
CREATION TO NEW CREATION

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR A

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“PILGRIMAGE: FROM APPEARANCE TO REALITY.” FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

1 Samuel 16.1–13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5.8–14; John 9.1–41

1 Samuel 16.1–13

The LORD said to Samuel, ‘How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.’ Samuel said, ‘How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.’ And the LORD said, ‘Take a heifer with you, and say, “I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.” Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.’ Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, ‘Do you come peaceably?’ He said, ‘Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.’ And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.’ But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’

Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, ‘Neither has the LORD chosen this one.’ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, ‘Neither has the LORD chosen this one.’ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, ‘The LORD has not chosen any of these.’ Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ And he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.’ And Samuel said to Jesse,

‘Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.’ He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, ‘Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.’ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

This passage is the prologue to the story of the rise of David that will take up the rest of the story found in the books of Samuel. It reads like a political to us and, at one level it is just that. It is an answer to a political question: How did David succeed Saul?

The story-teller is interested in other questions and they are best summed up in the interchange between Samuel’s musings about the suitability of Eliab and God’s response (6–7). “But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”“ This is the core of the text here. What humans want in a leader and what God looks vary greatly. The story in the books of Samuel expands on that. Surprisingly moral perfection is not included. But then neither is injustice, mercilessness, deceit or faithlessness praised. This story is about spiritual relationships with God.

Saul has proven a ruler who could not hear God because the people’s voice was louder and nearer (15.24–26). The ruler of Israel needed to heed the word of God first and obey it, and only then listen to the voice of the people. Religious and pragmatic political activity had to bend to the voice of God (15.22–23). Israel’s future (and the world’s; remember this is the story of God at work for the world) is at stake in Saul’s failure not only to hear the word of God and obey but also in his indecision and inability to assess situations clearly (see chapters 13–15). He was not the leader to take God’s plan into its next stage. So, at one level the story is about the decline of Saul. It is slow and resisted. It is also about the rise of David, slowly and in turmoil, conflict and fear that still govern human politics.

Even this little story that is only an introduction to it all is full of tension, secrecy, and fear. Samuel fears for his life. After all, this looks like a conspiracy. Although my Bible has the heading ‘David Anointed as King’ that is not accurate. He is anointed and God is looking for a new king but Samuel is very careful not to do a royal anointing but a very local, very secret anointing for the story is yet to play out. Anointed with the Spirit David may be but far from being a king.

After the confrontation with Saul in which Samuel announced the demise of his kingship, Samuel went home to Ramah north of Jerusalem (called Jebus then). He grieved for Saul because of his great promise and great failure and because Israel was leaderless. His grief, however, seems to have rendered him impotent. Israel is in danger not only because of Saul but because Samuel the prophet and bearer of the word of

God is unable to act. God commands Samuel to get on with the business of anointing a new king over Israel specifically from the sons of Jesse. God provides for himself a new king: Israel may be bereft but God is not. Samuel is afraid because if he anoints a new king while Saul still reigns his action is treasonous. So, God tells him to take a heifer for sacrifice and head south the Bethlehem. The elders of the town are nervous because of Samuel's conflict with Saul and fear retaliation.

Samuel anoints David at the express command of God thus emphasising the divine initiative in the choice of the next king (6–13). David is the eighth son of Jesse, a shepherd from the village of Bethlehem and from a family with no claims to great pedigree, Jesse being the grandson of Ruth and Boaz. Samuel works through the seven sons of Jesse (6–10) only to find that God has not chosen any of them. The telling encounter between God and Samuel is found in verses 6–7. Samuel is looking but not seeing. Possessed by his own agenda of grief and fear, beauty and strength blind the great prophet; he seems only to be able to look at the outward but cannot discern the heart.

YHWH has another in mind; the last son who is a fine specimen but who is not significant enough to be present. He is not even significant enough to be named until after he is anointed; David, the not-yet king, by oil and the Spirit.

