



Adjusting to the Light

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 2, 2008*

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.

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 neighbors 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 worshiped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment 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.”

From the Book of Samuel we heard tell of the young shepherd boy David anointed by the prophet Samuel as king of Israel. It is an extraordinary tale of political cunning in which YHWH—the God of Israel—legitimizes a political coup that effectively places an outsider, a political nobody upon the throne. Israel, you must understand, has a king currently on the throne: Saul. But YHWH has tired of Saul; for Saul did not heed YHWH’s word, but instead did what he wished. So YHWH has sent his prophet Samuel to find a new king. Samuel anoints a most unlikely candidate, the youngest son of an unknown family, a handsome little shepherd boy: David.

The winners generally write the history. So it was in this case. You can almost see the grin on their face as one of their own good lookin’ guys ascends to power; “that’s *our* boy, David!” God creates a challenging predicament: the legitimate ruler with authority, King Saul, now has no authority; the legitimacy conferred to another. Instead of power being transferred through approved and predictable channels, the political process is now open: to the winds and spirit of the living God.

I looked at this text a couple of weeks ago, when the news headlines announced that:

- Fidel Castro was stepping down in Cuba, handing authority off to his brother Raul
- Kosovo was declaring itself independent from Serbia
- The parties of Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari have been elected to succeed Pervez Musharaf in leading Pakistan
- Bloodshed in Kenya was still raging in the aftermath of disputed elections between incumbent President Mwai Kibaki and contender Raila Odinga;
- Vladimir Putin will be succeeded at least in name by President Dmitry Medvedev
- McCain and Huckabee, Clinton and Obama jockey for votes to ascend the White House throne

When the history of these present days is recorded some years from now, will it be revealed that God gave legitimacy to one successor over another? Is God at work in these current political rearrangements, as God apparently paved the way for young David? Perhaps. If God is a God of justice who seeks fervently, pointedly and eternally (that’s a big playing field!) to lift up, restore, gather, and embrace the least, the oppressed, the marginalized, then I proclaim that the hand and spirit of God is indeed at work wherever rearrangements of political and economic power open up and admit those beneath to rise up and those without to participate within.

The question is: will the ostracized and the outsider today have access to justice, power and well-being tomorrow—in Cuba, Kosovo, Pakistan, Kenya, Russia, the United States? If so, then at least with hindsight those who follow us may say, as the Hebrews did, “God was at work in that place in that hour; thanks be to God.”

As we are witnessing the world over, the transfer of political legitimacy from one individual or party to another is an unsettling, often painful, sometimes bloody, enterprise. Those accustomed to the privilege of ruling, perhaps because they established the rules, now find the rules shifting, and the privilege residing elsewhere. Resistance to such change should come as no surprise. Tension arises when established patterns of content give way to new voices in a new day.

Shifting the arena, I’d like to suggest now that this tale may be a metaphor for the internal upheaval that comes as a consequence of new sight in our own lives, that what we see played out in the political landscape is also played out within. Consider the Gospel text. At times comic, tragic and bewildering, it is rich with possibility. A man born blind is healed by Jesus. Debate ensues about why he was blind. Debate about how he could be healed. Was he really blind? Was he really healed? Is he an impostor or is he true? And debate about how he could be healed on the Sabbath. And what that might say about Jesus.

Through it all, those who can see—physically see—the Pharisees, the neighbors, even the man’s parents—seem not to see, are unable to see the extraordinary thing they see right in front of them: that the man born blind now sees. Meanwhile, the man born blind sees and knows only one thing, the important thing—that once he was blind and now he sees, and that Jesus gave him his sight. The man born blind who now sees knows not why Jesus healed him or how, nor does he particularly care; only that the darkness is now light, and in that light his life in the world is made new.

This does not look like a political story, yet once again, when God—now in Jesus—steps upon the stage to bring about justice or healing, it is profoundly disorienting for those who thought they saw and knew how things work, for those who thought themselves to be the arbiters of order.

Holy Scripture tells the continuing story of David. Saul will jostle with him, contest his rise to power, but Saul's day is now past. The handsome young shepherd shall become the greatest king that Israel ever knew and from his lineage shall come the one we know as Messiah. Scripture does not tell what happened to the man born blind who now sees, nor of the seers in the tale now blind to his healing. In the absence of any record I am free to surmise that it took a while, but eventually the man created his life anew and learned to live with sight, to live in the light that was given him by Jesus. The neighbors, the Pharisees, his parents too, in time, accommodated the man's new presence. More importantly, while they never settled on when or how or why it came to be, life was far richer now, or at least more suspenseful, for who now could say when the Spirit of the living God might again enter in and give sight to one born blind.

Which brings me round to you and to me. I met a man last week. He is not blind, but neither can he see, at least, not clearly, not just now. He came to me in hopes that I could see. In hopes that I could see what he could not but what he wanted to see. He came to me because something, he knew not what, was gone awry in his life. The things that matter most to him were somehow, for no evident reason, pushed aside, and things that matter not at all were taking center stage. Often we experience these times; some of us experience these times often. And from somewhere in his past or inner life, he thought perchance a priest, a church, something of the Spirit—and of God—might open his eyes anew.

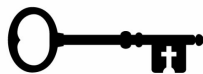
Already, perhaps you see, the man who came thinking he is blind, is not so blind after all. No, for in seeking and asking, in heeding the desire within, the whisper of the spirit, he has acknowledged at least to himself that something is not right, that something more is to be seen, if only there could be light. And when we see and know even this much we're a good part of the way there.

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious,” said Carl Jung, who perhaps was paraphrasing our letter to the Ephesians: “once you were darkness; now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”

When light shines anew on some aspect of our lives that heretofore lay hidden in darkness—some aspect we have feared, ignored, been ashamed of, not yet discovered, or squashed away—when light shines in this dark place, it takes a while to adjust, to get used to the light, to admit that a new voice, a new reign is coming to our land. The man born blind whom Jesus helped see was now seeing the life around him in new ways for the first time. It must have been bright, disconcerting, scary perhaps, as well as magnificent, exhilarating, breathtaking. When the little boy David was placed on the throne, he didn't know yet where he was, nor will any of those who step into positions of power in Cuba, Kenya, Pakistan and the rest. As the man I met makes heeding the Spirit within a central part of his daily life, it will be challenging, for a time.

So also, the healing you seek is already taking place, the light already rising. Christ sees the hidden broken places lying in the dark within. In ways we cannot, Christ sees the ways in which you and I are now blind, trapped, hurting.

Your prayers are already being heard. The love of God is beating as the heart within you, the spirit of God flowing as the breath you breathe, the light of Christ heralding a new dawn, calling you forth. You woke up this morning a child of God, loved by God. Rejoice and live in that light.



Open hearts. Open minds.