

Prayer

What great readings we heard this morning! Four very different stories, or so we think at first... but are they really all that different?

The reading from Chapter 16 of the Book of Samuel, tells a little of the story of Samuel; we don't hear any more about him until chapter 25 when he dies. But in the preceding chapter 15, we learn the reasons leading up to what is happening in the verses we heard this morning. Samuel had been instrumental in appointing judges for the people of Israel; but the people wanted a king, and so eventually God had Samuel anoint Saul as king for the Israelites but Saul's kingship eventually failed. God, through Samuel, gave Saul specific instructions when they went into battle with the Amalekites, and Saul disobeyed... he allowed his people to loot all the best sheep, cattle and valuables and keep the loot for themselves. At the end of Chapter 15, Samuel and Saul part company, with Samuel grieving over the lost relationship, and God sorry he had ever made Saul king.

Here, in this reading today, the prophet Samuel is instructed by God to go to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse and anoint a new king. Samuel is scared... what if Saul hears about this... he'll kill me! Don't you worry about Saul, God says... take a heifer with you and say you have come to perform a sacrificial offering, and invite Jesse and his family... after all, it's only natural for you to perform such a rite, so no one will be any the wiser. So off Samuel goes to Bethlehem, invites Jesse and his family, and goes through the liturgical act of sacrificing the heifer. He informs Jesse of his real purpose and Jesse presents Eliab, his oldest son, a magnificent young man, handsome and upstanding. Samuel wants to anoint him right away and get out of this dangerous position he finds himself in, but God says no, and ends up rejecting seven of Jesse's sons as likely candidates for king.

So who is the most likely candidate? David, the youngest, and from all outward appearances the least king-like person among them, even his own father refers to him as the “runt” of the family. We are familiar with the term “Don’t judge a book by it’s cover”... oftentimes we are blinded by what we see on the outside of a person; we need to stop, think, reflect, and see what is hidden on the inside. As it says in verse 7:... *“for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”*

And Jesus said... The first shall be last, and the last first... (Matthew 19 verse 30.)

Today’s Psalm 23 is the most loved and most well known Psalm of them all – The Lord is My Shepherd.

Yet again we see the dichotomy of “outside” and “inside” in the person of the shepherd.

Herbert O’Driscoll in his commentary *The Word Among Us*, says this:

“in our Lord’s day, shepherding was very low on the occupational scale. Shepherds were generally regarded as misfits, loners, on the edge of society, usually mistrusted, and sometimes – perhaps because of their toughness – feared. Once again, as he has associated with tax gatherers, prostitutes, and Samaritans, Jesus identifies himself with shepherds, thus elevating their role by adding the qualities of caring and responsibility.”

It is this caring which shines through the Psalm... The Lord makes me lie down.. leads me... revives my soul... guides me... is with me... comforts me...anoints me... remains with me always.

Yea though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, says the psalm... which could be speaking of the people of Ephesus! The theme of inside and outside, continues in this Epistle reading from Ephesians, which compares darkness to light.

The Ephesians are a people living in the shadows, in the darkness of wrong-doings... greed, promiscuity, sinister and evil acts, conducted on

the dark side of life. But Paul admonishes them... into this darkness the light of Christ penetrates, the light of everything good and true... "*For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light*" and just as it speaks to those people, in that time, in their circumstances... so it speaks to us today.

Eugene Peterson in the Message writes it this way: "*The bright light of Christ makes your way plain. So no more stumbling around. Get on with it! The good, the right, the true – these are the actions appropriate for daylight hours. Figure out what will please Christ, and then do it*".... The final verse of this passage from Ephesians reads thus: Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

In a few weeks we will be witness to baptism here at the Cathedral. The candidate's family and sponsors will be asked:

Do you renounce Satan and all spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Saviour?

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

Do you promise to obey him as your Lord?

And we, as a congregation will bear witness to these vows...and will promise to do all in our power to support the candidate in their life in Christ. Powerful words, powerful promises.

