

GATHERING IN THE WORD OF GOD

Lent is a time to make our hearts ready for remembering Jesus' passion as we move to Palm Sunday and Holy Week. As a period of preparation, Lent historically included the preparation of persons for baptism and profession of faith on Easter Sunday; the calling back of those who have become estranged from the church; and efforts by all Christians to deepen their piety and devotion, faithfulness, and the readiness to mark the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. As such—Lent is a season to explore and deepen our “baptismal spirituality that centers on our union with Jesus rather to function only as an extended meditation on Christ’s suffering and death.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent and our scriptures speak of light and darkness—sight and blindness. These are descriptives and are metaphorical and figurative in nature—and must be understood in terms of the full humanity and persons of color and sight-impaired people. Darkness is not synonymous with evil: darkness is also the place of growth and gestation.

HEARING THE WORD OF GOD

1 Samuel 16:1-13 (The VOICE Bible)

16 **Eternal One** (*to Samuel*): How long will you mourn over Saul? I have rejected him as king over *my people* Israel. Now take your horn, fill it with oil, and depart. I have selected a new king for me from among the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem.

The Lord has yet another mission for Samuel.

Samuel: ² How can I do that? If Saul hears *I am anointing a new king*, he will kill me!

Eternal One: Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Eternal One." ³ Invite Jesse to that sacrifice, and *when he arrives*, I will show you what to do. You will anoint for me the one I show to you.

⁴ Samuel did as the Eternal One had told him, and he went to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came out to him, *unsure of what business he had there*.

Elders (*trembling*): Do you come in peace?

Samuel: ⁵ Yes, in peace. I have come to sacrifice to the Eternal One. Sanctify yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.

And Samuel consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice as well. ⁶ When they came, he noticed *the eldest son*, Eliab.

Samuel (*to himself*): Surely this is the one the Eternal One will anoint.

Eternal One (*to Samuel*): ⁷ Take no notice of his looks or his height. He is not the one, for the Eternal One does

not pay attention to what humans value. Humans only care about the external appearance, but the Eternal considers the inner character.

⁸ Jesse called *his son* Abinadab and brought him to Samuel. Samuel looked at him.

Samuel: The Eternal has not chosen him either.

⁹ Then Jesse brought *his son* Shammah in front of *Samuel*.

Samuel: The Eternal has not chosen him either.

¹⁰ Jesse walked seven of his sons in front of Samuel, *and each time*, Samuel refused them because the Eternal One had chosen none of them.

Samuel (to Jesse): ¹¹ Are all your sons here?

Jesse: All but the youngest. He is off keeping the sheep.

Samuel: Send for him, and bring him here. We will not sit down until he arrives.

¹² Jesse sent for the youngest son, *David*, and he came in *front of Samuel*. He was a handsome boy, with a healthy complexion and bright eyes.

Eternal One: Rise and anoint him, because this is the one.

¹³ Then Samuel took the horn filled with *olive* oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the Spirit of the Eternal fell strongly on David and remained from that day on. Samuel then left for Ramah.

“People look at the outward appearance but GOD sees the heart.” GOD had to get across that idea to Samuel because he was being wowed by the big, strapping brothers from Jesse’s household who were strutting and parading their stuff in front of the Prophet. Samuel is duly impressed but GOD says, “Don’t be. I am looking for the beautiful inside.”

But later the young man with the right heart and beautiful inside steps forward at long last and as almost a kind of afterthought; nevertheless the narrator of the text goes out of his way to tell us how good-looking this youngest brother was— ruddy, *fine-looking*, handsome features, chiseled good looks. So GOD tells David as GOD saw on the inside of David—and tells Samuel to anoint him.

As we are in Lent we are really thinking about spiritual vision—and GOD’s vision!

- ✓ How do we see things in this world?
- ✓ How is our spiritual eyesight?
- ✓ Do we know how to relativize (*make or become relative; to make one thing relative to something else, or regard one thing as relative to something else*) what comes through our eyeballs in order to embrace far more important spiritual realities—the things that

sometimes lie just below the surface of life (past which most people cannot see and do not every try to see)?

