

Lent 4 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Last week we talked about the scrutinies. How three great stories from the gospel according to John were used by the early Christians for spiritual examination in the weeks leading up to Easter. And those three great stories are: Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well; Jesus and the man born blind; and Jesus and the raising of Lazarus. In each of these stories Jesus has meaningful dialog with someone, and they usually exhibit uncommon insight as they come to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

And so through the ages, Christians and would-be Christians have meditated upon these stories. Hoping to engage with Jesus and to find uncommon insight and a deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

“Insight” is one of those great words in English that means multiple things, and in meaning multiple things, it ties some things together. The original, literal meaning of “insight” is that it is the sight that originates within a person. Looking and seeing with the mind, not the eyes. Kind of like extra-sensory perception. Beyond the senses. Beyond the sense of sight. So insight originally meant the kind of seeing that we do with our heart, our minds, our faith. And not with our eyes.

But then it changed over time. And instead of meaning the sight that originates within, it meant the sight that can see *into*. That’s why in modern usage, insight is almost always followed by the preposition *into*. We want insight into the workings of a virus. Or we want insight into a person’s motivations. Or we seek insight into the Bible, or the Creeds, or the mind of God.

So insight is this double-edged word in the English language. It originally meant where you look *from*. And now it usually means where you look *to*. In our readings today, insight is contrasted with other types of vision. It is contrasted with narrow vision. It is contrasted with worldly vision. And it is contrasted with stubborn vision.

Insight. In contrast to narrow vision. Our gospel begins with this question from the disciples: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The man at the center of the story was born blind. He didn’t lose his sight due to disease or accident. He was born that way. You can see from a certain point of view that being born with a disability or a disfigurement or a disadvantage might seem more tragic. It’s easier to accept that bad things

happen once a life is under way. But it's harder to accept a bad thing that afflicts a person before their life even begins.

And so the disciples are asking that if this man was born blind, before he even had a chance to do anything to deserve blindness. And there's a background for the disciples. A background called the Ten Commandments. *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.* Whatever you make of that, it seems to indicate that the sins of the parents will be visited upon the children and the grandchildren. So the disciples of Jesus perhaps have this in mind.

But Jesus says, No. *Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.* So the question is "A or B?" And Jesus' answer is neither. The disciples are using narrow vision. And Jesus is using insight. Narrow vision is when we see something and we make it conform to our expectation and our understandings. Humans have a great need to find cause and effect. Science says it's so hard wired that we see it even when it isn't there. If you suffer, it must be because you did something bad. If you are blest, it must be because you did something good. "Not necessarily," says Jesus.

The greatest question in this universe is "Why?" And so great is our yearning for the answer to that question that we miss out on what God is up to. Insight is open to what God is up to. God's works that might be revealed. Narrow vision is too busy imposing answers to truly see. That's insight. In contrast to narrow vision.

And then there's insight in contrast to worldly vision. Our first reading is truly one of my favorites. It's one favorite of just about everyone. Because it's about the youngest boy in a society in which all privilege and prestige goes to the oldest boy. Seniority. And height. The musician Randy Newman had a hit song in 1977. "Short people got no reason to live." It made it to number two on the Billboard Hot 100. Human beings are biased. Usually toward taller people over shorter people. Good looking people over homely people. Sometimes toward lighter skinned people over darker skinned people. So there's that. But there's also some sibling rivalry.

So, in our great first reading from First Samuel, Samuel is sent to anoint the next king. And there's some comedy as the tall, oldest brother comes first. And the father goes down the list through all the sons. It's the lowest and the least and the last, the shepherd boy, that will become king. And what a king! King David! The uniter of the tribes. The founder of Jerusalem. A great king. But short! And last in line. The treasure in this particular story is God's declaration: *Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him [the oldest brother]; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance,*

but the Lord looks on the heart. People look on the outward appearance. But the Lord looks on the heart. Worldly vision. Versus insight!

And third and last, the Bible contrasts insight with stubborn vision. The villains in our gospel story are the Pharisees and the synagogue leaders. The episode ties them in knots, revealing their self-contradictions. It has very serious consequences because the man who was born blind is cast out of the synagogue— excommunicated— which was a very bad fate for someone in his society. Even if he had gained his physical vision.

The villains in our gospel are stubborn. They can't see a good thing when it happens miraculously in their midst. They are so hung up on the status of Jesus, and on the proper observance of the sabbath (Once again, the Ten Commandments are employed to justify a lack of vision). The story ends with Jesus declaring to them: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." Insight versus stubborn vision.

He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. And God's works were revealed. In the blind man. But those who have functioning eyes still fail to see the work of God. Because they are stubborn. Their sin remains.

So on our Lenten journey toward Easter, today's gospel is a scrutiny. It examines us and asks us in what ways we might be blind. Do you want insight? Do you want the gift of light that comes with baptism? Then beware of your tendency to have narrow vision. Beware of your tendency to have worldly vision. And beware of your tendency to have stubborn vision. Elsewhere Jesus speaks of those who have eyes but do not see. Who have ears but do not hear. Sometimes our eyeballs may even see God at work, but our false vision prevents us from knowing God. As we journey toward the promise of new life, God give us the insight to perceive his ways. Amen.