Later in the service the newly baptized will be given a lit candle, with these words: *Receive the light of Christ, to show you have passed from darkness to light.*"

And we will all say... *“Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”*... more powerful words. We who have received the light of Christ are charged to live as children of light, learning to do what is pleasing to the Lord, to turn against deeds of darkness and expose them... racism, greed, inequality, violence, injustice, deprivation.

Just as for the people in Ephesus, our baptism marks a transition from an old way of life to a new, enlightened existence.

And so we come to the Gospel and it was a long one. Most of us like a good theatrical drama – and here we have one... if you haven't already done so, I encourage all of you to read this chapter...

Like all good stories, this one has it's twists and turns, one minute you think you know what's going on, then the story takes a turn and you think to yourself... what is really going on here?

So what is John telling us in this Gospel story?

Well, I believe the man had faith...there he was minding his own business, when a stranger approached him whom he allowed to smear mud on his eyes, and then followed his instructions to go and wash in the pool... and immediately the man's sight was restored. The man could not see with his eyes, but his heart and mind were open to receive.

The Pharisees see with their eyes, but their hearts are blind. They had “blind faith” in the law of Moses, but their eyes were shut tight against anything new or different; they were blinded to change.

The Pharisees want to discredit this story of healing; Jesus is causing enough problems as it is, drawing great crowds, and the Pharisees believe their power is slipping away from them. In their eyes, Jesus is becoming too powerful, if word gets out about Jesus restoring the sight of this man born blind, his following will increase, the Pharisees will lose

face... especially as this occurred on a Sabbath with no regard to the law they rigorously uphold. This must be stopped in its tracks!

The parents are cagey, covering their own butts, comfortable in their beliefs, in following along with what they're told to believe; don't want to rock the boat, afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue for being a Jesus follower.

What's missing in this story? Where is the rejoicing, the praise, the celebration that this man, blind since birth can now see? We would think it would be party time... but no... there's dispute, discord, dissension and persecution.

In this narrative from John, we don't hear about the blind man himself. How does he feel?

It was mentioned to me that on CBC last week there was a programme about a person who had been blind and regained his sight. He had become so accustomed to relying on his other senses, touch, sound, smell, his insight, that he found it extremely challenging to suddenly live in a world he could see...

What we do know about this young man...is this... he gives a powerful testimony... the man who healed him must be from God to have the power to heal. And in the end, the young man confesses his faith, becomes a believer and worships Jesus.

His eyes were opened in more than just a physical way.

In the few last verses of this Gospel, Jesus tells it like it is to the antagonists, they come under judgement as it is revealed who they truly are.

Jesus is the light, and the light has come into the world. Light comes to those who recognize that life is blindness without Christ, but those who claim to see and live without Christ will continue to live in darkness.

Herbert O'Driscoll puts it this way...

We live in a culture of much intellect and technical knowledge. But there is much that intellect and technical knowledge cannot see, or chooses not to see. The question asked of Jesus by some Pharisees is an eternal question: "*Surely we are not blind, are we?*"

On Friday of last week we had the privilege of witnessing the ordination to the priesthood of two of our own who were Lay Ministers of Word and Sacrament, Martina Duncan and Angus Muir. The Ven. Peter Zimmer gave the sermon, during which he spoke about how an icon is written.

In the preparation of writing an icon, the wood, the base layer of the icon, is coated with several layers of pure white gesso – a mixture of marble powder and glue. The surface is sanded, smoothed and made ready to be written upon. The icon itself is written using earth colours of pure powdered pigment mixed with egg yolk, almost translucent in substance. The icon image is formed layer upon layer of colour whilst the pure brightness of the white will be hidden under the layers of colour placed on top of it, providing depth to the outward appearance; when complete the icon has an almost luminescent appearance, with the colour and form being reflected from the light at it's core... an interesting analogy to us, the layers of our life becoming our exterior persona we present to the world, and the Christ light deep within us.

Do we go out into the world with the Christ light shining from within us? Are we open to seeing the light that may shine from within ourselves, and others? Or are we too blinded and see only what is front of us? Do we banish the darkness in the world around us – the personal blindness, class blindness, racial blindness, political blindness, moral blindness - do we do all we can to live in the light?

"Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Amen.