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Friday, March 17, 2023
Year A Lent 4

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

“Turn your Smart Phone into a Microscope!”

- That was what the website promised, anyway...
 - Perhaps you have heard of the site called Kickstarter
 - I admit I have spent some money there over the years, and most of it I don't regret. :)
 - Kickstarter.com, if you are not familiar with it, is a crowd-sourced venture capital investment website
 - Where little people like me can give some money to a company who is starting up, or launching a new product, to help them on their way
 - Think of it as a micro-lending type of system, but micro-venture capital instead of loans
 - It's not small- they have transferred over \$7 billion from individuals to startups. Some of that is mine!
 - When you commit some money toward a goal, and when the group succeeds, one usually get a reward- usually one of their future products
 - I have backed watch companies, poets, board games, wine openers, books, kitchen knives...
 - And one such cool thing was a small adapter you would be able to attach to your smart phone and turn it into a microscope!
 - They promised magnification of 800 times when using this little device!
 - So I said, “take my money,” and then waited for them to finished the design and production
 - Most of the time projects succeed, although some projects fail all together and you lose your investment
 - This one delivered after about a 7 month wait.
 - And while it did arrive... it was not quite as exciting as I had pictured in my head
 - Turns out a cell phone is really not the same thing as a microscope, no matter what thing you clip on there.
 - I was hoping to see the cells of a leaf under my little microscope

- While one should be able to see a cell with only 400x magnification, this was a little bit of a disappointment.
- We did not ever see clearly enough with it to see more than you could with one of those hand held dollar store magnifying glasses.
- Nothing at all like the ones we had in college biology labs
- And then there are the really big ones that blow my mind, the research microscopes that can see the tiniest organism, and even see electrons!¹
- I wonder just how much there is yet to see, yet to uncover
- I wonder just how far down God's creation goes
- And I marvel at what God must be able to see: the infinitesimal, the expansive, time and space, and even the depths of the human heart
- Did you know that one of God's names from the Old Testament is
 - "El-roi" (el ro-EE), "The God who sees"?²
 - Hagar from Genesis calls God this, which indicates that neither time nor distance limits God's own vision
- Even those who lived thousands of years ago appreciated the fact that God sees and understands things we do not.
- That brings us to our first reading this morning, with God choosing a new king for Israel
 - God tells the prophet Samuel that it is time for a change: time to pick a new king
 - And Samuel is not happy about it- he grieves for Saul, the current king
 - But he does as God commands, and goes to find Jesse's sons
 - The story is a good one: it is not the older, handsome sons that God chooses
 - It is the most unlikely of candidates, the youngest, the one keeping sheep,
 - The one that was not even called in because no one thought it was possible that he could be king.
 - God tells Samuel that God does not see as mortals see, but God looks on the heart.
 - It's more than simply knowing what is on the inside, what we think, what we do when no one else knows

¹ <http://www.livescience.com/4844-electron-filmed-time.html>

² Fredrick Neidner, *Feasting on the Word*, 98

- For this culture, the heart was not just the center of emotions, it was the center of one's whole being³
- We might call it the soul- God sees the soul
- God looks on us and sees who we really are, sees what kind of person we are, and who we have the potential to become
- And he saw in David not just the shepherd boy,
- But one day a singer for royalty, a fighter of giants, and a king after God's on heart
- It was with this kind of sight, seeing into the heart, that Jesus brought with him to his ministry
 - Seeing Nicodemus even at night, seeing the woman at the well in spite of the societal differences and distance
 - And now seeing a blind man begging just to survive
 - This man was practically invisible to everyone else-
 - All anyone saw was the fact he was blind, which meant he was a sinner and his parents were sinners, or so they assumed
 - It was this theological question that started the whole thing: the disciples, seeing a blind man begging,
 - Ignored him and his needs, and began a theological debate about sin
 - Now it is worth stopping right here for just a little bit, because this theological view still tempts us
 - That when someone is sick or something bad happens, that God has directly caused it
 - And that for some hidden reason, somebody deserved it, and God was handing out punishments that unlucky day
 - But notice what Jesus says: no one has sinned, not this man, not his parents- that's not the point
 - No, this man's blindness was going to be used for the glory of God
 - Perhaps a sermon in itself is that God can and does use people everyone else has dismissed.
 - What everyone else saw as a limitation, a separation from God, was about to become the path to finding God
 - This is something not to be missed, I think, because it is still a very relevant take away for us today
 - Whether we are tempted to believe that the bad things that happen to us are somehow a divine punishment

