

Blind to the Blessing

1 Samuel 16: 1-13 John 9: 1-7 (8-41)

If we don't see it, do we believe it is happening? And what is it that we see? We see exactly what we want to see, just as we hear exactly what we want to hear. Given the present media landscape, one thing that is irrefutable is that people see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear, all mutually reinforcing what we've already seen and heard and known. The notion that there is another valid viewpoint is lost on many of the people in today's society.

The last time that I preached on these texts several years ago, I discussed people's rather complacent response to global warming and climate change. It was something that we were told is happening, but since it didn't impact our lives that much, we generally dismissed it. Some may think that Al Gore invented the idea, but global warming was regarded as a national threat in the George H.W. Bush administration in the late 1980s.

By the time Al Gore published his book "An Inconvenient Truth" about global warming's threat in the late 1990s, the evidence was clear. Still, no one took it seriously. On cue, our global climate has shown drastic changes just as the models from two decades ago predicted. It is now too late to stop the destabilizing of our planet's ecosystems; the best we can do is mitigate the damage we have caused and will continue to cause. It will be a rough ride as our climate changes drastically and causes profound, permanent changes in the way we live our lives. However, we can't say we didn't see it coming. We have to say that we didn't want to see it coming or we didn't care to see it coming.

These days, we have had another instance that has tested our inability to see and yet believe. I refer to the pandemic, of course. Like global warming, we could verify the impacts elsewhere, but we still couldn't take this new reality seriously. With COVID-19, we could see what they were going through in China, but we didn't see that it would ever apply to us. Only two months later, we've suspended worship services as much of the society shuts down and whole states tell their populations to stay put and not leave their home. You may be viewing the sermon video for the very first time.

If we're led to be disingenuous about the realities we face, one thing that scripture compels us to do is to get real about what God is doing and wants done. As in other cases, convincing God's faithful can be a chore. Overcoming our propensity to know everything is a challenge. Overcoming our complacency about what we expect to happen can require an electric shock. Overcoming our resistance to actually changing what we know, what we see, what we do, and how we do it requires massive effort.

The folks in our scripture passages show us that our inability to see and perceive new realities is not unique. This was a problem in biblical times, too. The issue we should be aware of is that our highly integrated world brings us lots of change very fast. As a species, we will have to improve, or we won't survive.

In First Samuel, we hear that God is finished with King Saul, Israel's failed first king who continues to be the reigning monarch. God's prophet Samuel has been vainly holding out some hope for paranoid, self-righteous King Saul, like the king is going to get his act together anytime soon. God wants Samuel to get real, accept the change, and get on with it; find his successor ... **now**. And God tells Samuel where to go: Jesse's place in Bethlehem.

Knowing King Saul, Samuel immediately frets about ticking off the tyrant, a worthy consideration. God has an answer for that. Make believe you're going there to offer a sacrifice and invite Jesse's people to come along. Why Samuel would go to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice and why he would invite Jesse to join in, we don't know. Again, don't ask too many questions. But Samuel seems satisfied and sets off on his somewhat clandestine mission.

When he gets to Bethlehem, Samuel is immediately challenged, "Do you come in peace?" It seems word is out that Saul is a bit of a wacko and may have sent his prophet out to cause trouble. Samuel assures them and the whole scheme with the sacrifice is on.

Then we get thought bubbles over Samuel's head as he eyeballs the candidates for next king from among Jesse's sons. Apparently God can see the thought bubbles over Samuel's head as the prophet looks Eliab up and down. 'This is the guy,' says the bubble. God interrupts, telling his prophet not to consider their appearance; God is looking at their heart, not their looks.

Then the parade of sons begins, and each time Samuel's thought bubble says, 'I like this one. How about this one?' God replies, "Nope," every time. When the parade of seven sons is over, Samuel is still hearing "Nope" from God. Samuel has to be wondering now what on earth God is looking for, what does God want to see, or better, what does God want Samuel to see?

"Are these all of your sons?" a rather desperate Samuel asks. Jesse answers, "Well, there's still Junior, but he's just a kid. He's out with the sheep." With all of these older brothers, I guess the kid was the "surprise" baby in the family. "Get him; let's see him," Samuel says. Sure enough, Junior gets the nod from God: "this guy – anoint him ... **now!**"

As is clearly illustrated here, Samuel is utterly blind to what God is doing. If God hadn't been reading his thought bubbles, who knows what might have happened?

The predicament of God's faithful is the same in every age. As the devoted and faithful servant of God, Samuel struggled throughout to perceive what God was doing. Then we have remarkable evidence in the text itself. Even after repeating God's words in the text that God 'looks at the heart, not at appearances,' what do we get?

