

Fourth Sunday of Lent/March 26, 2017

Psalm 23; John 9:1-41;

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"Denying the Light"

Another intriguing story from John's gospel. Here we have Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem, for the festival of Tabernacles or Booths, a time remembering the wilderness wanderings of Israel, and an autumn thanksgiving celebration. It would have been a happy, celebratory atmosphere. Jesus had been teaching at the Temple, surprising many because it was known that the religious authorities were out to arrest him. And so, we assume he is near the Temple again when they see the blind man, as the passage mentions the pool of Siloam, which was at the base of the mount upon which the Temple stood.

Now John is continuing this theme that he has been using, that Jesus is the "Light of the world", and in using this metaphor, raises up the contrast between light and darkness. We saw this in the story of Nicodemus, who comes in the darkness of night to speak to Jesus, suggesting that Nicodemus (and the other religious leaders whom he represents) is in the dark about who Jesus really is. Because of his inability to understand Jesus' words that he must be "born again" or "born from above" in order to see the kingdom of God, he cannot see the light that Jesus has for him.

Likewise, in the story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, John uses the contrast of light and darkness again as he places this story in the bright, hot, sun of noontime. Here Jesus meets and talks with a person whom by Jewish cultural standards (she is a woman and a despised Samaritan) he should have no contact with whatsoever. Yet, it is to this marginalized person, outcast even within her own community, that he reveals himself as the promised Messiah, and she becomes the first evangelist in the gospel of John, going and telling the people of her community about Jesus, saying, *"Could he be the Christ?!"*

So here, in today's story, we have a man who lives in darkness. He is blind. Has been blind from birth. But we will learn as the story continues, that he is the least blind of many. First we will have the disciples. The disciples see him as a theological test case about sin. *"Who sinned . . ."* they ask Jesus, *". . . this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*. Jesus responds, *"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."*

The disciples show that they are in the dark as they treat this man as an object to be studied, and not as a person in need, a child of the kingdom of God. Jesus on the other hand, interacts with him immediately, even physically touching him. He makes mud by spitting on the ground, places it on the man's eyes and sends him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Jesus seeks to literally bring this man out of the darkness and into the light.

John then introduces us to the second group who seem to be in the dark. The blind man's neighbors. He comes back from the pool, now able to see, and you would think that his neighbors, those who have seen him, probably sitting and begging in the same place every day, who know him better than anyone, would be excited for him, would be rejoicing at his new found sight! Right? But instead, they question whether it is even him or not? *"Isn't that the guy who used to sit and beg here? It looks like him, but how can that be?"* He explains to them how he received his sight, but they prefer to stumble in the darkness of their doubt and uncertainty, rather than look into the light of what has happened to him.

So now John has them lead him to the Pharisees, the next group who is stuck in darkness. John tells us that the sign Jesus did (John calls these "signs", not "miracles", because they point to who Jesus really is), was

done on the Sabbath. This is so the Pharisees have something to complain about, some reason to condemn what Jesus has done. They too, fail to recognize the wonderful thing that has happened to the man. They are looking for proof that Jesus is a sinner and so want to see the man as a piece of evidence to back up their belief. They ask him to explain how he gained his sight and he tells them, but they are not even willing to hear or believe what he says because it doesn't match up with their already preconceived ideas of who they think Jesus is. The darkness they choose to live in, keeps them from hearing the truth, and leads them to condemn and cast out a completely innocent man.

The other group John includes in those who are in the dark, are the man's parents. It is hard to believe his own parents wouldn't support him. Their darkness is based in fear. They are afraid to speak their truth because they're afraid to be thrown out of their religious tradition, afraid to have to undergo the persecution their son is experiencing. Their darkness keeps them from standing by his side, protecting him, or even knowing and sharing in the joy of his new found sight and the freedom he now is experiencing.

Finally, after being cast out of the synagogue, Jesus seeks him out. And upon telling him who he is, the man believes in Jesus as the "Son of humanity", the "Son of God." Not only has he gained a physical ability to see, but now a spiritual ability to see, to recognize the light of the world, which John has clearly spelled out, is Jesus.

Throughout his gospel, John seems to be telling us, telling his own faith community, that it is in the outcasts among us, the marginalized, the weak, the foreigner, the ill, those the establishment, who hold power over them, deem as "sinners" and "untouchables", those who are seen as living in darkness, it is to these that Jesus comes, it is in them that he makes God's power known, and it is through them that the light of God, the love of Christ, shines most brightly.

During this season of Lent, as in every other time of the year, we who are called Christian, who follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, we, like the members of John's community who looked for themselves in the characters of this story, need to look at ourselves. We need to ask ourselves, what darkness might we be living in? Do we, like the disciples distance ourselves from others, especially those different from us? Do we objectify or speak about others as if they were nothing, or worse, as enemies we would wish harm upon? Do we act like the neighbors in this story, caught up in the issues of our time, but neglecting the real relationships we are called to nurture with one another? Do we act like the Pharisees, making judgments and condemning those we don't understand? Do we plug our ears when what is being said does not match our own views or positions, or when it threatens our need to be in control of things? Are we open to hearing the real facts, do we pursue truth and justice, or do we believe only in what fits our needs or benefits our privileged status? Or is our darkness like that of the man's parents, whose fear kept them from showing the faithful and enduring love that they could have given him. Does our fear keep us from speaking up, from doing the right thing, from risking our own selves for the sake of others?

We need to look into our own darkness to see who we truly are. Ignoring it leads to nothing. Only continued darkness and a denial of the light that shines around us. Now, the darkness can seem like a scary place to go, but if we can see our darkness as a place of God's fertile and nourishing soil, if we can enter it with the hope of a transformation and new birth that await us, then we can be like that seed, that bulb, that is put underground only to feel the life and energy of a new way of being, bubbling up inside us, as we reach up and out to the warmth and light that God is pouring upon us. The light that we experience through one another, which is the life and love of Christ Jesus, who knew the pain of his own darkness and the garden of his own Easter, of which we are called to share. May we, in the days to come, yearn and seek to break free from our own darkness, our own blindness, and may we carry the light of the world, into all the world. Amen.