

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 9:1-41

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, lonely 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

When I first tackled the Divergence for this portion of Ephesians, I wrote that I wasn’t convinced of Paul’s authorship. There are significant problems with the letter’s *apparent* understanding of the relationship of wives to husbands that I had not then reconciled. I didn’t think Paul could have written them. They are too much at odds with what Paul says in other letters. But I have come to understand them better, so I have also come back to thinking that Paul likely wrote Ephesians. I can’t go into all that here, but I will in other Divergences.

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 the Son. Paul 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, They’re not really interested in the behavior as much as They are in showing me the pain that lies behind it so that I’ll let Them heal it. So yes,

the behaviors have to come into the light, but they soon become transparent as 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.”

“...that the works of God might be displayed in him...” I have, until my studies this week, always understood the “works” displayed here as simple healing. But now I have a new understanding. This is an act of creation.

Scholars have long recognized the way that Genesis is echoed in the Fourth Gospel. From its opening verse the intention is clear, “In the beginning...” Interpreters of this passage began as early as the late second century (Irenaeus and others) to read the making of mud to heal the man’s blindness as another echo of God’s creation of Adam from the “dust of the ground.”

Since then, commentators have cast doubt on that reading of the text, largely because there is no mention of “spittle” as an element of the narrative in Genesis 2. But an interesting study by Daniel Frayer-Griggs has shown that, while it may be absent from Genesis, the use of saliva as part of the creation of humankind was nonetheless a part of the thought-world of first century Judaism. The Dead Sea Scrolls have several mentions of “spitting” as part of a person’s understanding of their own creation by God. In addition, certain Egyptian texts also use this act of spitting in a creative sense.

Students of John’s Gospel have long linked it to the Dead Sea Scrolls. They surmise that the Gospel itself must have come from members who began as part of the same or a similar group of people. So the idea that “spittle” could be a part of a creative process would have been familiar to them. So when Jesus says that “the works of God might be displayed in him,” His reference can be seen to be to God’s creative works in Genesis. This then makes some sense of another early interpreter’s claim that prior to Jesus use of the mud the blind man had “a face with no eyes.” Perhaps for him, Jesus completed the work of creation.

Reading the mud-spittle in this way also helps make sense of other elements of the rest of the story. The interplay of light and darkness draws the reader back to God’s first act

of Creation, that of light. The driving out of darkness is manifest in the blind man's new vision, which casts the willful blindness of the Pharisees into greater and greater contrast.

Finally (well, there's so much else, but this is all I can manage this week) it also helps make sense of the man's worship of Jesus. This is the *only* occasion in which someone actually worships Jesus in John. It is awkward, in that in chapter four Jesus reserves that word for worship to worship of the Father. This awkwardness is sufficient that some copyists found it necessary to omit that verse. Others changed Jesus' self-reference from "Son of Man" to "Son of God" to make the worship more palatable.

But when we see this miracle as one that echoes the Creation narrative, we can see that, while awkward, the "worship" of the one who *reveals* the Father by doing the *works* of the One who sent Jesus, makes sense. The worship is ultimately of God. Here, in contrast to last week's Gospel, Jesus does not reveal His *identity* with I Am, but allows His works to reveal the One worthy of worship. Perhaps it was the proximity of the Pharisees who overheard this conversation that prevented Jesus from using the Divine Name. But I do notice the difference.