- ✓ We are taught to be enamored and attracted by the beautiful, the spectacular, and the famous.

Lent is a time that reminds us that the deepest and dearest truths of the universe require a ***spiritual vision*** that looks past outward appearances and even apparent contradictions.

John 9:1-41 (The VOICE Bible)

John and many people in his community are Jews. As a son of Abraham, his criticism of certain Jewish leaders is not a criticism of a whole people. He's not stereotyping or making generalizations. "The Jews" he remembers in this passage are a corrupt group of power brokers who conspire against Jesus with the Romans to have Him crucified and who later have John's own followers expelled from the synagogue. Their behavior may be compared to the behavior of those Israelites condemned by Old Testament prophets. Prophets have the duty—Jeremiah said he had "a fire in his bones" (20:9)—to speak for God and condemn hypocrisy and unbelief wherever it is found, especially when it's found close to home. That's what John's doing when recalling this event.

9 While walking along the road, Jesus saw a man who was blind since his birth.

Disciples: ² Teacher, who sinned? *Who is responsible for this man's blindness?* Did he commit sins that merited this punishment? If not his sins, is it the sins of his parents?

Jesus: ³ Neither. His blindness cannot be *explained or* traced to any particular person's sins. He is blind so the deeds of God may be put on display. ⁴ While it is daytime, we must do the works of the One who sent me. But when the *sun sets and* night falls, this work is impossible. ⁵ Whenever I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.

⁶ After he said these things, he spat on the ground and mixed saliva and dirt to form mud, which he smeared across the blind man's eyes.

Jesus (to the blind man): ⁷ Go, wash yourself in the pool of Siloam.

Siloam means "sent," *and its name reminded us that his healing was sent by God.* The man went, washed, and returned to Jesus, his eyes now alive with sight. ⁸ Then neighbors and others who knew him were confused to see a man so closely resembling the blind beggar running about.

Townspeople: Isn't this the man we see *every day* sitting and begging *in the streets?*

Others: ⁹ This is the same man.

Still Others: This cannot be him. But this fellow bears an uncanny resemblance to the blind man.

Formerly Blind Man: I am the same man. *It's me!*

Townspeople: ¹⁰ How have your *lifeless* eyes been opened?

Formerly Blind Man: ¹¹ A man named Jesus *approached me and* made mud from the ground and applied it to my eyes. He then said to me, "Go, wash yourself in the pool of Siloam." I went and washed, and suddenly I could see.

Townspeople: ¹² Where is this man *who healed you?*

Formerly Blind Man: I don't know.

¹³⁻¹⁴ The townspeople brought the formerly blind beggar to appear before the Pharisees *the same day Jesus healed him*, which happened to be on the Sabbath Day.

¹⁵ The Pharisees began questioning him, looking for some explanation for how he could now see.

Formerly Blind Man: He smeared mud on my eyes, and I washed; now I see.

Some Pharisees: ¹⁶ God can't possibly be behind this man because he is breaking the rules of the Sabbath.

Other Pharisees: How can such a law-breaking scoundrel do something like this?

The Pharisees were at odds with one another about Jesus and could not agree *whether his power came from God or the devil.*

Pharisees (to the formerly blind man): ¹⁷ What do you say about this man, about the fact he opened your eyes so you could see?

Formerly Blind Man: *I have no doubt*—this man is a prophet.

¹⁸ Some of the Jews suspected the whole situation was a charade, that this man was never blind. So they summoned the man's parents to testify about his condition.

Pharisees: ¹⁹ Is this man your son? Do you testify that he has been blind from birth? How therefore does he now see?

Parents: ²⁰ We can tell you this much: he is our son, and he was born blind. ²¹ But his new sight is a complete mystery to us! We do not know the man who opened his eyes. Why don't you ask our son? He is old enough to speak for himself.

