

Sermon Lent IV Year A 2017

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

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We seem to be in the Lenten season of very long lessons from John's gospel. And as Kim preached last Sunday, the authenticity of these passages as reflecting real events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth have much that calls them into question.

The parable of the man born blind begins easy enough with the disciples asking a common question that puzzled them. How could someone be born blind? Or their dilemma as people of faith, the question was who sinned, this man blind from birth or his parents? It was a common understanding that deformity and illness were the result of sin. But a child born with such a defect could not have sinned in utero. So, the disciples wonder if the blindness is a punishment for sins of the parents.

This idea that sin leads to illness is not altogether different from the kind of questions that run through our minds when someone becomes ill. We wonder, what were the risk factors that led to this development. Was it due to something that they had done or not done? Was their illness a result of poor choices or addiction? We've all been there. We are at once curious and also hoping that their illness has an explanation which involves a risk that we don't have. This process is not all that different from the question the disciples asked. Who sinned?

Our God is one whose property is always to have mercy. And Jesus responds that blindness was not caused by sin either of the man born blind or his parents.

So, we have a passage that contains a healing miracle that takes all of two lines to relate. Yet, the passage goes on for 41 verses. So, let's talk about our understanding of how scripture was shared in the years before it was written down. I know you wonder about this.

In the 60-70 years between Jesus' crucifixion and the gospel writer John putting this text together, much has happened. Some say the stories were preserved in an oral history. By this they mean an act of memory developed through the telling and retelling of their memories of Jesus. Now a story of 41 verses is hard to preserve through retelling. I count 8 plot points or scene shifts in the story.

Imagine if one of us had witnessed the healing. We then told someone else in our home perhaps. Who in turn told a friend or neighbor. Eight plot points is a lot to

remember and retell. Studies of memory, as NT scholar Bart Ehrman has presented, show that we don't do a very good job retelling stories. A story of this length would necessarily shift and adapt over time. Part of this is due to the fact that in retelling the story, the story teller naturally takes the audience in mind as they try to capture folks' attention. In doing so, the story shifts and changes.

Some scholars doubt that any such healing miracle occurred. They believe instead that this is a typological story. A story told to signify theological truths rather than actual history. Despite the sound of an actual event, some scholars doubt this took place in the manner related. And there is much reason for doubt beyond the significant length and detail.

How else do scholars believe that the stories of Jesus were preserved? Another possibility is through telling and retelling them in the context of worship. Specifically worship in the synagogue. Our story contains clues to just such a process. This theory holds that early after the death and resurrection of Jesus the stories of his life and ministry continued to circulate. And the worship life in the synagogue was one place where the stories were told and retold. Jesus and his disciples were Jewish. Most of his initial followers were Jewish as well. Early on there was no Christian church, but there was the synagogue where the faithful worshipped. And into this worship experience, scholars believe that the stories of the prophet Jesus were being told and retold.

Some of this may have been in trying to convert others to believe in this Jewish prophet who claimed to be the Son of God. For others it may have been an attempt to understand the questions revolving around his mysterious life and death.

But telling the stories during worship in the synagogues did not go on too long. Sometime between the years 80 and 90 the early Jewish believers in Jesus were dismissed from the synagogue. The split was complete. We learn this in John's gospel lesson today. We believe John wrote this gospel text between the year 90 and 100. So, 60-70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. We hear of this separation from the community of the synagogue in the portion of the text that relates the parent's response to the Pharisees' questioning. "For the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." Well, this didn't happen during Jesus' life but much later. Thus, this clearly did not take place as the story suggests immediately following the healing. Instead, this is John describing the split that had occurred at the time of his writing between the Johannine community and the Jewish faith community. To read more on this, I recommend John Spong's book being read in the Thursday morning book group, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*. Spong devotes a full chapter of his book to this story and its implications.

So our question this morning is as always, what does this passage say to us today?

Jesus came to open the eyes of the blind to the presence of the divine life in human form. And in his life and ministry, Jesus revealed something of God's love for each of us. In fact, Jesus revealed God's love for every aspect of his beloved creation.

In the story this morning Jesus tells the man born blind to go and wash. And in so doing, he was given the gift of sight. Yet, the only one who rejoiced in the miracle was the man whose sight was restored. No one else seems appropriately overjoyed. Not his neighbors, not his parents, much less the authorities with their questions. In this story, the work of the divine has been lost while the world is seemingly preoccupied with all that life demands.

The same may be true in our lives as well if we are not careful. We continue in the paths we walk with our "to do" list in mind. Busy, busy, busy. Yet, around us the world is breaking open. On a recent beautiful day in May in New York someone observed the experience of two men who were blind in Central Park. Both were hoping for charity. One was tapping with his cane and held a sign which read, "I am blind." Not many stopped to place money in his cup. Not too far away was another blind individual who was doing better. He too had a sign, it read, "It is May - and I am blind." Nearly every passerby put a coin in his cup, some even turning back to make their contribution. Unfortunately for the first man, folks were simply too busy; and thus they missed the man. But the other man's sign interrupted them and caused folks to pause, reflect and think about the miracle of sight in the midst of the miracle that is Spring.

Today's story is about blindness; about not seeing the reality of life around us. Some in Jesus' day failed to realize the divine presence that his life revealed. So too in our day our daily routines, concerns, habits and fears can produce a fog around us. While we hope that God will make God's presence known, we are so self-absorbed, we fail to see the miraculous in our midst. We miss the miracles around us.

None of us has an appointment on our calendar where we sit outside on a bench with the instruction "sit and look for God's presence and love around us." Even if we did, we are likely to pursue our goal with such determination that we would miss the subtle presence.

During Lent, one of my disciplines has been focused on gratitude. At the end of each day, I try to reflect on the events of the day that I am grateful for. I have come to believe that most of these are experiences of the in-breaking love of God. By stopping and reflecting, I am more likely to recall them before they slip into the mist of the day gone by.

This activity has changed my perspective and allowed me to see what I perceive to be the divine love at work in the lives of those around me.

Experiences like these (some are mine and others are yours of the past few days):

When you call someone asking for their help providing something for the Mission Possible Auction, they surprise you by saying, “why sure, I would love to donate a painting, or some other product of their giftedness.”

When you come to church on a Sunday in Lent expecting only greenery you discover the altar covered with beautiful flowers.

When you immediately hop in your car in response to your child’s call for help in a crisis, but then before you drive far, you get a second call. “It’s ok, I’ve got myself together.” “I don’t need you but thank you for responding so quickly.”

You see someone at lunch on Sunday after church and stop to say hi. As you leave they say, “thank you so much for speaking with me.”

When you drop by the garden supply store for a scoop of mulch in the bed of your truck and the frequently grumpy man gives you a bigger load than you ever imagined.

When you walk past the garden and are blown away by the emergence of perennials popping up all over, despite the freezes that have been such a challenge.

In the midst of your day, grace breaks in for those with eyes to see.

The writer of Ephesians says, “once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are in light.” Lent calls us to turn around, repent, turn back to God. And in so doing, see the miracles of God’s presence and love surrounding us each and every moment.