:16 and following where five times Jesus calls the Pharisees blind.

Alternate Sermon Ideas

The Problem of Suffering (John 9:1-7)

You might take a completely different slant on this text and deal with the disciple's question. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" "Neither," Jesus answered. He went on to say that the purpose of the blindness had to do with God's plans to be glorified in the man and not with the man or his parents.

The disciple's question relates to the idea that physical infirmity related to a person's iniquity. Job's "friends" (who needs 'em) spend their time trying to convince Job that he needed to repent -- that there had to be some sin in his life to cause all his troubles. The Gospel account of the Rich Young Ruler who wanted to follow Jesus and was told he "lacked" something absolutely shocked the disciples. When Jesus said it was easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter the kingdom of God -- the disciples were absolutely shocked. This was a "good" man -- a man whose wealth showed that he was blessed by God -- "WHO, then, can be saved," they wanted to know." (Mark 10:17 ff)

There is a thread in this text that supports the contention Jesus came to smash barriers of hatred and prejudice. One of the strong elements in oppression in much human oppression is religious justification for the plight of the poor and dispossessed. If someone is living in poverty, for instance, it is because they have accumulated so much "bad karma" they simply have to live through.

Jesus points to a truth which is seen throughout the gospels in all the healing stories. All healing is to bring glory to God. The text here does not literally mean that God singled out this one man with congenital blindness -- but rather, there would be purpose in the blindness to point people to the "works of God". Namely the work of restoration, renewal and reconciliation.

For additional possibilities with this theme, see: ["Why Does God Permit Suffering?"](#)

As Mortals See (I Samuel 16:1-13)

Using the issues of sight and seeing in the Gospel lesson, you might focus on the issue of how God looks at things as opposed to the way "mortals see."

Even the prophet Samuel missed the boat when it comes to who will be anointed to be king. Samuel, Jesse and the brothers of David all miss what God sees. In fact, it may be that mortals *can't* see what God sees and must therefore suspend judgement. Particularly the kind of judgment the Pharisees make in the gospel lesson. They brand Jesus a "sinner" (and worse) because they see "as mortals see."

God, on the other hand sees the "heart". (Hebrew "*lay-bawb*" -- the innermost organ -- or interior of the person). How would our relationships be different if we were to attempt to see as God sees and stop judging the outside?

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Juxtaposition the gospel and O.T. readings to show how the man who was blind sees Jesus more as God sees without having had the gift of physical sight, while the Pharisees see Jesus through their own prejudices even though they have the gift of physical sight.

The fact is, *no one* can see the inner person as clearly as God can. We are therefore *always* short of the complete knowledge needed to judge another.

Worship Helps

Call To Worship (Based on Psalm 23)

L: We rejoice in the One who leads us beside still waters,

P: And gives us refreshment of soul.

L: Christ our Shepherd shows us the way we should go,

P: So that the name of God will be glorified.

L: Though all manner of evil befall us, we will not be afraid,

P: For the Great Shepherd of our souls is with us.

L: We are never away from the love and mercy of the Lord,

P: And we shall be with him for ever and ever. Amen!

A Prayer of Dedication

You have given us light and life, hope and joy, O Lord. Bless the gifts we bring and the ministries they enable us to carry out. O help us to truly become bearers of the light of Christ in our world. Amen.

Benediction

Go from this place as children of light. Take the love and comfort of God with you wherever you go. God's goodness and mercy shall follow you and the light of the Lord will be upon your path. Amen.

<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/mar993-14.html>

VIII.

[A. IF YOU'RE TEMPTED TO FAST LIKE A PHARISEE...](#)

by [Joshua Luton](#) [Leave a comment](#)

I Samuel 16:1-13, John 9:1-41 *Spiritual Blindness*



“Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’” –Matt. 9:14-15

I nervously shifted on the couch. The drive to the church from the high school hadn’t been long enough and now I sat, hoping my peers would wax eloquent in their response to the question.

