

Lent 4 A 2017

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

This story of the man born blind,
This is my story,
A woman said to me once,
Long ago and far away.
My terrible and lonely childhood
Was not something I brought upon myself
Through being sinful.
And though my parents surely were sinners
like the rest of us,
Their sin didn't cause the accident
That left me orphaned.
Neither I nor my parents sinned
To make my childhood what it was.
But the power of God for healing
Is clear in how my life has turned out.
I survived.
I made a home and began a new family,
And discovered meaningful work.
I can sleep at night.
I understand what happened
And how it affected me.
I was lost, and am found.
I was blind, but now I see.

In the stories of salvation
There are no words more compelling than these:
I once was lost,
But now I'm found –
Was blind, but now I see.

If you want to know what it means
To move from death to life,
To move from emptiness to fullness,
To find meaning,
To enter into peace,
This is the simplest way to describe it
That I know.
I once was lost,
But now I'm found –

Was blind,
But now I see.

And, I have come to see,
There is no more compelling witness
To this power of God
To bring new life
Out of a dead end
than the man born blind.

In the life-changing encounter
With Jesus he becomes a person
Of courage and conviction.
In him we see the journey
From victim to free and fearless witness.

This is a story
That moves
from a locked down and limited view of the world
To a vision of hope.
It moves from a false certainty
That our suffering
Grows out of our faults
Into a revelation –
God can bring life
Out of anything.

Imagine living in a world
Where everything that happened to you was your fault.
And where any ailment or disability
Was considered a sign of sin.
A world where someone can ask, in all seriousness,
As the hapless disciples do,
Rabbi, who sinned,
This man or his parents,
That he was born blind?

Or where someone says this:
Personally, I blame the parents.
Or – She was asking for it.
Or – They say it's genetic,
But I always think that if you have enough willpower,
You can overcome these things.

Or where we ask ourselves,
What did I do wrong?

If only I had done this,
Or not done that,
Or worked harder
Or been more loving.
Then blindness would not have come upon me;
I would not have gotten lost.

Maybe all this is too much asking.

We like to think that all questions are valid;
In fact in a community like this
That's an article of faith.
We believe that questions are the answer.
But some questions,
It turns out,
Lead us down a path
That turns out to be a dead end.

Who sinned?
Whose fault is it that something bad happened?
Much as I would like to believe
That all questions are worthwhile,
I have come to believe
This question is wrong.

Who sinned,
To make something bad happen?

Once you start on a path like this,
There is no way out,
Or so it seems,
Until Jesus comes along
And shows us the way.

Into the middle of this mess
Into the middle of a world
Where too many people believe
The randomness and disasters of our lives stem from sin,
Jesus comes.

He breaks through the dead end
And makes a way.

It's not about sin,
He tells the disciples.
It's about the power of God.

Who can say who is,
And who is not, a sinner?
Is that up to us?
If sin is separation from God,
Who but God can say
If we are separated
From the divine source of our lives?
Who but God,
And perhaps we ourselves?
Can others know
Unless we tell them?

Too often the answer has been yes.
Too many people have decided who is sinful
And why.
But the man born blind,
brought into the light by the light of the world,
Learns to discern what is,
And what is not,
The real question.

I do not know whether this man is a sinner,
He says.
All I know is that I was blind,
And now I see.

All I know is that when I met the man called Jesus,
The promises of God
That the prophets dared to speak,
The recovery of sight to the blind,
The ingathering of all the outcasts,
The coming of the reign of God,
All these promises came to life
In my own body.

Who would care to talk about sin
When you could live in the promise instead?

It takes courage to turn away from talk of sin
And speak instead of walking in the light.
The man born blind,
Who began to see,
Shows us the way.

It is up to us to follow.

If we have come to see,
If we have come to find a way,
How will we let it show?

How, like the man born blind,
Will we learn to speak with courage and conviction
Turning our eyes away
From those who would focus on sin
And looking instead to the new life
That we have been given?

There is always a place
Where we can speak with conviction,
Turning the questions about sin
Into a chance to speak of life and strength and healing.

We still live in a world
Where some are in
And some are out,
And where too many people
Make a judgment about who's in and who's out
Based on the question,
Who sinned?

Or, more often now,
who's wrong?
Who's out to get me,
Or mine?

Religious language,
It turns out,
May no longer serve us.

Church attendance has been declining
For decades.
That's not new news.

Now it's plummeting,
And whereas even a few years ago,
It was believed that a growing secularization
Would usher in a new era of tolerance,
The opposite has been true.

The issues and the language have shifted some –
We call people wrong or misguided rather than sinful –

But we are more polarized,
More entrenched in our camps than ever.

We are more set than ever in our own ways.
We are more convinced than ever
That the others are wrong.
We just don't use the word sin as much anymore.

But the vicious in-groups,
The vulnerable out-groups,
Still endure.

It seems that we are locked in a hopeless struggle,
Utterly convinced that others are wrong,
Absolutely dedicated to winning,
Clinging to our causes even if they sink us.

There seems to be no way out.
We are trapped.
We can't see beyond our selves.
We have gone blind.

And that's where the glory of God
Peeking out of the story of the man born blind
Can get us out of a dead end.

It's not really historically accurate or fair,
But the bad guys in this story
Are the Pharisees,
Religious authorities self-appointed to keep the rules,
Especially rules of purity and boundaries
Designed to keep the in group in
And the out group out,
All based on the notion of God's purity.

Those who are out,
Must be inferior in some way.
They must have sinned.

In Jesus' day,
Those with physical disabilities
Were left out.
We would never dream of claiming now
That a physical disability
Was a sign of sin,
Individual or corporate.

But we identify plenty of other others,
Out groups,
Whether we call them sinners
Or something else.

The point is the same.

We can be on the side of rule-keepers,
Line-holders,
In-group maintainers –

Or we can be part of the Jesus movement,
Followers of the radically inclusive rule-breaking
Outsider
Who made room at the table for everyone,
Who reached out and touched the blind,
And made them see,
Who went looking for the lost,
And brought them home,
Who gave glory to God
By letting God into his deepest inner self,
And becoming what he received.

The world is walking away from a religion
Based on in-groups and sin counting.
There is a cost to that.
And there is a promise.

There is still room for the truth.
There is still room for the good news.
There is still room for what we could bring,
We who have remained within the household of Jesus.

There is still room for us to proclaim this truth:
There is more to religion than rule-following;
Compassion will always win out over rules.
We can reach reconciling hands across the chasms that divide us.

If we were willing to be fearless followers
Of the one who made the blind man see,
Even though that broke all the rules,
We could bring a gift to the world.

The world needs us now.
The world needs this story

Of freedom, and fearlessness,
And compassion,
Of boundary breaking
And radical inclusion.

The world needs us
To tell the story
Of how we,
Like generations before us,
Have been made new and whole
Healed and empowered
By the encounter
With the one who brings life.

When the gospel stories come true
In our own lives,
When we stop asking the blaming questions
And claim instead
The power of God to bring life
Anywhere, out of anything,
Then we become free and fearless witnesses,
Who love to tell the story,
I once was lost,
But now am found,
Was blind,
but now I see.

· www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/