

**Sermon for March 19, 2023—“Here’s Mud in Your Eyes!”**

Texts: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

“Surely we are not blind are we?”

The question was put to Jesus by Pharisees who, on one hand, could see quite well in a physical sense. Their problem was that they had absolutely no clue when it came to seeing God’s activity in their midst. Oh yeah, they could see alright, but they were blind to everything God was doing before their very eyes.

On the other hand, the gospel reading tells us about a man who was blind from birth, and received his sight from Jesus. In the end, however, he gained much more than physical sight when he gained his sight in a **spiritual** way for the very first time. In other words, it’s possible to be able to see physically, while at the same time being blind to spiritual things.

The religious authorities that Jesus confronted were so religiously hard-headed, and spiritually blind that they were inwardly, and spiritually blind. Jesus had to get through some pretty thick skulls before it dawned on these idiots that he was talking about them! “Surely we are not blind, are we?” they ask. Well duh!

I remember a conversation that I had with a colleague several years ago. He called me, and really poured out his heart. He admitted that he was a workaholic. He also admitted that he was becoming increasingly distant from wife and family, and that his marriage might be in jeopardy. He’d gotten himself into a vicious circle whereby the harder that he told himself he was working for the people he loved most, the further away from them he grew.

His job had become an obsession. His efforts to provide for those he loved only drove the wedge between he and his family deeper. He said, “I’ve lost sight of everything that matters most!” He’d lost his vision, his ability to see what’s really important—the true purpose and meaning of life. Now that’s one kind of spiritual blindness.

There’s another kind, a second kind that has more to do with the incessant searching people do when they are trying to find purpose or direction in their lives. Nothing seems to fit, or add up. This feeling of being lost is reminiscent of an old Peanuts comic strip, where Charlie Brown is saying, “I feel like I was born on the wrong planet!” The emotional sense is one of groping around in the dark.

There’s an amazing story in chapter eight of John’s gospel where a woman had been groping around in the darkness of her life. You probably know it, it’s the story of the woman caught in adultery. Once again, the story has the religious authorities in conflict with Jesus. They gather to see if he’ll enforce the death penalty against the woman.

But, of course, Jesus isn’t in the condemnation business, and so instead of condemnation, he offers an opportunity for new living. Jesus uses the woman’s situation as a mirror which he holds up to the crowd. **“Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone.”** As it turns out, all of them—especially the outwardly religious—are walking around in spiritual darkness.

Jesus then says to the gathered crowd, and especially to the Pharisees, **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”** The Light that not only illuminates, the path we tread, but the Light that is life itself. **“Follow me,”** Jesus says, **“and you will have the life you were designed to live.”**

To follow Christ is to develop clarity about who we are, and who we are meant to be—who we are created and called to be. The first letter of John is clear on the issue of choosing to follow Christ, or to put it another way, to choose light over darkness. Once we encounter the good news about Jesus Christ groping in the darkness is no longer an unfortunate circumstance—it's a choice. In that first letter, John writes:

**“God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”**

During these Lenten days, we draw ever closer to the day of greatest darkness—that day is Good Friday, the day when darkness covered all of Jerusalem, the day that the “Light of the World” was briefly extinguished. Yet, as John's gospel says, **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”**

You see, God's good purposes for our lives are that we have light for living, and a deep sense of knowing why we are here. To that question, the Westminster catechism states: **“The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.”** In order to arrive at our “chief end,” or essential purpose, we need the light of Christ that leads us out of darkness.

There's still another kind of blindness, a third kind, that keeps us from the fullness of God's purpose for our lives. Our reading from 1 Samuel, goes to the heart of this kind of darkness, the darkness of mistaken perception. When we're overly focused on outward appearances, we're vulnerable to this blindness.

Even Samuel, the great servant of God found himself mistaking the apparent for the real. The story fits well with the Pharisees who didn't get the point with the healing of the blind man. But doesn't that happen to us sometimes? Isn't it true that we sometimes are so blind that we miss the point? If we're honest with ourselves we know it is—and guess what?