This is a story of God's unexpected choices of unlikely vessels to bear God's grace. All through the books of Samuel David is an unlikely instrument for Israel's hopes. Can this boy defeat the Philistine the champion? Can this upstart warrior escape the anger and machinations of Saul? Can this fugitive and bandit become a King? Can this man who sells himself to the Philistines win the hearts of the Israelite? God finds possibilities for grace in the most unexpected, even barren, places. God's anointed one, God's messiah, is neither wealthy nor powerful. Like Samuel we still confuse appearance for reality. Image and appearance may dominate our culture but God looks elsewhere – on the heart. The trouble for the modern church is that it too confuses appearance with reality and thus finds it hard to discern God's grace at work and address the needs of the human heart.

Questions: How can we confuse appearance and image for the kingdom of God? What can we do to learn to move from seeing to discerning? What is the place of discernment in the Christian life? Do we consider ourselves to be unlikely candidates for God's calling? What does this story teach us about that?

What can we learn about the way God 'goes about God's business'? What might it mean for us as we contemplate our mission as disciples?

Psalm 23

A Psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

The writer begins with a profession of faith: The LORD is the psalmist's shepherd, the poet's king. Kings were called shepherds and their role was to enact God's justice into the political and social life of the nation (see Ezekiel 34). God alone suffices the psalmist; God alone is the only necessity of life. The reason is simple. Relying on human kings to bring about justice is futile; God alone is the true shepherd.

The beautiful tranquil pictures of verses 2–3 illustrate a simple idea that God keeps the psalmist alive; food, water, rest and security (safe paths). The psalmist lives in trust that this is the right way to find peace.

The image of the darkest valley introduces a more disturbing but significant part of life. Even in the most life-threatening situation God's provision is sufficient. Walking on the shadow side of, even in death, and certainly in the face of all evil, God's presence is all that is necessary. The protection of the LORD dispels all fear which often paralyses human life and allows for flourishing even in the worst circumstances.

The images turn to the household the centre of human life and God is described as the gracious generous host (5–6). God actively pursues his role as loving host even as enemies look on powerless to do anything about it. God's goodness and mercy pursue and surround the psalmist protecting and nurturing him or her.

The simple message of this psalm is that God is the only necessity of life. The tragedy is that the psalm is almost only associated with the funeral service, yet it is all about life. It is a psalm for daily living. And in its liturgical use today it points us to Jesus who sees the people as sheep without a shepherd and who then feeds the people. Jesus is the true king.

Yet even in death or near death, in deepest darkness, the shepherd's love, presence and provision is enough. Note that the presence of the shepherd does not mean that we

will not pass through the deepest darkness; it indicates that we most certainly will. The threat is real and ever-present but the presence of the shepherd is our hope.

The Christian hears in this psalm the promises of the shepherd and the Lamb of the New Testament (John 10.22–30). They also remember that God is the shepherd (Ps 95.7, 100.3; Isaiah 40.11; Ezekiel 34.11–16; John 10.11, 14). They also notice that the overflowing bounty of God’s provision finds its outlet to the world in Tabitha the widow who helps overcome scarcity in God’s house hold (Acts 9.46–53).

And perhaps we can hear echoes in the Eucharist, in which the bread and overflowing cup of God are shared with the world. Perhaps we need to remember that the Eucharist is an economic and political enactment grounded in a theology. Is that too difficult an dangerous I wonder?

Questions: Read this well-known passage every day this week and savour each phrase and word. Settle on a word or phrase each day and let it speak to you.

What is God saying to you? In what ways is this psalm the foundation for living for you?

How difficult is it to hear the message of the psalm in our consumer driven and obsessed society? Is its message too naïve? What message should we present to our society, our neighbours?