The editor notes conspicuously that Junior is "ruddy, with fine appearance." The editor might have figured out *from his own context* what God wanted and might have

instead declared how Junior had ‘a faithful spirit, a heart for justice, a humble presence, the courage of a lion,’ anything but outward appearance. But no! That’s a stunning failure, showing just how captive we are to our own beliefs and assumptions – here, that a king needed to look good and kingly.

Then we have the long, long story of the healing of the blind man in John’s gospel. This story shows how pervasive blindness can be, and most of this blindness is toward Jesus and what Jesus is doing.

The blindness starts with the disciples. Upon seeing a blind man, they ask the irrelevant and impertinent question, *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* Really, guys? Who cares who sinned? ‘Can we do something for this blind guy?’ - that might have been a better question, fellas. But no, their minds are still operating under the old system, the old way of thinking, the old familiar expectations.

Jesus brushes off the question saying that neither sinned. Then Jesus throws a curve ball: **God** made him blind at birth so that ‘God’s works might be revealed through him.’ His blindness is created by God and serves the aims of the Kingdom of God. Some interesting logic there, but let’s keep working through the story.

Jesus then briefly lapses into a light-dark/day-night parallelism before he gets to work. Jesus proceeds to spit on the ground, make a saliva mud pie, and spreads the goop over the blind man’s eyes. Then he sends him to the pool at Siloam to wash off, hopefully with some guide to help him there.

After washing, he can see. People who have known him as the blind beggar, well, they seem to have the vision problem now. ‘Isn’t that the blind guy? Y’know, he doesn’t seem to be blind anymore.’ As they’re carrying on, the blind guy – who was never deaf – overhears them and keeps telling them, ‘Yeah, I’m the guy. No, really, I’m that blind guy. I swear it, I’m the guy who used to be blind and beg.’

These folks who know him ask, ‘How come you see now?’ The man tells them about Jesus and the spit-mud pie and washing at Siloam. That clears up nothing, and they bring the guy to the Pharisees because surely the Pharisees have an answer for this sort of thing.

The Pharisees notice that the event occurred on the Sabbath, and the act of making a spit-mud pie for the man’s eyes violated the Sabbath. You can’t do that; it’s against God’s Torah Law. Therefore, Jesus could **not** be authorized by God since he broke the Sabbath. The curious ones ask the pointed question, ‘Then how **did** he heal the blind guy if the healing wasn’t from God?’ Hmm.

They interrogate the healed man about this fellow Jesus, who gets described by the man as “a prophet.” That’s no help, so the Pharisees question him about his parents because maybe he was never blind, and his parents could straighten it out.

This story goes back and forth and has all kinds of players, and truly is funny like a wacky Abbot-and-Costello ‘Who’s-on-first?’ kind of bit. In this goofy routine, the comedic pivot isn’t double meanings, but the inability of multiple people to see what should be obvious – so, maybe it’s more like Mr. Magoo.

As the story finally reaches its conclusion, Jesus finds the man and explains that he is the Son of God. The once-blind man professes his faith in Jesus. The culmination of the story is that only those who see into the heart or the spirit will be able to recognize the truth about Jesus and recognize God at work.

But along the winding way of the story, no one seems to be able to see anything clearly. The healed man is no longer the same man when his sight is given to him. He is hardly recognized by those who know him. Jesus is never recognized with any clarity, even though the bumbling Pharisees could hardly draw any other conclusion than that the healing of the blind man was the work of God through God’s servant.

There is a changed reality as vision is changed. What had been seen is not what gets revealed when Jesus provides the lens for new sight. A new reality begins to appear as the context moves away from the focus on me and into the focus on what God is doing.

We know that God is active in our lives and in our midst. Do we always have the vision to see that God is active in our lives, as well as in the lives of others, even others that we may despise, ridicule, judge, and condemn? Are we willing to have our vision transformed from our customary flat, one dimensional landscape that has all the answers into the depth and diversity of complex activity that God would have us see? Can we focus on a context that is not simply about me, what I know for sure, what I accept and profess as good, true, and normal? Can we see beyond appearances, looking into the heart and discerning the spirit in a person, in an occasion, in a situation unfolding?

Lent is time for getting our sight aligned with what God is doing with us and around us. We may perceive that our pat answers are bunk, and that a new reality awaits faithful eyes. In our very fast-changing world, our faithfulness to God and our openness to God’s new ways may be more valuable than we have ever realized before.