²² The man's parents were a bit evasive because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. It had been rumored that anyone who spoke of Jesus as the Anointed One would be expelled from the synagogue. ²³ So they deferred the thorny question to their son, ²⁴ and the Pharisees called on him a second time.

Pharisees: Give God the credit. *He's the One who healed you.* All glory belongs to God. We are persuaded this man you speak of is a sinner *who defies God.*

Formerly Blind Man: ²⁵ If this man is a sinner, I don't know. *I am not qualified to say.* I only know one thing: I was blind, and now I see.

Pharisees: ²⁶ What did he do to you? How did he give you sight?

Formerly Blind Man: ²⁷ *Listen,* I've already answered all these questions, and you don't like my answers. Do you really need me to say it all over again? Are you thinking about joining up with him and becoming His followers?

Pharisees (berating him): ²⁸ You're one of his followers, but we follow Moses. ²⁹ We have confidence that God spoke to Moses, but this man *you speak of is a mystery;* we don't even know where he comes from.

Formerly Blind Man: ³⁰ Isn't it ironic that you, *our religious leaders,* don't even know where he comes from; yet he gave me sight! ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does respond and work through those who worship him and do his will. ³² No one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of any person blind from birth. ³³ This man must come from God; otherwise, this miracle would not be possible. *Only God can do such things.*

Pharisees: ³⁴ You were born under a cloud of sin. How can you, *of all people,* lecture us?

The religious leaders banished him from their presence. ³⁵ Jesus heard what had happened and sought out the man.

Jesus: Do you believe in the Son of Man?

Formerly Blind Man: ³⁶ I want to believe, Lord. Who is he?

Jesus: ³⁷ You have seen his face *with your new eyes*, and you are talking to him now.

Formerly Blind Man: ³⁸ Lord, I do believe.

The man bowed low to worship Jesus.

Jesus: ³⁹ I have entered this world to announce a verdict *that changes everything*. Now those without sight may begin to see, and those who see may become blind.

Some Pharisees (who overheard Jesus): ⁴⁰ Surely we are not blind, are we?

Jesus: ⁴¹ If you were blind, you would be without sin. But because you claim you can see, your sin is ever present.

“I once was blind but now I see!”

The town folk stopped and stared. “Isn’t that? No, couldn’t be.” Still . . . “I think that’s him.” Other’s chimed in, “Of course it’s not him—blind people don’t get better and see. It’s probably just someone who looks like him.”

The man had a big, goofy grin on his face as he went through the village!

This man is the *only* one who is smiling. How can that be? A grand miracle had taken place! You'd think that everywhere you looked you'd see goofy grins, broad smiles, maybe a few folks wiping away some tears of joy from their eyes. **It's not every day, after all, that the power of GOD gets displayed so brilliantly!**

Make no mistake: this was a very big miracle! We are so used to this kind of thing in the gospels that we forget how powerful this miracle is.

Yes this one man is smiling! Everyone else is deadly serious. And the reason for this is as startling as it is tragic: there were some people who just didn't want GOD around. Or they were OK with the idea of encountering GOD but then it had best be on their terms and according to their own pre-conditions. For the Pharisees seeing all things it was simple: "If GOD were here, we'd know it because GOD would look just like us, act like us, and follow our rules. This Jesus guy doesn't fit the bill so his divine pretensions are as sinful as they are laughable." They'd know GOD when they saw GOD and---Jesus . . . well, he was not it!

It's sobering and serious, isn't it, to see the contortions and expressions of the Pharisees here. They will condemn anyone, say anything, deny

iron-clad facts if that's what it takes to prop up their own views of GOD.

But before their eyes stands this healed man:
"I once was blind but now I see!"

Among the great ironies and paradoxes of this story here in John 9 is this: both the disciples and the Pharisees try to make a connection between bad things and sin.

"GOD must have been pretty mad at someone to produce a guy like this," the disciples say when they first see this blind beggar, "so, who messed up, Lord, this fellow or his folks?"

