Spirituality
Scripture for Life



"Jesus Healing the Blind and the Lame," an 1817 painting by François-Louis Dejuinne (Artvee)



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On the Fourth Sunday of Lent parishes preparing people for baptism will celebrate the second of three "scrutinies." The word "scrutiny" comes from Latin and French and refers to what we might call dumpster diving, the work of folks who look for valuables in what others have thrown away. This call to learn what to save and what to let go, how to distinguish treasure from trash, frames today's Liturgy of the Word.

We begin about 1,000 years before the time of Christ with God's surprising choice of the boy David to be Israel's king. In a society that prized the firstborn, warriors and wise men, Samuel had to accept and defend God's "scrutinizing" choice of a mere kid to be secretly anointed as successor to Saul. About the only thing more unexpected would have been for Samuel to anoint a woman — but would have been too much for a people who believed that military victories proved God's favor. (Joan of Arc would not appear for another 2,400 years.)

The choice of David and the statement that God sees differently than we do is the setup for the story of the healing of the man born blind. Now the core question is, "What are we supposed to see?"

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2023

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Unlike the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus says little and does much, John's Gospel offers lots more talk than action, and even the action stories have so many layers of meaning that they read like discourses. This story opens with the statement that Jesus saw a man who had been blind from birth, a malady the disciples understood as a punishment meted out on either the man or his parents. Jesus adjusted their perspective, explaining that God doesn't see things as human beings do. With a

statement that Paul repeated by saying that for those who love God, all things work for good (Romans 8:28), Jesus said that the man's condition would show forth the works of God.

That was Jesus' subtle foreshadowing of all that was about to follow: He was continuing God's work of creation. To illustrate that, mimicking the creation of Adam from the river-watered dust (Genesis 2:6), Jesus made clay to use like chrism on the man's eyes. Jesus then told him to wash, and that washing opened the man's eyes.

It's hard to imagine this fellow's experience of new sight. Years ago, the movie "At First Sight" depicted the agonizing experience of a young man, blind from the age of 3, whose sight was surgically restored. Although he could see, his brain could not decode the images before him. He couldn't make sense of the world he had learned to navigate by touch and sound. That's the extreme experience John describes here. It's a wonderful thing to see, but our newly sighted friend had to totally reorient himself to "live in the light."

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Even as he was reestablishing his identity, the people around him were annoyed. Religious leaders debunked Jesus, asserting that God would never sanction work on the Sabbath. The fellow's parents were too afraid of repercussions to take a stand on what had happened. In the end, only the fellow himself gave testimony, realizing in the process that nobody wanted to believe that Jesus had done him good. But the man saw one thing clearly: Jesus could not have healed him "if he were not of God."

This fellow, nameless so that everyone can recognize themselves in him, knew nothing about Jesus, except that he did him good. As he went through the process of gaining a new perspective and being persecuted for it, he understood ever more clearly that the one who had healed him on the Sabbath was doing the work of God. Jesus had opened his eyes to new dimensions of God's goodness — and that was what got him into trouble.

After the poor fellow had been questioned, abandoned by his parents, and excommunicated, Jesus found him again. This time, Jesus explained that, unlike the others, the fellow was a successful scrutinizer. When Jesus assured him that he had encountered the "Son of Man," the man bowed down in worship.

What about us? Baptism (washing), symbolic of death and rising, is our sacrament of reorientation. Unfortunately, many of us who were baptized as infants have learned to protect our inherited perspectives, resisting even miracles if they challenge our comfortable patterns of thinking and acting.

This Sunday, we can't help but hear this Gospel as an invitation to scrutinize our perspectives, sort through our presuppositions and see what should be discarded and what new insights might be hidden in unexpected, even unwanted places. True, choosing to try to learn God's perspective will cause great disorientation, but the option is to choose self-imposed blindness.

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