

**Fourth Sunday in Lent (Lent 4A)i – March 30, 2014**  
**I Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

In our first reading, Samuel is blessed with that expansive and discerning focus—that spiritual sight—as he is given the task of finding and anointing a new King for Israel. Also today, we hear another lengthy reading—in one act, but played out in seven short scenes—what we call one of the Lenten “Scrutiny” gospels. These readings have been used in the church for 1700 years, calling people to scrutinize their faith in Lent. In our gospel today, Jesus, and eventually the man who had been born blind, showed this spiritual vision and expansive focus, in contrast to the short-sighted or spiritually blind disciples, initially, as well as the blind man’s neighbors, family and, especially, the authorities. Their inability to truly respect the dignity of the man born blind hinged upon their unwillingness to accept his blindness not as a punishment for sin, but rather as the special place for Christ to show forth God’s restoring and redeeming purpose. And their inability to see God’s hand at work in the man’s healing on the Sabbath hinged upon their unwillingness to see the work of Jesus not as a violation of their sense of biblical authority and community norms, but as an act of unspeakable compassion.

As Barbara Brown Taylor points out, this story of the man born blind forces not only the question, “What if something is *not* of God and we believe that it *is*?”—[but] this story *also* forces the question, “What if something *is* of God and we believe that it is *not*?”<sup>ii</sup> Everyone forgot to ask these questions—especially the latter one—*except* Jesus and the blind man. Everyone else was so sure of everything—so sure that God did not work on the Sabbath; so sure that anyone born blind had to be a sinner; so sure that God did not work through or on sinners. The eyes of their hearts and minds were closed, and they closed out Jesus and the blind man as they let their fear of being wrong keep them from seeing God’s compassionate and powerful hand at work in their very midst. And telling such righteous people that they are wrong is a dangerous thing.

This lengthy gospel story begins with the disciples asking Jesus “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”<sup>iii</sup> Many believed then—as many still do—that God is the author of all good, *and* all ill, such as blindness, depending on one’s righteousness or lack of it. So, this gospel story begins with a theological question: if God and God’s Creation are good, what is the source of human affliction? Why should anybody be born blind? Unfortunately, the disciples assume the answer that punishment for sin might be the explanation. But in this case, whose sin is the cause? Surely the man born blind hadn’t had a chance to sin before his birth. Already, in earlier teachings, the prophets Ezekiel<sup>iv</sup> and Jeremiah<sup>v</sup> had condemned the notion that such a thing could have happened because of the unrighteousness of the parents. Faced with this question, Jesus replies unequivocally that sin is not involved and thus this is not some divine doling out of blindness as a consequence for past failings. Instead, Jesus simply anoints the man’s eyes with dirt and spit and directs him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man does this, and he receives the sight he has never known.

Now neither the man himself, nor the people acquainted with him had expected such an awesome gift of healing. The neighbors couldn't believe the change! But when he told them what had happened, they decided that this incident must be taken up by the authorities, for the healing had taken place on the Sabbath, a day nobody was supposed to do any work. As a rabbi, Jesus knew fully, and respected, the written Law of the Torah, and the oral laws and customs of the religious tradition. Yet, as the saying goes, "Learn the rules, so you know how to break them properly;"<sup>vi</sup> for Jesus also knew that alleviation of human suffering superseded religious ceremonial concerns, and compassion for human need took priority over the Sabbath and its prohibitions.<sup>vii</sup>

Related to their objections about the Sabbath, there was an even deeper fundamental limitation that all those around had imposed on God, namely, their understanding that God somehow ended and then rested from creating, so that on every Sabbath all human creativity should also cease, even certain kinds of healing. This belies the real truth that God is *not finished* creating. In a similar setting earlier in John's gospel, on the Sabbath when Jesus had told a man to take up his pallet and walk, Jesus said to the same authorities who came down hard on him, "My father is still working, and I also am working."<sup>viii</sup> Jesus said then and in our gospel today that the Creation isn't finished, that God the Creator isn't finished, that God isn't finished with us; and that whatever our limitations, they aren't congenitally or intrinsically sinful, and are not God's last word for us. Thus Jesus reminds them and us that whatever our circumstances—from our birth through our life experiences—we are not finished. It is still possible for us to grow, to create and re-create. You and I and all the people we would judge so readily and give up on—or who would judge us so readily and give up on us—*all of us* are still under construction. And we can work with God to join with Him in his ongoing construction and repair project of creation, and while we're at it, ask God to keep us growing.<sup>ix</sup> This is good news indeed!

