

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

John 9:1-12

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed 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."

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's

eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” (which means “Sent”) Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” But he kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He replied, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He answered, “I do not know.”

METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING

Psalm 23 John 9:1-12

Our scriptures for this morning provide us with a rich Lenten meal. There is a lot here to digest for our journeys through the Lenten season. Psalm 23 is written on all of our hearts. For millennia it has been a staple in both the Jewish and Christian diets. The early church sang it when an initiate emerged from the baptismal font and then processed to the

Communal celebration. It has served as a centerpiece of countless sermons and is frequently read at memorial services to bring solace and comfort to the bereaved. Indeed, most of us can pretty well recite it from memory.

It also connects us to our Hebrew origins. It was originally written as a commemoration for the release of the captives from Egypt and the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness—*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.* And it then proceeds to a renewal of the covenant which the people had violated subsequently resulting in their captivity which served as their punishment from God. The psalm included an expression of reconciliation containing not only the assurance of God's abiding love, but the people's promise to be faithful to the new covenant.

Anointing the head with oil was a symbol of investing the candidate with power and consecrating them for a holy purpose. This was understood as the endowment of the Hebrew nation to be God's designated ambassador to the world to serve the divine purpose. And the psalm concludes with the postscript of thanksgiving and commitment: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

For us, the psalm is a powerful metaphor for our relationships to God and provide us with a sign post to guide us through Lent. The beauty of metaphors is that we can each take a different meaning from them which allows application to our own circumstances and experiences. Metaphors have power and are great teachers helping us to understand life and ourselves on a deeper level. How does Psalm 23 move you? In what events in your life has it been a source of comfort? How do you feel when you hear it, read it or recite it?

Our passage from John can be understood metaphorically as well. A lot is happening here. First you have the man who was blind from birth. You can interpret that literally as a congenital condition and John intends it that way so that he can emphasize Jesus' ability to heal. Viewed from another lens, however, it can also be interpreted metaphorically as spiritual blindness. The disciples jump to the conclusion that his condition was a result of sin and wondered who was to blame, him or his parents. In a way, it was a head scratching question because how could a new born possibly commit a sin? Jesus quickly disabuses them of the notion that either him or his parents must be responsible. He wasn't going to engage in the blame game.

As we noted two weeks ago when we highlighted Jesus' discussion

with Nicodemus, John takes a different approach than the three other gospel writers in his narrative. This is a case in point. While all four of them emphasize Jesus' healing powers, Matthew, Mark and Luke underscore the importance of faith in the miracles of Jesus' cures. *Your faith has made you well.* But John takes a different tack: *he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.* In other words, the man's blindness was not God's revenge for sin, but was rather given to him as a purpose for being here. He was ordained to be blind so that he could be healed by Jesus as an adult. In this way, Jesus had an opportunity to prove to skeptics that he really was the Messiah. *We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day...As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*

And then, as in Psalm 23, there is the issue of responsibility. The Hebrews agreed to the renewed covenant with God committing to *dwelling in the house of the Lord my whole life long.* The former blind beggar who could now see was instructed to *Go wash in the pool of Siloam.* Why Siloam? Its significance was in its meaning which was *Sent.* In other words, he was now commissioned to reveal through his healing that Jesus was indeed the *light of the world*, and that Jesus' healings were testimony to his special relationship to the Father who sent him.

Is not having one's *eyes opened* a Metaphor for becoming enlightened? ("I once was lost, but now I am found; blind, but now I see.") And how do we understand enlightenment? Is it not seeing what had once been shrouded in darkness; seeing the world as God sees the world? Is it not seeing the beauty of the earth we live in and the deep humanity of every person who shares the world with us? And the point John makes is that Jesus is the *light of the world*. And when we see that, then everything changes. No longer can we engage in arbitrary discrimination, accepting people we approve of, but throwing the others under the bus and denying the divinity within them.

Sometimes our vision does not include what is right before us. Many of the witnesses were skeptical of this healing because it did conform with what they already believed. When the former blind man returned from his trip to Siloam, some refused to believe their own eyes. *Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?* Some confirmed that it was indeed him. *But others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him."* *But he kept saying "I am the man."* *Still, they kept asking him, "Then how were his eyes opened?"* And then they demanded to talk to Jesus and wondered where he went. And he answered, "I have no idea." It was all right before them,

but the scales did not fall from their eyes.

Lent is a season marked by self-examination. We are invited to go within to seek the *light of the world*. We can refuse to believe that Jesus brought God's message to the world. And we can dismiss his teachings and deny the truth within them. Or we can commit to a renewal of the covenant and promise to allow *mercy and goodness to follow us all the days of our lives and to dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long*.

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