

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A

First Reading

1 Samuel 16:1–13

The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” And Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you.” Samuel did what the LORD commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, “Do you come peaceably?” And he said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before him.” But 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 sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen these.” Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.” And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah. (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 5:8–14

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness,

but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.” (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 9

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them. So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet.”

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” His parents answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do

not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.” He answered, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” And they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing 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 if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Does anyone else read this passage from 1 Samuel and get disappointed at the end? Eliab has the looks and the presence to be a king, but God says, “Don’t look on the outward appearance. I look on the heart.” So Samuel works his way through all the brothers but one, the one who’s left out doing the dirty, loney job, tending the sheep. And you’re all set for David to be kind of scrawny and unattractive, and for God to say, “See? I choose to work through the ugly duckling!” But no, he’s ruddy, has gorgeous eyes, and he’s handsome to boot. I keep wanting David to be like Paul.

For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” 2 Corinthians 10:10

You know, there’s that whole thing about the weak vessel making the proclamation stronger. “My strength is made perfect in your weakness.” All that stuff.

But no, we get beautiful David.

Which, in a really strange way, makes what God says about Eliab even more striking. The older and more wrinkly I become, the more I want the absence of beauty to be a mark of my value. I still want to look on the outward appearance, if only from a rather backward perspective. And God is reminding me as I type all this that It. Just. Doesn’t. Matter. I can see now how being outwardly beautiful can be just as much a burden in preaching the Gospel as being outwardly unappealing. Both are distractions, and draw attention away from the message, away from the Truth.

What/whose outward appearances can you think of that get in the way of preaching the Gospel?

Second Reading

Before we get to our passage in particular, I’d like to acknowledge that the authorship of Ephesians is a matter of a lot of dispute. I love this letter for many of the things that it says, and I’d very much like to believe that Paul wrote it, but the more that I read it the less likely I find it to be true. I don’t find that some of the teachings about household order in this letter are consistent with Paul’s teachings elsewhere. I don’t think that those sections reflect the heart of Paul. Still, I think it was written in his name by someone close to him. The author of Ephesians has a really exalted vision of what it means to be “in Christ,” and there is much to be gained from that, but the letter also reflects the way that the church was already abandoning its egalitarian foundations for social respectability in the way it deals with women and slaves in particular. So I won’t be referring to the author of Ephesians as “Paul” any longer.

The actual part of Ephesians we’re reading this week really suffers from a lack of context, so I’m going to quote for you here the verses that come just before it.

Ephesians 5:1–7

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; (ESV)

Only then do we get:

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.” (ESV)

I added those early verses, even though it means that we have to be reminded about the “wrath of God” and what it means that it “comes upon the sons of disobedience.” (Sorry ladies, I think that includes y’all, too.) No, really. It doesn’t mean that God is more angry with those who live in darkness than those who live in the light. What the author is saying here is that living in the dark means that one lives in a transactional world, where what you get is what you’re due. Where the penalty of sin hangs over you because you don’t know any better. Not because you sin more.

And that mindset leads to many shameful deeds. The more we feel the weight of sin, the more likely we are to do harm to others, to treat others as objects, to treat ourselves as objects, because we don’t know the dignity with which God has clothed us through the Blood of His Son. The author of the letter is saying, “You know better. Do better.”

Most of us haven’t yet brought the fullness of who we are into the light. The pain of remembering, or realizing, or just the difficulty of remembering (when you get to my age!) mean that there are always new things in us that God would like to bring into the light, so that they may “become light.”

Some of the dark parts of my own self-image aren’t sins that I’ve committed, but pains I’ve buried. And most of those pains have led me to compensate in ways that don’t bring

glory to God. My experience is that when God nudges me and points (ever so gently) at one of those unhealthy behaviors, He's not really interested in the behavior as much as He is in showing me the pain that lies behind it so that I'll let Him heal it. So yes, the behaviors have to come into the light, but they soon become transparent as His light shines through them and brings life to a deadened part of me.

That's my takeaway from our lesson from Ephesians this week...

Gospel Text

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”

Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

The disciples got one tiny bit of it right. Blindness, along with a whole host of other maladies, is the result of sin. God didn't create the world with disease and pain in it. But pain and death entered through the sin of our first parents. So, I suppose you could say that this man was born blind because of the sin of his “parents” if you go far enough back. (Whether you take Adam and Eve literally or not. I don't, but it makes the story no less true.)

But Jesus says, “No, you haven't gone far enough back. This all goes back to God's greater purpose, to show you Who He Is.

Because these are the works of God. To show mercy to the sinful, to the willful, to those who have betrayed Him.

Stop and think for a moment. Do you think that the One who created heaven and earth, who molded us from the dirt and breathed life into our bodies didn't also know how the whole Eden adventure was going to work out? Of course He did. And so all the consequences of our refusal to live the lives God created us for were also pre-known.

All so that the works of God might be displayed when He lifts us from our brokenness and sets us on our feet and empowers us to do the same for others. Because that's what we do when we lift others up, heal them, restore them, speak reconciliation over them. Those are the works of God. One whose fundamental nature is to forgive, to create beauty from ashes, order from chaos.

And here's the kicker. God chooses to do that through you and me. From the moment that God deputized Adam and Eve and told them to “fill the earth and subdue it”

(because beyond the borders of the Garden lay chaos), it has been God's purpose and desire that we, His creation, should be His agents in bringing peace and healing. And Jesus demonstrates that, as a man, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Yes, He is God incarnate, but also man, who has "emptied Himself" so that He might show us what any human, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can do. Because those are the "works of God," to bring healing and restoration and forgiveness through the women and men He has created.

It boggles my mind to think that the mystery, the cataclysm that is forgiveness is woven into the very fabric of creation. That the One who embodies forgiveness from the Cross is the One in whom all things hold together. (Col. 1:17)

And it drives me to my knees to realize that God has entrusted to me and to you the act of making it manifest.