

Year A – Lent Four – 26 March 2017

John 9

This morning I welcome you to the mid-point of our Lenten journey. We are slowly marching along, or maybe shuffling along, the road to Jerusalem, and our path is getting more difficult. Our approach into Good Friday is looming larger and larger and there is a heaviness that seems to lay upon the liturgy, the scripture, the very things we are doing as we near the cross. In many ways, for those who have embraced a serious Lenten discipline and are open to Lenten encounters with the holy, this time may seem to be getting darker and darker ... This Lent, and the days we will walk through between now and Good Friday are asking us to allow ourselves to enter the dark ... to enter the dark and just stay awhile.

This morning's Gospel lesson tells us about the blind man from birth who is healed of his infirmity and becomes both a pawn in the game the Pharisees are playing with Jesus but also a witness to those who have eyes to see of who Jesus really is. The Pharisees jump on the opportunity to dwell on the man's presumed sin and that of his parents. They are even willing to accept his healing if it means that they have their evidence against Jesus.

Jesus, on the other hand, does not see sin and disability when he looks upon the blind man. He recognizes a child of God who is prepared to see, and Jesus is prepared to open his eyes to the truth that is the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus, once again, takes everything the Pharisees, and indeed, all of the people, are so very certain about and he turns it on its head. He calls upon everyone, of his day and age, and of ours, to look with new eyes that we might see a new kingdom that God has created: one which doesn't really resemble anything that we are used to recognizing with the eyes through which we currently see.

Over the last few days I have been reading a book by Barbara Brown Taylor, titled Learning to Walk in the Dark. It is just a book I happened upon at the library but it is serendipitously a wonderful book for a Lenten time of reflection. The author undergoes a time of researching darkness by reading about it, reflecting on it and seeking it out. She looks at such things as artificial light and how, though it has helped us to "see" more and more, it has actually caused us to "see" less and less. She goes "caving" during which she experiences the absolute silence of sound and sight and through which she more clearly hears the Creator and experiences the created. She delves into The Dark Night of the Soul by John of the Cross and discovers God in absence and darkness where there are no answers but only deeper questions. She invites the reader to take an intellectual journey with her into the dark; into the blindness in which true sight can actually be found.

Taylor's writing is a challenge to rethink the way we think about darkness and blindness. All too often we think of difficult, scary and nefarious things in terms of being "dark" or happening "in the dark". Our culture is so attuned to referencing things we don't understand, and hence may scare us, as "dark" or "blind", that generations before us actually developed forms of racism, classism and language that, unfortunately, take our minds to specific thoughts when we hear phrases that connote darkness. Too often we walk around afraid of what might be lurking in the

dark, and that is such a shame because within the dark, and within our inability to see, are worlds we have not yet discovered; experiences of God we have run away from rather than embracing.

“Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’”

It is so very easy for us to hear this statement and assume that Jesus is talking about punishment for those arrogant enough to believe that they really can see, but what if we looked at this statement as one of universal hope rather than one of condemnation? What promises may Jesus be making to those who will acknowledge him and place their faith in him?

For those who are blind, for those who cannot see, Jesus is promising them sight. For the blind man in the gospel, and for the other blind men in the other gospels, sight is given them but with that sight comes first a recognition of who Jesus is, and the truth that when one comes face to face with Jesus, life changes.

When we first see Jesus Christ, and acknowledge him as our Saviour, we realize that our life has become eternal. Through this gentle one who has given us new sight we are granted glimpses into something that is really quite beyond seeing ... To see the face of Jesus is to see the face of God, and for every one who was granted sight, their first vision is that of the face of God.

Imagine that ... the first thing you see when you open your eyes and can finally see is that of the face of God. How powerful, how lifechanging, how magnificent...

But what happens when you become used to having sight and the things you see, the visions you have begin to pile up and push out that initial sighting of the face of God? For anyone who has been spiritually blind and whose eyes have been opened to Christ, to recognize him and believe in him, there will be a period of time in which that sight is there before you every time you close your eyes, but then, as time goes by, that vision fades and all that is around you becomes your focus. There is nothing wrong with that. It is normal and expected. But the initial vision becomes a memory, and sometimes begins to fade... What once we could see becomes what we may no longer see with ease ...

So, there are those who did not know Christ, who were blind to him and they were given sight, but what of those who have always had sight, those who have always simply believed, and those who had been given sight but have lost that vision of the face of God?

I think this is where Jesus is inviting us to become blind – for the first time or once again. We have been taught to fear blindness because it takes away from us our independence. If we are blind we need guides; we cannot just go it alone, at least not completely. But that desire and need for independence flies completely in the face of all that Jesus is.

Blindness and entering into the dark are really invitations for each of us to let go of our need for control and to allow God to do what God has been trying to do all along – lead us into salvation through His love and sacrifice. When we become blind, or even simply close our eyes and trust in Jesus, we open ourselves up to seeing him in ways that our eyes could never see. Yes, it is wonderful to look upon the face of God but wouldn't it also be wonderful to hear the voice of God; to feel God's touch upon us; to smell the fragrance of God's delight; to taste the sweet nectar that has been given us in that One Cup of Christ?

The dark, the blindness, that comes with the life of faith, that we are invited to enter into during this Lenten season, is such that it will not overwhelm us or absorb us. Rather it will lift us up into new truth and hope. It will sharpen our other senses that we will not just see the face of God but we will better be able to experience the totality of the presence of God in our lives.

Darkness is not something to be feared. Blindness is not something to run from. They are opportunities given us by Jesus that we might better come to know him now.

We don't have to wait until eternity to discover the beauty of Jesus in our lives. We just have to slow down and become aware of his beauty which is ours to experience, if we would only learn to embrace those places where God can actually be more easily seen – in that darkness that comes from blindness to the world – in that darkness that invites us to see with spiritual eyes and to hear with spiritual ears.

Enter the darkness and prepare to be in the presence of the great I AM!