Ephesians 5.8–14

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’

The writer is discussing what difference being in Christ makes to the disciples’ way of living (from 4.17) and comes to the conclusion that it is a life of imitating God in tenderness, love, kindness and forgiveness (4.32–5.2). Old pagan ways must be put away as they come under judgement (5.3–7) and because the disciples have come into the light of Christ. Christian ethics are simply an expression in life of what the Christian disciple believes to be true in Christ.

The statement that sets theme of the discussion in this chapter is found in 5.1–2.

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Be like the God who is revealed in the crucified Christ. This is light.

The cross with its themes of sacrifice, love and grace cast a light on human behaviour that is devastating in its critique of the human condition (8–14). The disciple has a new status as ‘light in the Lord’ (Matthew 5.16; Luke 16.8; John 12.36; 1Thessalonians 5.5). The daily life is walking or journeying in the light.

We must let the light burn its way of goodness, truth and right through our lives so we might live the light (9). These form the framework for discernment. Goodness, truthfulness in word and deed and justice, which puts all human relationships to rights, are the light of Christ in which we walk.

Evil is the absence of light. Note that it is an absence, a negative. And we have an obligation to expose the works of darkness to make the evil visible in the light of the cross, not by using a megaphone, but by living in Christ. Morality police we are not. We have no licence to scold or berate. We have tried that and it has failed, and continues to fail, miserably and painfully, our hypocrisies are laid bare.

That is what the writer says when he speaks of discerning what is pleasing to the Lord. The NRSV “Try to find out...” (10) obscures the critical process of discernment that is required of the Christian. The word means put to the test, examine and decide. It is a critical intellectual and spiritual activity (Romans 12.1–2) that takes place using the framework of verse 9; “...for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true”.

Christians are not to withdraw from the world as some of their contemporaries did. Instead, they must explore the human condition for their own struggles with the darkness in the light of the cross. Then they are ready to discern and lay bare the tawdry life that makes oneself the centre of the universe, encouraging greed, and self-absorbed pleasure at the expense of others, the very opposite of goodness, justice and truthfulness (11).

They are to live lives fully awake (14) because, after all, that is what light is for. This little quote maybe from an early liturgy or baptismal service but reflects scriptural ideas that the early Christians drew on (Isaiah 26.19; 51.17; 52.1; 60.1; Romans 13.11).

If only the institutional church had learnt this lesson instead of covering up the works of darkness in its own life.

Questions: How can we be light? How can we learn to critically discern what pleases God in our circumstances? How can we discern the works of darkness in our lives and expose them? How important is this discussion and insight for the way we go about our mission?

John 9.1–41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been

heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.

This long story and debate seethes with so many arguments and cross arguments, so many ideas and counter ideas so much jostling for power and so much at stake theologically that we may find it hard to make out any central theme. As is usual in John’s Gospel the central theme is Jesus himself and the words, “... I am the light of the world” are the key to understanding that theme. The blind man moves towards sight, to the light, towards Jesus, while the Pharisees move towards blindness, to the darkness and away from Jesus (remember the themes discussed in the Ephesians reading).

I want to begin with two preliminary comments. The first is that in the Gospel of John healings like this one (and other miracles) are not wonders, something to be stared at and overwhelmed by. We can walk away from those and even forget them. John calls these events signs. Now a sign gives us an entirely different picture. It points somewhere, perhaps an unknown or mysterious place. Or perhaps it points to the possibility of going somewhere new and finding a whole new view that opens us up to greater possibilities. Reflect on that as we work our way through this the terrain of this sign.

The second comment I want to make concerns the question that the disciples put to Jesus: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” They obviously believed in a chain of inevitable cause and effect, sin and judgment, that led to this man’s condition. Thinking like this is a way of trying to hold on to a belief in God’s justice. I think the way that Tom Wright puts it is helpful.

“If something in the world seems ‘unfair’, but if you believe in a God who is both all-powerful, all-loving and all-fair, one way of getting around the problem is to say that it only seems unfair, but actually isn’t. There was, after all, some secret sin to be punished. This is a comfortable sort of thing to believe if you happen to be well-off, well fed and healthy in body and mind. (In other words, no-one can accuse you of some secret previous sin.)”