That's how a lot of folks operate: you see something bad; you chalk it up to someone's sin. Our universe operates on the principle of *quid pro quo*, of tit for tat. Oddly, though, when people in our story encounter the profoundly *good* thing of an awesome healing—they do everything in their power *not* to connect that good thing with GOD. Some, it seems, are more comfortable with making GOD out to be the dispenser of punishment than **GOD as the decanter of something good!**

Apparently—it's fully possible to be in the presence of the Light of the World and still be in the dark. As

it stands, those of us who consider ourselves religious folks today have plenty of reason to wonder whether—or how often—we fail to celebrate the work of GO just in case the shape of that work doesn't fit the bill of how we think things ought to go! How often don't we let our own scruples and principles keep us from celebrating GOD's presence in the lives of others?!

This story is such a moving spectacle and wonder—at least for those with eyes to see. This was totally boring for the Pharisees—lingering on the fringes; their steely-eyed scowls told Jesus and this man all they needed to know. But by this point of our story—even those unbelieving-rude-yahoos were not enough to overcome the joy of the last scene. As we imagine that Jesus eventually went on his way—this man waved at Jesus and kept on waving until Jesus finally disappeared out of sight!

As this man-who-now-can see turned back home—he was no doubt tired after such an eventful day. On his cheeks you could trace the tracks of his tears of joy! And as the picture fades---the last thing we notice as the man-who-now-can-see as he trudge and treks home is that once again—the edges of his mouth are starting to curl up into a smile!

Because wherever we find the real Jesus at work—there's just no repressing all those smiles!

DOING THE WORD OF GOD

So what is the Word of GOD for us on this Fourth Sunday in Lent?

1. ONE: WHEN JESUS ARRIVES IN OUR LIVES—EVERYTHING CHANGES FOR US!

- ✓ Limitations and constraints and restraints fall by the wayside.
- ✓ There is no need any more for sacrifices—because the Lamb of GOD who takes away sin in our Lord!
- ✓ Divisions between people, races, and cultures fade away in the presence of our Lord offers us Living Water!
- ✓ And the one who can heal us is the One who offers us not just life—but life in all its abundance!
- ✓ Change brings disruption in our lives.
- ✓ Sometimes we will wonder whether the change—even when it promises new life—is worth it.

2. TWO: WITH JESUS ALWAYS COMES HEALING, A NEW IDENTITY, AND ABUNDANT LIFE.

- ✓ Jesus the Lord of Life always seeks us out, rebuking and reproaching all those who steal or limit our identity in him—even when we do it ourselves!
- ✓ God sees possibilities in the most unlikely of persons and encounters—all things become vehicles of divine revelation and all people can reveal the holy to those who have eyes to see!
- ✓ We the Body of Christ are to be like that!

3. THREE: WHAT JESUS WANTS FOR US ISN'T JUST SURVIVAL, PERSISTENCE, GETTING BY, OR ANY OF THE OTHER WAYS WE FORMULATED AND EXCUSED LIVING HALF-LIVES.

- ✓ What Jesus wants for us for us is life—full and rich and abundant!
- ✓ This abundant life that stems and comes from knowing that we have infinite worth in GOD's eyes and are and always will be GOD's beloved child!

- ✓ In healing Jesus used mud—which was used in ancient societies to heal. GOD uses our energies also—our energy, the laying on of hands; also medication and surgery. GOD is the source of healing!

SENDING IN THE WORD OF GOD

Are your/our eyes focused on Jesus?

Today's story is not a recovery of sight—but a giving of sight where it had not existed before! Jesus doesn't just restore sight—Jesus gives sight! GOD is with us in threatening times and GOD's circle of aloha surrounds is all the time! In living light-filled lives—we tap into GOD's resources beyond our imagination for the good of ourselves, our families, our children and for our neighborhoods and the world!

GOD uses the things that are not, the nobodies, and invites all to be recipients of GOD's grace; guiding all of us who are willing to be led into an ever deeper understanding of our Triune GOD—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

I'm a nobody . . .