³ Donald P. Olsen, *Feasting on the Word*, 100

- And we ask, What did I do to deserve this?
- Or when we look at someone to whom bad things have happened, or are in a bad situation
 - And we assume that they are getting exactly what they deserve
- What if, instead of placing blame or spending all of our time searching for reasons,
- What if we saw in both the good things and the bad things that come, the chance to live through them in a way that gives glory to God?
- A chance to live as a witness through whatever the changes and chances of life bring
- That is what this man ultimately did: blind for his whole life and now able to see Jesus, and to share his story for God's glory
- The deeper question of "why" may remain unanswered, but as Robert Hoch puts it,
 - "John's gospel points to a God who stirs the stagnant determinisms of human suffering with unlikely and improbably gifts of insight which reveal God's abiding love."⁴
- Now back to the Gospel, the disciples do not even see the man, but Jesus does
 - Not getting caught in the blindness and the lesser debate about why the man was blind
 - Jesus helped him- addressed a concrete need
 - Jesus spat in the dirt, made mud, and put it on his eyes, and tells him to go wash in the pool
 - I find it very interesting that the blind man did not complain about the dirt and spit ⁵
 - There just must be something about Jesus, something that stirs people and reassures people
 - Because even with mud and spit on his face, he did as Jesus asked
 - He leaves and begins his journey towards a pool that many believed had healing powers.
 - He washed in the pool, and could see for the first time in his life
 - They had up until that point only seen a man blinded because of someone's sin, and never anything else

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1985

⁵ Anna Carter Florence, *Feasting on the Word*, 121

- His change was so drastic that people did not even recognize him, and argued over who he really was
- But now he could see, and they could not- I love that reversal
- Now Jesus does go on to talk about sin in this Gospel reading
 - But instead of it being about the blind man or his parents, which is what everyone automatically assumes
 - It is squarely pointed at the Pharisees who see with their eyes, but not with their hearts
 - Instead of celebrating this miracle, they complain that it was done on the Sabbath
 - That Jesus has sinned by doing so, and thus this miracle and this man cannot come from God
 - Yet, only God can restore sight to the blind, so they argue about it.
 - Much like the disciples in the beginning, back and forth they go, absorbed in the theological debate,
 - Missing the whole point
 - Blind to the man who now can see standing right in front of them
 - Blind to the Messiah talking with them
- I believe the lesson we hear today from Scripture is really pretty simple when you get down to it, but a powerful one
 - We cannot see as well as God sees, even though we may try
 - We sometimes misjudge, we miss the point, we debate about irrelevant things while ignoring the more important parts
 - We see, but do not really see, not deeply, not with Kingdom eyes
 - So perhaps for today, this fourth Sunday in Lent- we're over halfway done, by the way!
 - Perhaps our take away today is a simple spiritual exercise that can just be one of admitting this truth:
 - Many times we just don't know.
 - Sometimes we just cannot see the whole picture.
 - What if this week, or even for the rest of Lent, we embraced the power of the statement: "I don't know"⁶
 - I don't know why something has happened, I don't know for sure if I am right about this or that, or even about that person
 - I don't know, cannot see, and that's ok... because I trust.

⁶ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1985

- Maybe it is a chance to experience some humility in a world that insists we show confidence, certainty, and strength all the time
- Maybe it can be an opening up of possibility, of being receptive to what God might show us that we could not see before
- Richard Rohr calls it in this morning's devotion, a "Beginner's Mind", and a mind like a child that Jesus tells us to become more like⁷
- The beginning of spiritual wisdom, of truly seeing, might just be the admission that we are blind and cannot see
- Doing so offers the chance to look again, see past particular issue or event, and see into the potential, to look again for God
- One thing for sure: God's kingdom and God's creation extend to depths we cannot yet know or see
- And the good news: God can use even blind sinners for the glory of God, even as we pray for God to give us clearer vision.

Amen.

⁷ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/adopting-a-beginners-mind-2023-03-19/>