

1 Sam 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
Jn. 9:1-41

Lent 4A
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St. Peter's Cathedral
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The Next Chapter

Jesus is someone who said such wonderful things and did such amazing things that as he walked the streets of Jerusalem, people followed him. In our gospel reading, we see Jesus walking those streets; we can imagine the limestone walls of houses and businesses rising up on either side of the road. As he walks, Jesus notices a blind man, a beggar.

The disciples have been hanging out with Jesus for a while now, but their reflexive action -- when they see the man -- is to attribute blame. They do not look him in the eye or learn his name. They ask, "what did he do wrong that put him on the street with a cardboard sign?" ("Does he have drinking problem? "Was his mom an addict when she was pregnant?" "On whom can we blame this injustice?")

Jesus doesn't reveal the man's story to us or to the disciples. He doesn't say, "well, his situation is really more complicated than what you're imagining." Jesus says, instead, to pay attention. The blind man's story will open our eyes to God's purposes, God's action, in our time and place.

Like me, the disciples are practiced at averting their eyes in uncomfortable situations. They know when to look down, when to avoid eye contact. But now, they can't look away. Their attention is focused on Jesus as he draws near to the man who was begging. Jesus, the creator of the universe is crouching in the dirt, spitting on the ground, making a paste, a salve for the blind man's eyes. The man - whose name we never hear - can't see color, or look into his parents' eyes, or take in the beauty of the hills surrounding Jerusalem. As Jesus touches him, he dares to hope that the creator of the universe isn't done with creation yet.

There Jesus is, reaching out to touch the blind man's eyes. This is not a televised faith healing with Benny Hinn. There is no studio audience. The blind man is sent to feel his way, eyelids caked with mud, to the south end of Jerusalem. I guess he went by himself. I'm sure his mind was filled with wonderings and second guesses and hopes and disappointments as he walked. Maybe he felt embarrassed about the attention that he had just received. Then, the text says, "he went and washed and came back able to see" (9:7).

It seems like the story should be over, but its not. This healing is just the beginning of the blind man's friendship with Jesus.

I want to ask you to leave the newly healed man here with Jesus, so that we can travel back with me to an even more ancient time. We're going time before the temple was built, when the people of God were just sorting out what it might mean for them to be a people with a king. After Saul, David - a young guy, a man after God's own heart - was pulled out of the fields and the weather, away from the smell of the sheep, and was anointed by Samuel to be the next king of Israel. David's story can be found in 1st

and 2nd Samuel; it is long, and exceptional for its time as one of just a few ancient text that provides a detailed, slow moving account of a character's life. In 1st and 2nd Samuel, we see chapter after chapter of David's life as king, of David's life with God. Throughout the story, David is a larger than life character and as we turn the pages, Scripture makes clear that David's story, especially in "the unresolved tensions and contradictions" of his life with God,¹ is so much more textured and complex than what we imagine at the beginning of the story when we hear the beloved story of the shepherd boy anointed to serve as Israel's king. And in the pages of David's, we see snatches of our own lives: he his full of self-indulgence and doubt, anxiety and ambition. And also like us, David is chosen to be an intimate friend of God.

As we hear these two stories today, of a man who was blind and now sees, of a shepherd boy anointed to be king and I'm asking you to resist the temptation to believe that the next line in both of these stories is, "they lived happily every after." I'm asking you to resist the inclination to believe that, "I was blind and now I see" is all the story there is to tell. In these two stories, we see just the title page, perhaps the first chapter of a story that unfolds over time with depth and complexity in the healed man's life, in David's life, just like your story of friendship with God. Just like mine.

It's Camp Marshall Sunday (Camp Marshall is our diocesan summer camp located near Polson, on Flathead Lake) and several years before I came to be a Camp Director, when I was serving as a parish priest, I read a short story, a fictional story called "Personal Testimony."² In it, Ellen Whitmore, a 12 year old camper, cultivates a business writing testimonies for other kids at a Baptist camp in Texas. In the story, Ellen says, "the idea of my writing testimonies for other campers - a sort of ghostwriting service for Jesus - was Bobby Dunn's - but before we got up from the table, I had refined it and made it mine. The next afternoon in the arts and crafts cabin I had made my first sale: five dollars for a two minute testimony detailing how God gave Michael Bush the strength to stop swearing." So, Ellen receives orders at camp and she begins to write. She charges between \$5 and \$25 to pass on a believable story about how her peers' lives were supposed to have been transformed by the Spirit; their own versions of, "I was blind but now I see."

