

## *Blind to What God Is Doing*

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

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 absolutely irrefutable, people see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear, all mutually reinforcing what we've seen and heard and known. The notion that there is another valid viewpoint is lost on many of the people in today's society.

Climate change has been reckoned as national security issue by the CIA since the days of President George H.W. Bush – Bush the Elder. The CIA's intelligence gathering capabilities included the tools of submarines who were able to measure temperatures of deep waters, measure the size and depth of polar ice caps, and a host of other routine information gathering operations. The CIA has in recent years backed away from its leading role in information gathering and sharing – that intelligence information being classified – but the awareness of the impact of climate change on global security issues has not disappeared from view. The CIA believes that the situation in Syria was worsened considerably by the effects of climate change.

It seems more people believe that climate change is a real thing; that good news since the evidence was indisputable. However, people are still reluctant to believe that human activity is the main driver of it. They have their reasons, but a look at the raw numbers and comparisons with other eras in the planet's long history make theories about other causes laughable.

Scientist Stephen Hawking says that humanity needs to find another planet to colonize because we're going to destroy this one way or another. Is it visionary then, for someone like Elon Musk, the billionaire behind Tesla and SpaceX, to be thoroughly absorbed with establishing a colony on Mars? Musk wants to see people on Mars in the next 10-15 years. Some would agree that he is being a visionary. But what vision is there to admitting that we've trashed this planet so miserably that we should throw in the towel, admit that billions will die, and hope a few survivors will be able to make things work on another planet? Particularly considering that we've done such a great job with this one, the prospects elsewhere don't seem too hopeful.

A series on the *SyFy* channel called "The Expanse" is extremely well done, now in its second season. It envisions a future where a colony is established on Mars, along with other smaller colonies involved in mining operations on different planets, moons, and asteroids.

This isn't *Star Trek* where a confederation of peoples and planetary civilizations are harmoniously cooperating in scientific exploration. In "The Expanse," greedy corporations and renegade pirates compete amid political intrigues and military warfare among the players. The little people are exploited relentlessly, with whole colonies of thousands even used as human guinea pigs for biological experiments. For the little people, it is a life dealing with dangers, darkness, scarcity, and confinement, very much

like prisons. Yet it isn't the dystopian future of some apocalyptic movie that envisions the aftermath of a plague, an asteroid, an ice age, or a nuclear war. What makes "The Expanse" so gripping is that it envisions humanity just as we are, only more advanced technologically, simply projecting the human malady of sinfulness into the expanse of space.

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.

In First Samuel, we hear that God is done with King Saul, Israel's failed first king who is still the reigning monarch. God's prophet Samuel has been vainly holding out some hope for paranoid, self-righteous King Saul, like he's going to get his act together anytime soon. God wants Samuel to get real 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 are not known to us, 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 sacrifice gambit is on.

Then we get thought bubbles over Samuel's head as he eyeballs the candidates for next king from 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 him 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 mentions that Junior is "ruddy, with fine appearance." The editor might have figured out from his own context what God wanted and 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! What a stunning failure that shows just how captive we are to our own beliefs and assumptions.

The long, long story of the healing of the blind man in John's gospel 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. (How could you not see that one coming?) 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.

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.

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 know him as the blind beggar 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 guy. I swear it, I'm the guy who used to beg.'

The folks who know him to question, '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 the answers 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 ask, '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 more like a cast of Mr. Magoos.

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? 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.