

LENT 4A - 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41 - 2 March 2008 - A sermon preached by The Rev. Peter A. Munson for St. Ambrose Episcopal Church, Boulder, Colorado

How Do You See?

INTRODUCTION - Seeing and not seeing

All of our lessons today have something to do with seeing, and a couple of them also stress what can keep us from seeing, too. Let's take a look...

1 Samuel

The Lord told the prophet, Samuel, that it was time to find a new king for Israel, and that the king would come from one of Jesse's sons. We learn that for Samuel, at least, a big part of his seeing had to do with listening - to paying attention to the words and direction he heard from God. When the first of Jesse's sons was paraded in front of Samuel, something about Eliab grabbed Samuel. Eliab was evidently quite a specimen. And Samuel thought to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed [the Messiah] is now before the Lord." (1 Samuel 16:6) But then Samuel heard the Lord say, "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." (verse 7)

Samuel was making a judgment based on his first impression of how Eliab looked, but instantaneously, the Lord jumped in and taught Samuel a new lesson about seeing.

This is us, a lot of the time, isn't it? We either like the way someone looks, or don't like the way someone looks, but either way, we often rush to judge what someone is like based on how he or she looks. How many people do we totally ignore because we don't like the way they look? How many people do we go out of way to try to meet because we do like the way they look? How many of us take the time to think to ourselves, "I wonder what that person is made of. I wonder what kind of substance and character he/she has."

Part of seeing in new ways has to do with learning how God sees things. Fortunately, we get lots of instruction in how God see things in the Bible.

Psalm 23

In what may very well be the most famous of the 150 Psalms in the Bible, what do we learn about how the Psalmist sees?

He begins by saying that he sees the Lord as a shepherd who provides for all of his wants, so that he lacks nothing. He goes on to elaborate. The Lord provides for his physical needs. (verse 2) The Lord provides for his spiritual needs and guides him so that he can live a moral life. (verse 3)

He sees a Lord who is present with him, not just in the good times, but also through all the hard places - and even the dark places - of his life. He sees a God who provides for him, even in the midst of trouble. He sees a God who *keeps* providing for him, so that the blessings are innumerable, like an overflowing cup. Finally, he ends up back where started. He will not be in want, for God's goodness and mercy are with him always.

This is a Psalm where we learn how people see things when they have a great trust in the Lord.

Ephesians 5

In Ephesians we are reminded that once you have the Lord in your life, there is a Light that helps you see all things in new ways. The Ephesians are encouraged to come to the Light, to remain in the Light, and to expose everything - including themselves - to the Light that is the Light of Christ. And then they will discover what is pleasing to the Lord, and what isn't.

John 9

Finally, we have the entire ninth chapter of John's Gospel. There is a lot to learn about seeing - and about not seeing - in this chapter.

We learn that some people see by holding on to things that they have been taught - either from the Scriptures, or from their religious teachers - no matter what. There isn't room for any gray. There isn't room for questioning and wondering if God might be revealing something new. It's been revealed for all time - period - and that is how I will see things. End of discussion.

For example, if someone has been born blind, there is sin involved. Someone is to blame - either the parents or the child. (John 9:2, 34) For another example, if you heal on the sabbath, you're still a sinner, because you are breaking the sabbath law about not doing any work. You can't be from God, or one of the people of God, if you break the sabbath law. (verses 16, 24)

What goes along with this way of seeing, of course, is the certainty that you know who is a sinner and who is righteous. Sometimes we are quick to judge others, or we can't see the new ways God is breaking into our world, because we are too locked into the way we see the world. Our vision is too black and white, and because of that, we have some very real blind spots.

There are others in the story of Jesus and the healing of the blind man whose vision is affected by their overall tendency to be skeptical. Some of the people asked the blind man how he had received his sight. He told them what had happened. In fact, it says, "He *kept* saying, 'I am the man.'" (verse 9) - that is, the same guy whom you used to see blind, and begging. And then, when they finally heard the same story from his parents, and they believed that he was the man who had been born blind, they were skeptical that Jesus had anything to do with it. "Give glory to God. We know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner." (verse 24)

Sometimes, our skepticism keeps us from seeing.

There are others in the story who ask questions. They allow their curiosity and openness to be a tool for learning, to seeing in new ways. "The neighbors and those who had seen him as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?'" (verse 8) "Then they kept asking him, 'How were your eyes opened?'"

If we want to really see, and really understand, sometimes what is required - more than anything - is that we keep asking questions, and keep wondering, and keep looking for answers.

There are others in the story - namely, the man's parents - whose fear affects their vision. "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." We are told, "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." (verses 20-22)

Sometimes we don't say what we really believe; we don't fully disclose; we don't say how we really see things, because our fear gets ahold of us, and it gets in the way of us being honest.

And finally, sometimes we speak honestly, even boldly, because how we see things is based on a transformative encounter with God. Did you notice how the man who receives his sight gets bolder and bolder as the conversation continues? How come? Because he can't deny what has happened to him, that's why. Even when they try to bait him, and get him to say that Jesus is a sinner because he broke the sabbath law, he doesn't bite. "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see." (verse 25) When they kept hammering away at him with the same questions, and not listening, he began to be more incredulous. "Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" (verse 27)

And then later, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (verses 30-33)

He was empowered and convicted by what had happened to him. And he now was not only the beneficiary of having his physical sight, but he was seeing in much deeper ways, too. How did they react? Did they say, "This is amazing - all the ways that you have been transformed! Wow!" Not exactly. They fell right back into the ways they had always seen him. "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out of there. (verse 34)

And so we have, at the end of this story, a cautionary word from our Lord. Beware saying that you see, when you don't. Beware calling others sinners, when you have a log in your own eye - when you have huge blind spots. When you should be calling out to God to help you see things more clearly, and instead you puff yourself up and say, "I see everything perfectly - especially all the people around me who are sinners." Watch out, Jesus says, especially when you get to that point. "Now that you say, "I see," your sin remains." (verse 41)

CONCLUSION

I'd like to conclude our time today by talking about some of the ways that we see God - alive, present, and at work for good in our world.

How do you see God at work in your life, and in the lives of those around you? (Listen for answers)

Lord Christ, we thank you that you are the Light of the world, and that you have come to shine your light on us so that our hearts, our vision, and our very lives can be transformed, so that we begin to see others - and respond to others - as you respond to us. Shine your light on our blind spots. Help us to see what you would have us see, so that we can grow in the ways that you call us to grow. And Lord, most of all, help us *not* to miss all the ways that you show up in our lives, and in our world. Help us to see You! Help us to proclaim to others where we see You in the world. And help us to celebrate your goodness and mercy, all the days of our lives. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.