

Sermon170326
St. Stephen's, Laurelhurst
Lent 4(A)

The Collect

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; / I shall not be in want.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures / and leads me beside still waters.
 He revives my soul / and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; /
 for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; /
 you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.
 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, /
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Ephesians 5:8-14

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.”

John 9:1-41

As Jesus 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.”

Sermon

God has called you.

Yes, I’m talking to you. Here. Now.

One of the benefits of preaching three Sundays in a row
is that I can build on what I have said.

Two weeks ago, I talked about Abraham,

who was a bit of a schmuck.

He was an opportunist and an adventurer,
perhaps a bit of a con-man.

And he was God’s friend.

You need a bit of a rogue to found a people,
a bit of a con-man to convince your followers
and the leaders of the surrounding countries,
to recognize the nation of Israel.

And I do believe he became a better person
through his relationship with God.

The Lord brought him out of Ur and into Canaan,
but also led him to a better understanding of himself,
and of his family.

He was reckoned as righteous,
not because of his perfection,
but because of his friendship with God.

Last week, I talked about Photini,

the woman at the well,
who clearly led an interesting life.

No doubt she would have been thought head-strong,
flirtatious, and improper
by the respectable people of Sychar.

And she became Jesus’ friend.

You need to be a bit impetuous

to preach the gospel.
 You need to be willing to defy the expectations of society,
 to show people a new way.
 Perhaps being flirtatious helps
 if you're in the business of meeting new people.
 And I do believe she became a better person
 through her conversation with the Messiah.
 I believe she found a new focus for her life.

This week we get the man born blind.

“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.’”

Now, it would be rather cold-blooded for God to say,

“Let’s make someone blind so we can show off.”

I don’t think that’s what Jesus is going for here.

Instead, in his usual, carefully focused way, Jesus is answering the question,

“Why is he blind?”

It’s not about “what caused his blindness?”

but “what does it mean to us?”

How are we called to be God’s people,
 in light of his blindness?

We keep saying,

“it’s bad that he is this way.”

And Jesus says,

“it’s good that we can respond.”

Jesus looks forward.

I do not deny that blindness can be a hardship.

Nor do I deny that Abraham and Photini

had each sinned in their own way.

But Jesus comes to each of us exactly where we are,

weighs us, and puts us to use,

bringing about the kingdom of heaven.

If anyone reveals this truth, surely it is the first kings of Israel,

Saul and David.

Their reigns look like something written for a soap opera,

sex and violence,

selfishness and political intrigue,

adultery, betrayal, and even necromancy.

Basically, Game of Thrones.

The Israelites wanted a king and this is what they got.
 The books of Samuel and Kings tell the tale.
 the people said, "we want a king!"
 And God said, "No you don't."
 "Look, he's just going to put your sons in the army
 and your daughters in his household,
 and take your crops."
 (In other words, expand the national government
 and raise taxes. Things don't really change much.)
 And the people said, "No. We really want a king!"
 "Give us a king."
 God said, "Yes" and gave them Saul.
 King Saul was handsome and strong and self-confident.
 People liked him and he was an effective military leader.
 He protected Israel from the neighboring kingdoms.
 But Saul forgot that his righteousness and kingship
 were based on a relationship with God
 and not on his being handsome and strong and self-confident.
 And so, Saul began to neglect his relationship with God.
 And so, God began looking for a new king.
 David was the second King of Israel,
 not quite so much the expected candidate,
 being a youngest son, less strong, perhaps, but more clever
 than Saul.
 And, for the most part, David was a good king,
 though he did have some problems with adultery and murder.
 Game of Thrones, remember.

We can forget that
 scripture tells us our history
 and not just our aspirations.
 Israel was – and still is – a byword for faith and hope.
 God did a wondrous thing in creating the Kingdom of Israel,
 not because it's founders were such impeccable
 symbols of righteousness,
 but because, in their relationship with God,
 they became part of something –
 the recreation of the world.

Or we might consider the rise of the Church of England in the 16th century.
 I remember very clearly my first year of seminary.
 Bill Countryman, our Anglican Spirituality professor,
 was talking about the Tudors: Henry VIII, Mary, and Elizabeth.
 He said we tell their stories not because they were wonderful people,
 but because they are members of our family.
 They remind us what it means to be part of the story we find ourselves in.

I can't count the number of people who have said to me,
 "Anglican, really? Isn't that a branch of Christianity
 founded on Henry VIII wanting a divorce."
 "No. It has a lot more to do with finding a path between the extremes
 of Roman Catholicism and Calvinism."
 But that's beside the point.
 We remember Henry for the good he did – and the bad.
 We remember him because he had a relationship with God,
 and through him, we think good things happened.

Coming back to today,
 you might think you are not the kind of person
 to be a prophet, or found a nation, or preach the gospel.

Nonsense.

I'm guessing none of you are as messed up as Abraham or Saul.

Don't get me started on Moses.

Apparently, an entitled stammering murderer
 was what it took to get the Israelites out of Egypt.

I'm joking.

A little.

I think.

I really do believe Moses was an amazing individual,
 whose faith could move mountains.

My point is that he became that – and we become that –
 through our relationship with God.

We cannot – we must not –

think it works in the opposite direction.

If a man was born blind so that the world might learn to see,
 we respect God's willingness to work with us,
 however and wherever and whatever we are.

This is not a cop-out or an excuse or some way of saying
 "everything is okay."

Everything is not okay.

You are not perfect just the way you are.

And the world is not hunky-dory.

And yet, the whole idea of grace comes wrapped up
 in a recognition of our own powerlessness
 and God's power working in us.

Knowing this removes all excuse.

Whatever seems to be a weakness,
 can be an opportunity for God,
 when we let it be –

when we stop letting our expectations for God

get in God's way.

Are you a rogue?

God needs rogues?

Are you blind?

God needs blind people?

Are you doubtful, neurotic, poor, rich, angry, lazy, sad, silly, serious, manic, or depressed?

God needs you.

If Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Peter and Photini can be servants of God,
so can you.

This is true of many saints, by the way.

It's generally agreed that Saint Francis was impossible to live with.

No doubt there are many pleasant, patient, compassionate, wise saints as well,
people passionately advocating for justice
and infinitely fun to be around.

...well, maybe not many, but a few.

And again, that's not the point.

They are not saints because they are perfect,
they are saints because we can see God working through them.

You, too can be a saint.

No one better.

Really.

Step one: see that this is a possibility and talk to God about it.

Ask, seek, pray.

Say, "God, make the world better through me"
and see what happens.

The Pharisees thought they saw clearly
and so they were blind.

They stopped asking and so they stopped hearing answers.

The blind man suffered,

but God saw his suffering and used it to make the world a better place.

You can do this as well.

You can be a witness to suffering,
and you can work to redeem it.

Look at the world and say, "What can I do?"

Try stuff and see what happens.

You will make mistakes.

Bad mistakes.

That's what happens.

But also, a little grace, a little improvement, a little light shining through.

Maybe you've started already.

I think you've started already.
I know you've started already.
That's alright, too.
Maybe you're perfect. No worries.
 That's not the point.
 The point is what comes next.