The point is that Jesus resists any such a view. The world is stranger, darker and more wonderfully mysterious than that. And God's justice is much more personal and liberating as this story shows. It is also a reminder that all our reading, spirituality, and theological reflection is conditioned by our social and economic status. Hence the need for daily renewal, for which the Lenten season is a reminder.

So much more needs to be discussed but keep that in mind as we read this story begins with Jesus leaving the Temple as the celebration of Tabernacles continues encountering a blind man begging. The disciples mouth a common idea that someone must have sinned, either the man or his parents, as God could not be credited with evil that happens to people (1–5). As we have seen what a comfortable doctrine of justice that is for well-fed, well-off, and people healthy in body and mind. Jesus rejects this slot machine, put a dollar in and get a reward, type of theology. He does not look to the past to find some answer but to the future. He does not answer the question but puts it in another key. The chaos, mess and suffering of human life is the raw material out of which God is making a new creation (John 1.4–5). New creation always causes trouble and consternation. It threatens everyone. When lives are transformed it is like light being shone on the darkest recesses of human life but it also opens up new vistas and unforeseen possibilities.

Jesus addresses the need of the man using traditional practices and sends the man to the pool of Siloam. The man receives his sight; the Sent One sends and the man obeys. New creation begins (6–7). This is the sum total of the healing. The rest that follows is the chaos and consternation that it causes for all involved. New life turns everything on its head.

The man goes home and disturbs the status quo (8–12). The healing does not lead to praise and worship but to suspicion and confusion. The man witnesses to Jesus but does not know where he is.

The neighbours and acquaintances take him to the Pharisees as the sign had been performed on the Sabbath (13–17). Once again Jesus causes division, this time among the Pharisees. Some want to judge Jesus by obedience to Torah and some by the quality of the sign. The man's response is that Jesus is a prophet and not a sinner.

The Pharisees become angry threatening and the man's parents once called are fearful and anxious (18–23). The parents knew the Pharisaic ruling about being cast out of the synagogue and are too afraid to risk a direct answer. The Pharisees are moving further from the truth that Jesus reveals light. In attempting to prove that the light of world does not give sight they are proven wrong.

The Pharisees mock the man and his challenge to them about Jesus (24–34) and they throw him out. They subject the man to abuse; they ridicule him as a man born in sin (blind) and vigorously attack his testimony reviling everything about him. He is more

than a match for their rhetoric; “You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.” But the decision against Jesus is made against all logic.

Jesus searches out the man and puts the fundamental question to him (35–38). In John the Son of Man is the one who reveals God in the human story (1.51; 3.13–14; 5.27 etc.). The man opens his heart to Jesus, believing and worshipping. He has traversed the journey from blindness to sight.

The Pharisees are now the blind ones (39–41 and read to 10–21). They refuse the evidence of the blind man who can see and walk further into darkness and blindness. They refuse the evidence and the evidence judges them.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the fact that this passage (along with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well and our next Gospel reading John 11, the raising of Lazarus) was used as part of training early for baptism and the meaning of discipleship. From the story they took the clues that discipleship began in baptism and reaches its climax in the confession of Jesus as the Son of man. It tells the story of the cost and struggle of discipleship. Its joy is that in believing in Jesus they have found life in his name (John 20.31, the purpose of it all.)

Questions: Read this story very carefully. Take your time. There are many layers, strong irony and also paradox.

What does the journey of the blind man tell you about coming to believe in Jesus? Look at the reactions of the neighbours’ friends and family. What does this tell you about the journey to worship the Son of Man?

Why the opposition? What has Jesus said or done that gives his opponents so much grief? How does that reveal some of the costs of discipleship?

Meditate on the journey into unbelief by Jesus’ opponents. Where do you fit in this story?