Anytime we're so sure of our opinions, our beliefs, and set in our understandings, those are the times that we're sure to create darkness for ourselves. And if we stubbornly cling to our own understandings and allow our opinions to harden, refusing to change our minds, or our ways of thinking—what happens? Well, we gradually close the door to the light that comes from beyond us.

Please be aware of a critical danger here! We're all vulnerable to this! Trust me, it's true! Anyone can take something that's gospel truth, internalize it, and mix it with personal preconceived ideas; that is, their own understandings, despite the bible's warning against that, and thus slam the door to further insight from the Holy Spirit, and turn what was once truth into darkness. This is exactly what happened to the Pharisees. They took the Law given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai, they mixed it with their own interpretation, personal pre-conceived ideas, cultural biases and prejudices, and shut the door to any new insight from God. Jesus, in one of his more scathing attacks on twisted religion said that these folks were, as Matthew puts it, **“...blind leaders of the blind.”**

Then there's our first reading, the story of Samuel's search for the one who would become king of Israel is one that took place over twenty five hundred years ago. The lesson it teaches, however, is as fresh as the day that God told Samuel what was missing in his perception. Samuel was grieving over the fact that God was going to take the throne away from Saul.

Samuel's attachment to Saul and his clinging to what **he** wanted instead of what **God** wanted brought about a kind of darkness to his spirit. When God sent him to the home of Jesse in Bethlehem to anoint the next king of Israel something surprising happened. As it turns out you can't judge a book by its cover. We know this. We know that outward appearances can be deceiving. You see, God had told Samuel that he'd show him which son of Jesse would become king.

So, when Samuel laid eyes on the impressive Eliab he thought, "This is the new king for sure!" God's response to Samuel is classic. It addresses a key factor in spiritual blindness. It's something every one of us can take to heart and use to do a quick analysis of our own way of looking at the world.

**"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.'"**

Therein lies the lesson: God doesn't see things the way we do! Even though the intention here was that God looks at the human heart while we look at outward appearances, the fact remains that God sees all kinds of things differently than we do.

We often miss the significance of a person to God because they're not significant to the world, or to us personally. We miss the joy of a child's capacity for play and laughter because we're engrossed in "important" things. We watch the news, we read the newspaper, and somehow fail to see abject poverty, homelessness, the desperate conditions of much of the world, let alone the community right outside our door.

And what of Christ? It's altogether fitting that we ask ourselves whether we really and truly are seeing the Savior who came to bring us light. I wonder: Is it possible that we've grown so accustomed to the prayers, to the hymns, and words of scripture, that we miss Christ himself—the blazing truth of his incarnation, not to mention that of his death and resurrection?

Wouldn't it be great if during this Lenten season we could finally open up our hearts, minds, and spirits to see the life changing, world transforming, power of the fact that Christ came to take the darkness of this world upon himself. And as the darkness is taken into the light of Christ, it becomes no darkness at all. The Psalmist captured the heart of how God's light overcomes all darkness:

**"If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you. 'The night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.'"**

As we understand and embrace this truth, we might even come close to the experience of the man in John's gospel who—though born blind—was able to see again. His healing was a cause of rejoicing for him, and his family, and for the ordinary people who'd known him. However, it was just another ordinary day at the office for the Pharisees, another occasion for the deepening of their darkness, and so, rather than rejoicing in the work God was doing they actually threw the man out of the temple. The amazing thing is that the man who'd been born blind lost nothing; nothing except for his physical blindness, and the spiritual darkness of the Pharisees who couldn't see—trained religious leaders who were supposed to have known better, who should've been able to see. Then, having gained his physical sight, he came to see something far more valuable. Listen once more...

**“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.”**

The man who was blind from birth saw again for the very first time! **“And he worshiped him.”** May God give us the grace to open our hearts and minds to the life changing light of Christ, so that we too may renew our vision, and worship the One who came to give us light; a light that did not—that absolutely cannot—be overcome by darkness.

And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: When Christ truly dwells within us; when our lives are open to his life-changing presence, darkness cannot dwell in us because there is no darkness where Christ is! The light of Christ literally **is** life!

Therefore, I urge you, as Paul urged the church in Ephesus, in our second reading, **“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”**

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.