Now, the sight we gain from Jesus—our spiritual sight—not only puts us at odds with others' presumptions and expectations of us; it can also be a dangerous thing, as I said. In the story we see the blind man's parents distancing themselves from him because to proclaim Jesus as well as his gift of sight was to be declared a sinner by the community and forced out. To proclaim Jesus is to open ourselves to his message and his mission and to reveal in our own lives the same signs seen in Jesus' life. That was and is dangerous indeed; dangerous—and downward. Anointing with mud also began a process of downward mobility for the man born blind—a reduction from a beggar within the gates to the status of an outcast—and you thought, what could be lower in the social and economic ladder than being a blind beggar? Well, how about a sighted outcast? But it's precisely in this further abasement and degradation that this man comes to an insight—a spiritual vision beyond his new physical capacity to see. So, finally, this lengthy story serves the purpose of contrasting the blind man who can now see, with the sighted ones who act as though they are blind—but the process is a gradual one. As the man born blind is harassed by the authorities who want to know who healed him, his answers to them reveal more and more. First he calls Jesus "the man," then "a prophet," then "this man from God." By the time he winds up in front of Jesus again, his conversion has progressed. "Lord, I believe," he says. The gift of his physical sight is

only the beginning for him. It is Jesus' own self-revelation that brings him fully into the light, that gives him spiritual vision alongside his physical sight.

William Sloane Coffin points out that if sight is problematic on a physical level, how much more complicated it becomes on a spiritual level. We happily sing, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." But how many of us do you suppose would share in the blind man's desire to receive his sight, if by "sight" we meant spiritual sight—seeing ourselves through the eyes of Jesus, seeing those around us and our whole world and God with the spiritual vision of Christ?<sup>x</sup> It's not that we or those in this gospel story are evil, but rather that we and they are just a little dull, or have our priorities mixed up, or have given up on God or others or ourselves, or are simply caught up in the grip of life and all its distractions.

So, as we journey through this Lenten Season, may we ask ourselves a double question: first, how often do we quibble with inessentials to avoid facing God's true purpose and presence, which are so often hidden in plain sight; and second, how often does our vision become clouded, narrowed—even blinded—by old fears and discontents, by prejudice and judgmentalism, by privilege, or by a sense of powerlessness, by stress or confusion—so that, though we claim sight, we are in fact still in need of re-visioning? As each of us seeks to understand the causes of our lack of clear vision, may we accept the invitation to allow our limited sight, our spiritual myopia, to become the special place for God in Christ to show forth God's creative and redeeming purpose, so that, in the words of Richard of Chichester, we may "see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day."<sup>xi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> See Propers 16C and 25B

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), pp 73-78

<sup>iii</sup> John 9:2. This revealed a popular attitude that was expressed in proverbs of the time, such as, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.[Ezekiel 18:2]" Or, "The sins of the parents are visited on the children. [spelled out more fully in Deuteronomy 5:9-10]" They would have also known the passage that reads, "I am the Lord and there is no other...I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things. [Isaiah 45:5,7]"

<sup>iv</sup> cf. Ezekiel 18:2-4, 30

<sup>v</sup> cf. Jeremiah 31:29-30

<sup>vi</sup> This statement has been falsely attributed to the Dalai Lama (in an email hoax). It actually derives from advice in H. Jackson Brown, Jr., Life's Little Instruction Book: 511 suggestions, observations, and reminders on how to live a happy and rewarding life (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991).

<sup>vii</sup> In saying what he says and in acting the way he does Jesus is also making a serious point that when the fundamental connection is broken between our practices of piety or worship that we need to do and the worship through loving-kindness and healing that God needs to have done—when that connection is broken, then that piety and religious tradition becomes hollow, shallow, and irresponsible while presuming to be true or even holy. And because they felt the rules had not been followed, the authorities decided that the results just weren't right. And so, whoever had done this work had to be a sinner, too. But it would be even better if it could be proved that the man had not been blind at all. So, they call in his parents who say no more than that this is their son and that he was born blind. Again the formerly blind man is

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questioned, apparently to find inconsistencies in his account. Something had been done that had violated their sense of community identity which they believed was established by God through their forefathers and found in their sacred writings—not bad lenses through which to understand things—but lenses nonetheless that had failed them from seeing the forest for the trees. It had them place conformity, authority and purity ahead of the more important realities of God’s compassionate power and the intrinsic dignity of this man born blind. The man holds to one fact—he was blind and now he can see. The result? He is then driven out like a heretic, equivalent to being shunned or excommunicated. In compassion, Jesus, himself a heretic, finds the man and offers a new community.

Contrary to these attitudes in this story, there are a variety of things that go on in this world that may not have anything to do with the goodness or power or judgment of God. They may have to do only with the fragility of human development (a baby is born blind), or with the power of distorted human thought (such as the assumption that a blind baby is the result of some sin).

<sup>viii</sup> John 5:17

<sup>ix</sup> Some of these ideas were generated in William McD. Tully, “God does not make junk” (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church, sermon of March 6, 2005).

<sup>x</sup> William Sloane Coffin, “Let Me Receive My Sight” (New York: Riverside Church, September 21, 1986)

<sup>xi</sup> Full text of prayer:

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,  
 for all the benefits thou hast given me,  
 for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.  
 O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,  
 may I know thee more clearly,  
 love thee more dearly,  
 and follow thee more nearly, day by day.  
 Amen.