Over the course of the camp session, Ellen makes more than \$300, which she tucks between the pages of her Bible. When I came to work at Camp Marshall, Ellen's enterprise selling testimonies out of the arts & crafts cabin was on the slide reel of Things That Might Possibly go Terribly Wrong at Camp (the one that plays over and over again in my head at 3am). Even outside of a camp setting, Ellen's thriving business resonates with a desire maybe some of us have had. We long for an intelligible and succinct story of faith for our own peace of mind, so that we can track the exposition-climax-resolution of our faith stories coherently, so that we can be assured

¹ See Ellen F. Davis. "God's House" in Ellen F. Davis and Austin McIver Dennis. *Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

² Lynna Williams. *Things Not Seen and Other Stories*. (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1993).

this trust in God is reasonable. We also long for our friends and colleagues and families to be able to make sense of, to be able to digest our love for God. (Maybe, some of us long for a coherent story of faith so deeply, we'd pay a ghostwriter for it!)

Over the last few years, I've prayed and hoped and seen that Camp Marshall is a place that is a bit different from that camp in Texas, a place where campers do step into friendship with God that is rich, vibrant, and hopeful. And as they return year after year, as they join our staff, I pray that they live into the reality that our friendship, our life with God continues and deepens over time. We have a staff application system online, and in the box that asks, "why do you want to work at Camp Marshall?" nearly every staff application I received this year read, "I want to work with you because I want to grow in faith. I want to step into the next chapter in my life with God, and I need a context and a community for that work." The young adults applying to work at Camp Marshall recognize that they can't do it alone.

Let's go back to Jerusalem, where Jesus is still with the healed man and some others on the street.

"Did he just get healed?" "No, that's not what happened." "That can't have happened." "That's not even the same guy..." "And it's the Sabbath!"

To those who are gathered, the healing becomes confusing and laden with possible threat. The man who is no longer blind, no longer a beggar, repeats, "I went and washed and received my sight." Questions and accusations and threats of alienation take shape, and the religious professionals of his day boot the formerly blind man out to the margin of his community for a second time. First, he was on the edge of his community because he was blind and begging, and now, he is expelled for being healed by Jesus.

Jesus **sees** the healed man again. Jesus sees that he has been driven out of the synagogue and Jesus, the Good Shepherd goes to the man and invites him into an even deeper friendship, into a new chapter of faith. Here, the man comes to know Jesus, not only as a healer and a prophet, but also as God, as the One who gives and renews and sustains all of life.

Last year during Senior High camp, two days into the session, a couple of young men came to me a confused and upset. During the previous school year, they had been intentionally walking in friendship with God, part of their parish, working to become people of prayer. An awful, destabilizing event took place in their high school and small town and they had begun to question their own "I was blind but now I see" stories of faith, they weren't sure about prayers that had become so familiar they weren't sure what the words meant.

We know what that's like.

- maybe, as with the healed man, others question our experience of faith,
- maybe we can't quite remember what it was like when God really did show up (- were we just imagining it?),
- maybe the prayers that once were so meaningful now fall flat on our lips and in our hearts,

- maybe, like David, we have not been delivered from our enemies and our foolishness and our troubles like we imagined we would be.

At camp, these young men were part of a worshipping community where daily, in prayer and conversation and reflection with others, they began to cultivate imagination to embrace the freshness, the challenge, the hope that the next chapters in their friendship with God might hold. They began to see that their experience of pain and confusion was an invitation into a new chapter of their life of faith, a deeper and more mature friendship with God.

St. John of the Cross says that a context like this, a context of confusion and loss of understanding, faith becomes possible. Faith does not look like a systemic, assured argument for our life with God. In a space where we feel we have lost our bearings, faith is the possibility of trusting in a presence, “an ‘other’ who does not change or go away...” That is why we come to this table, and receive the bread and the wine: to find our faith strengthened, to meet and be nourished by the Good Shepherd. Over time we see that “when the signs and landmarks have been taken away there is a presence that does not let [us] go. And that is faith,”³ says Rowan Williams.

David, the boy who became king, named this presence, “the Good Shepherd;” the one who calls each of his sheep by name, who spreads out a table of sustenance even in places of conflict and division, who may draw near to us – as he did with the healed man – in the midst of pain, confusion, and disappointment. The Good Shepherd is with us. The Good Shepherd gives us everything we need to be God’s friends. If this is true, and we must grow to accept (as we come to receive our cabinmates at camp, despite their smelly feet or quirky glasses,) that one of the gifts God has given us in making us his friends, are the others in this room, the people who share this table.

Any experienced writer will tell you that “the development of relationship creates plot,”⁴ The pages in the story of our friendship with God will only begin to turn when they’re given a concrete setting, and when we risk inviting others into the uncertain telling and the living of this story of friendship. The pages of the story will begin to turn when we can work to recognize that other people – even people in this room – might be characters in it.

At the end of his gospel, St. John, who gives us the story of the blind man healed, describes a world that cannot contain all of the books, all of the chapters written about the Good Shepherd who keeps seeing us, who keeps showing up, who continues to call us into deeper and richer friendship. What St. John doesn’t say is that writing a new story – even when it’s God’s story – is hard work. It is work that requires us to open ourselves to the relationships that turn the pages of the story. Even the ones we encounter at coffee hour. *Amen.*

³ Rowan Williams. *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 27.

⁴ Anne Lamott. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 55.