

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

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

By this time in Jesus' itinerant ministry, people all over Judea had become aware of his healing miracles. The good news was being spread that among them there was one who had such power and authority that physical and spiritual ailments were being cured. Yet the sheer wonder at such miracles had not diminished: it was just unbelievable. People were just stunned and surprised. Notice one of the first questions the people asked: Was this man a sinner whom God punished with blindness? Or was it his parents who were sinful enough that they were punished by giving birth to a blind child? Is this a question you have asked, or heard others ask, when disaster strikes or infirmity occurs? Is Almighty God punishing us? Is this what God does to those who have been imperfect? Is God so ticked-off that God has forgotten the covenant with Noah, the rainbow in the clouds, to never strike down the creation again, ever?

And notice Jesus' answer to that question. No, he says, the disadvantage of blindness is not a punishment for sin. It is rather an opportunity for revelation of God's intent, a way through which God's sacred work can be recognized, a lens through which God's blessings, ironically, can be seen. If this seems mysterious, if this seems unlikely, remember the source: The worldview Jesus promotes seems unconventionally upside-down and enigmatic, but it is God's way to spread good news in the midst of despair, to show abundance in the midst of deprivation, to proclaim healing in the midst of disease, to be loving in the midst of fear. How is this possible, how does any of this make sense? That is the next question the bystanders and witnesses ask when the blind man is given new sight. Who did this miracle, and how did he do it?! The formerly blind man can tell them the circumstances, but can't explain what happened. He doesn't even know where Jesus went afterward. He just continues to insist that his blessing did indeed happen, that it happened in fact to him, and that his now changed and improved life is a testimony he's ready to share. But that testimony has put the whole community into a dither...

The community John's Gospel describes in this passage is cloaked in darkness. And, mind you, it purports to be a *religious* community! Religion presents itself here through suspicion, finger-pointing, and fear. As if wearing blinders, this religious community can see no way of repairing the breach aside from strictly abiding by the commandments. The Pharisees, the religious leaders, police the community with the threat of consequences. Even the parents of the healed man are afraid to witness to the light, to the healing love which has benefited their son, and choose to plead ignorance. In this community, ignorance is bliss, or at least safer than expressing an opinion. No one dares to turn the culture of suspicion upside-down, for fear that they will be excluded from the community synagogue; that they will be excommunicated and isolated, perhaps even permanently shunned.

Meanwhile, Christ Jesus, the source of grace, has disappeared from the story and apparently from that community. No one knows where he has gone. This one miracle completed and put aside, God's love seems to have departed, leaving fear free to roam and

destroy. Has the darkness actually overcome the light? Have the people who witnessed God's amazing grace forgotten the miracles of blessing and the wonderful gifts they have received all their lives? Have they become blind themselves? Are they condemned to the misery of a death that they're not sure of and a life they can't control? Where, Oh where, is Jesus now, when the darkness comes prowling around asking questions they are afraid to answer? Where is God's Christ when he is accused of being a law-breaker? Why won't he answer the charges publically? Has he abandoned us in this time of unrest and uncertainty, they wonder.

As your priest, permit me to reassure you that the church doesn't want you to be in a 'dither'. As we rerun the course of our seasonal themes each year, Lent is not meant to put us into a dither. Might I propose that a major intent of this season of Lent, as we prepare for the mystery of Easter, is clarity? Clarity about our relationships with God and one another; clarity about our various callings; clarity about the depth of our healing; clarity about how best to use our blessings in the implementation of God's creative dream. Lent can make us like the man in this gospel story: Though the powers of fear try to isolate and discredit the man who has new sight, they cannot now successfully re-assert their power over him. Though he may not understand what has happened to him, nor be able to explain it fully, he is bound to witness about the blessing he has received. He has broken the chains of fear. His new hopeful insight convinces him to talk-back to the religious authorities, even mock them openly and sarcastically. He no longer fears their retribution, knowing that God's love is stronger than their ability to punish him for his audacity. His healing has set him free, and if he is to be driven away, then he goes in peace. The clarity he now has about God's grace has become wisdom.

Christ comes into the world to pass judgment on fear through clarity and the wisdom it enables. Christ has a mission to cause those who do not or cannot see the ravages of fear to gain new sight. Jesus returns to this story looking for those who have gained new sight, and when he finds them, he draws out the wisdom they have come to know in their hearts, that is, what they believe. His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has no power to overcome it. Faith, hope, and love abide forever, and remain reliable despite the pessimism of any generation. While we are tempted to regard God's creation as a hostile, dark, and dangerous place, a place of predicament and pestilence, Christ's gift of inward-sight reminds us that God has created all things out of goodness, and that God's dream for creation is elaborate and colorful, inspiring and fertile, persistent in love and growth.

And then, like the blind man in this gospel story, I pray that you will be inspired by the Holy Spirit to *witness* to the light. If we are to be the church, Christ's earthly body, during each and every time of trial, then we are obliged to joyfully and faithfully pick up his light and generously illuminate the path forward for our friends and neighbors. Lent is an important time to be apostles, ones who are sent by the brilliance of light and sight into the habitations of fear and trembling. Carry your cross on one shoulder while you carry a lantern hung from the other, that you might be a witness of hope and that the darkness shall flee away from the path we travel together. Amen.