

3/15/26 St. Paul's

Lent 4A

1 Samuel 16: 1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5: 8-14

John 9: 1-41

I don't know about you, but I went home after church last Sunday singing! Wonderful music, and I want to thank JJ and the choir for adding so much to our worship each Sunday. Ending with *Amazing Grace* was just right. *Amazing Grace. . . I once was lost, and now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.*

The Man Born Blind – funny, but that's all we really know about this individual – **his disability**. I mean, what was his name? What was the sin that, ostensibly, caused his disability? And, for me, the bigger question: was he really the only one in this story who was blind?

This gospel story appears only in the Gospel According to John...(the last of the four gospels) and it recounts much about what was happening at the time it was written. Tensions were high between the Jewish community and the newly forming Christian community when John wrote. Those early Christians had not really formed into a community and were probably a mixture of believers of Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile origins. Likely, in Rome, this main group of early Christians formed itself under the leadership of John, *the Beloved Disciple* (Not John the Baptist) and formed a Johannine Community. They probably participated in Jewish communal life, in the towns where they lived. Much of that life would have taken place at their synagogue, which was as much a communal institution as a religious one. (This week after the sad incident at Temple Israel in Bloomington, Michigan, we heard that belief spoken over and over. Their Synagogue,

many said, is a place of community, of gathering, just as it is a place of worship – an important place to any community.) So, in these newly forming communities, many of the members who began to voice their belief in Jesus as the Christ, felt the tensions growing between those who held that belief and those who did not. The membership of the synagogue gradually began to view this new Christian movement as a clearly distinguishable rival, and so, many Jews may have taken part in activities that persecuted the Johannine community, whose members still considered themselves a part of the synagogue, but who held differing theologies because of their beliefs in Jesus. You hear this in the writings of John. Terms like, “for fear of the Jews,” reflect the antagonism that existed between the two groups. Biblical scholarship suggests to us that the Gospel of John was written to strengthen the faith of the Johannine Christians in their dire situation and to provide them with arguments against their Jewish opponents. This story of the Healing of the Man Born Blind is a good example of the tensions of the time. We read, “The one who declared Jesus as Messiah was driven out of the synagogue.” For John and those followers of Jesus whom he led, to be expelled from one’s religious home, due to their faith in Jesus, was very traumatic. (It reminds me of what happened several years ago to the members of some of our neighboring Episcopal congregations who were expelled from their buildings because their beliefs didn’t line up with some of the members of the congregation.) Many of those early Christians, who had been part of the same faith system, were now separated, which feels a lot like the times we live in – communities split over ideologies – dark times.

I once was blind, but now I see And so the Man born Blind literally went from darkness to light by God’s good grace, but in that healing, the blindness of others around him was revealed. John wrote that Jesus spit into the dust of the earth, combining two essential

elements. Saliva was thought to have protective healing properties and the earth – the dust that you and I are made from – an element of God’s own creation. Spit and dirt and the water from a pool called “Sent” and sight was born, for the first time in this man. He was healed, but his community was blind to that healing and still blind to him. It was simply unbelievable to them that a blind man would get his sight after a lifetime without it.

Unable to accept or understand the healing, the Jewish community made this man an object of scrutiny. His blindness: a result of sin, either his or his parents” (the belief of the time.) Many joined the conversation/the scrutiny/the speculation. **The neighbors** were no longer sure they even recognized him; **the Pharisees** complained that Jesus was out healing on the Sabbath; and **the parents**, who, rather than celebrate and give thanks, refused to speak to inquirers, and sent anyone who asked on to get the truth - from him. Many sighted individuals unable to see. Who was it that was blind?

Can we imagine what it would be like to regain sight after a lifetime of blindness? What an amazing, awesome event in one’s life, but instead of praising God, everyone treated the man as an object, speculated about that healing, and gave reasons why this simply could not be. They steered away from thanking God and looked instead for evidence to back up their own theology, their own politics. The newly sighted man could see, and perhaps he was the only one who could. *Surely (they asked) we are not blind, are we?*

God acts in us in so many ways, abundantly and simply, and we often miss it. Could it be that we have blindness to some things too? What is it that clouds our vision of the world and our place in it? Where are our blind spots?

Years ago, an incident occurred that I still remember even after all these years. It happened in a gravel parking lot that surrounded the building next to the house where we

once lived. That parking lot is a busy place in a not-very busy neighborhood. The building houses the offices of our small and rural Homeowners' Association, so people come and go much of the day with payments and/or news or complaints of one type or the other.

Several times a day, the parking lot was (and probably still is) really busy. That's right before the Mount Baker School District's bus rumbles down the road, spewing out fumes from its diesel engines, taking on (or dropping off) the neighborhood kids on their way to and from the "learning factory." It was always clear to me that many parents accompanied their younger children to the stop to await the big yellow bus because often, just before the arrival of the bus, there seemed to be equal numbers of parents and kids, waiting, visiting, playing. One day, while taking a bag of garbage out to the trash can, the familiar voices of all those youngsters in their play accompanied me, and a car drove up and dropped off a girl who was immediately greeted by a friend, "Chelsea, *I see you!*" And it startled me so much that I still remember it today. The friend didn't say, "Hi, Chelsea..." nor "Hey, Chels..." Nor "What's up?" Nor did she remain silent. Instead, she said, *I see you*, and as I dragged our kitchen garbage can back into the house, I felt good. "I see you," says a good deal more than the mundane, "How are you?" Saying *I see you* is the first step in saying *I care. I recognize you, I know you, I value you.*

I see you, though, infers the ability to see - a gift for which we give thanks, but also a gift that not all people possess. The Man Born Blind did not have/nor did he have ANY hope that he ever would. That is, until Jesus spat into the dirt and made mud, and for that, he believed and was thankful (even when others doubted.)

About three hundred years ago, in the wee village of Oney, England, a new parish priest came to town. The town quickly came to admire him, flocking to the services and

really were taken with his vibrant and personal style of preaching. They resonated with all he did and said, because of his honest testimony about his own checkered past.

This priest had once been a slave trader, and then, through an encounter with God, had come *to see* and to know a different way. Clergy often wrote verses for congregational singing in those days, and this priest went on to compose verses that, in plain language, told the story of his own remarkable conversion. Though the song was forgotten during its own time, it has managed to survive and become part of our own favorites telling the story of grace and change. *Amazing Grace* is the hymn, written by Father John Henry Newton, and it draws on images from the parable of the Prodigal Son, “I once was lost, but now am found” and from the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Man Born Blind, “was blind, but now I see.”

Today, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, is a day on which we might recognize any blindnesses that we have and to celebrate God’s gift of grace and healing – the ability to see and to change. The Fourth Sunday of Lent, in centuries past, was called *Laetare* (Latin - Be Joyful) *Sunday*. Clergy often wear a very light shade of purple – a pastel calling forth the light. Even in the time of Lent, it calls us to rejoice and to persevere through the remaining days of Lent. Today’s lessons, of course, remain from that tradition, and they remind us of the light, of our own propensity to be blind, and of God’s encouragement and grace healing us, leading us. God sees us, and we see each other. *I see you – each one* – and I continue to pray for the growing ability in each of us *to see* ALL people, to become aware of those around us – regardless of their belief systems and, ultimately, to know our own blindnesses. May it be so.

RDB