“What are you giving up for Lent?”

She asked the same question every year on Ash Wednesday. Why did youth bible study have to be on Wednesday, like it’s some kind of Minor League Sabbath? Still, it’s a simple enough question.

“Sweets,” a friend around the room chimed in. “Me, too” her friend echoed. Approving looks abounded, the ice was broken, no turning back.

My mind raced: What would be appropriately painful (and impressive) while not repeating last year’s fast. There must be some rule: Thou must not repeat thy Lenten fast. I’d given up pop (or soda, if you prefer) before, desserts weren’t my thing anyway, so giving them up was as easy as sleeping in on Saturday.

I half heard the other responses, ticking off the degrees of separation between me and the harrowing question.

“I’m adding on helping mom with the dishes every night.”

“Sweets.”

“Pop.”

“Fried food.” (as if us teenagers could bring in the kingdom of God by watching our waistlines and washing some dishes).

“Pop,” the word shot from my mouth. And just like that it was over. I was committed. As soon as I said it, I knew I had broken the unwritten “Thou shalt repeat” rule, but it was the best I could do. Not enough time to prepare, live with the consequence.

That was my ritual most Ash Wednesdays growing up. Looking back, it wasn't so bad. Dr. Pepper was my drink of choice, so every time I turned it down, I thought about Lent, about fasting.

B. PIOUS AND NON-PIOUS, OR THE PHARISEES AND JESUS

I wonder what Jesus would have said, were he in that upper room with us, "I'm not fasting this year." To which we might reply with the Pharisees, "Then why do we have to fast?"

For the Pharisees and John's disciples, fasting was an [important](#) necessary practice; any pious person would agree. Fasting was a box in their piety checklist, which Jesus didn't fulfill.

[Karl Barth](#), preached on this passage, "They [Pharisees] were always there [with Jesus], and they were the most difficult hindrance standing in the way of the Savior. So **the most difficult hindrance lay not in the malice of worldly persons but in the righteousness of the children of God**".‡

Nobody doubted the righteousness of the Pharisees, or even John's followers, but those groups doubted Jesus.

But notice Jesus' response, or lack thereof. He doesn't make excuses for himself or try to out-Pharisee the Pharisees ("How long have you guys been fasting? I fasted for 40 days and nights!). Jesus simply accepts their accusations.

How could his disciples [mourn](#) fast when they enjoyed the presence of the Son of God? The Pharisees (and John's disciples, and maybe we) couldn't accept that bit of good news. So, they gritted their teeth and fasted harder, begrudging Jesus' lighter yoke all the while.

Here's Barth's imagined word from Jesus to the Pharisees:

In the fine points you are very meticulous *because* you do not yet know the great gift that can now be given human beings. **You bring God sacrifice *because* you have not yet experienced God's mercy.** You prepare the way for the kingdom of God so avidly, with pick and shovel, *because* it has not yet come to you. *Because* you have not yet found the God you seek...Our of *this great affliction*, out of this *painful privation*, *come your fasting* and all the other things that are so important to you, and finally your damnation of me. Out of *humanity's great distress*, but not about God's Savior, comes your *piety*. Oh, you may keep your opinion about your fasting, so go on, keep doing what you are doing as long as you must, but do not forbid others to go a different way because the affliction and distress have been taken from them.‡

Fasting (from food, media, t.v., fermented beverages, caffeine, pop) can be a powerful and transforming exercise. But if you're like me, you can't be reminded enough that [fasting isn't earning](#).

We may be walking through the desert, but the good news of Lent is that ["Jesus does what we cannot do. For us."](#)

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Fast as much as you can (even if it is a repeat), but don't take it too piously. All that fasting is a long preparation for a grand feast, just on the other side of Lent.

Drop your email address in the subscription box (to the right of this post), and never miss a post from the Apprentice blog.

‡ *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon*, Karl Barth and William H. Willimon, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

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