



Healing and Revealing Brokenness

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedges
The Fourth Sunday of Lent ~ March 22, 2020*

Samuel 16:1-13

YHWH said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve for Saul since I rejected him as ruler of Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and be on your way. For I am sending you to Jesse in Bethlehem, for I have chosen my ruler from among his children.” But Samuel replied, “How can I go? For if Saul learns about it, I will be murdered.” YHWH replied, “Take a heifer with you: I am sending you to Jesse. Tell him that you came to offer a sacrifice to YHWH, and invite Jesse to the sacrifice. Then I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me my selection.” Samuel did what YHWH said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met Samuel. They asked, “Do you come in peace?” Samuel said, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to YHWH. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his children and invited them to the sacrifice. When they arrived, and Samuel saw Eliab, and said to himself, “Surely, God’s anointed stands here before YHWH.” But YHWH said to Samuel, “Pay no attention to appearance and height; I have rejected him. YHWH does not see as mortals see; mortals see only appearances but YHWH sees into the heart.” Then Jesse called Abinadab to pass before Samuel, who said, “No. YHWH has not chosen this one.” Next came Shammah, but Samuel said, “Not this one either.” Seven sons were presented to Samuel by Jesse, who said, “YHWH has not chosen any of these.” Samuel asked, “Are these all the sons you have?” “There is still the youngest,” Jesse said, “but he is tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not begin the sacrificial banquet until the lad arrives.” So they sent for the boy, a ruddy youth with bright eyes, and handsome to behold. YHWH said, “Rise and anoint this one.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed the boy in the presence of his brothers, and from that day forward the Spirit of YHWH came upon David and was with him. Then Samuel set out on his way to Ramah.

Psalm 23

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| 1 | The Holy One is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want. | your rod and your staff, they comfort me. |
| 2 | You make me lie down in green pastures *
and lead me beside still waters. | 5 You spread a table before me
in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over. |
| 3 | You revive my soul *
and guide me along right pathways
for the sake of your Name. | 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the
days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of God for ever. |
| 4 | Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me; | |

Ephesians 5:8-14

There was a time when you were darkness, but now you are light in Christ. Live as children of the light. Light produces every kind of goodness, justice and truth. Be correct in your judgment of what pleases our Savior. Take no part in deeds done in darkness, which bear no fruit; rather, expose them. It’s shameful even to mention the things these people do in secret; but when such deeds are exposed and seen in the light of day, everything that becomes visible is light. That’s why we read, “Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”

John 9:1-41

As Jesus walked along, he saw someone who had been blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, was it this individual’s sin that caused the blindness, or that of the parents?” “Neither,” answered Jesus, “It wasn’t because of anyone’s sin—not this person’s, nor the parents’. Rather, it was to let God’s works shine forth in this person. We must do the deeds of the One who sent me while it is still day—for night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

With that, Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with his saliva and smeared the blind one’s eyes with the mud. Then Jesus said, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam”—“Siloam” means “sent.”

So the person went off to wash, and came back able to see. Neighbors and those who had been accustomed to seeing

the blind beggar began to ask, "Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?" Some said yes; others said no—the one who had been healed simply looked like the beggar. But the individual in question said, "No—it was me." The people then asked, "Then how were your eyes opened?" The answer came, "The one they call Jesus made mud and smeared it on my eyes, and told me to go to Siloam and wash. When I went and washed, I was able to see." "Where is Jesus?" they asked. The person replied, "I have no idea." They took the one who had been born blind to the Pharisees.

It had been on a Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud paste and opened this one's eyes. The Pharisees asked how the individual could see. They were told, "Jesus put mud on my eyes. I washed it off, and now I can see." This prompted some Pharisees to say, "This Jesus cannot be from God, because he doesn't keep the Sabbath." Others argued, "But how could a sinner perform signs like these?" They were sharply divided. Then they addressed the blind person again: "Since it was your eyes he opened, what do you have to say about this Jesus?" "He's a prophet," came the reply. The Temple authorities refused to believe that this one had been blind and had begun to see, until they summoned the parents. "Is this your child?" they asked, "and if so, do you attest that your child was blind at birth? How do you account for the fact that now your child can see?" The parents answered, "We know this is our child, blind from birth. But how our child can see now, or who opened those blind eyes, we have no idea. But don't ask us—our child is old enough to speak without us!" The parents answered this way because they were afraid of the Temple authorities, who had already agreed among themselves that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why they said, "Our child is of age and should be asked directly."

A second time they summoned the one who had been born blind and said, "Give God the glory instead; we know that this Jesus is a sinner." "I don't know whether he is a sinner or not," the individual answered. "All I know is that I used to be blind, and now I can see." They persisted, "Just what did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" "I already told you, but you won't listen to me," came the answer. "Why do you want to hear it all over again? Don't tell me you want to become disciples of Jesus too!" They retorted scornfully, "You're the one who is Jesus' disciple. We're disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this Jesus comes from." The other retorted: "Well, this is news! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes! We know that God doesn't hear sinners, but that if people are devout and obey God's will, God listens to them. It is unheard of that anyone ever gave sight to a person blind from birth. If this one were not from God, he could never have done such a thing!" "What!" they exclaimed. "You're steeped in sin from birth, and you're giving us lectures?" With that they threw the person out.

When Jesus heard of the expulsion, he sought out the healed one and asked, "Do you believe in the Chosen One?" The other answered, "Who is this One, that I may believe?" "You're looking at him," Jesus replied. "The Chosen One is speaking to you now." The healed one said, "Yes, I believe," and worshiped Jesus. And Jesus said, "I came into this world to execute justice—to make the sightless see and the seeing blind." Some of the Pharisees who were nearby heard this and said, "You're not calling us blind, are you?" To which Jesus replied, "If you were blind, there would be no sin in that. But since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Good morning, God's people!

I want to start by saying, I really miss all of you. I joined St. Peter's in January, and just as names and faces were starting to click, we find ourselves in this season of physical distance.

But I don't feel far away from you in my heart. We've connected in a different way, than if it were business as usual. For some of you, I have learned your fears and hopes while still not knowing what you do for work, where you grew up, or whether you prefer a beach or a mountain vacation. I do look forward to learning that other stuff too, and, just so you know, I'm a beach person. But, for now, what a special way to get to know one another, to connect at the heart, across any boundary. That is a gift. Thank you.

So, I do not know about y'all, but as I apply these current distancing norms to my own life, they are kind of becoming the lens through which I see everything. Including our texts today.

The gospel of John describes Jesus healing a man who has been blind since birth: "After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's eyes."

Before COVID-19, I would have thought this spit mud bath was just an earthy, albeit weird, way of healing. But I was truly horrified reading Jesus break every rule we've been tirelessly enforcing the last two weeks: No! Don't touch anything outside. Ah, wash your hands! Don't touch your face! Don't touch HIS face! - Then I got up and washed my hands.

There are other things in this story I read through this COVID lens.

For starters, the gospel is long...it's 41 verses, y'all. But not in a steady or soothing way. It's also repetitive, but again, not in the way a song's chorus is repetitive; its familiarity isn't enjoyable. It's grating-- tiring. At one point even the man who has been healed - the one character who would have the most incentive to not stop talking about what's happened - even he's like, "Um, I feel like I've already said this a few times."

The length and repetition reminded me of our own pace of life right now: in some ways the days are the same and even drawn out. Yet, every new press conference or email notification jolts us - what is coming next?

It's not just the form of this text, it's the feeling: This story is upsetting, as Jesus' healing seems to turn the world upside down.

I know we've been taught to quickly dismiss the Pharisees, but remember that, in Jesus' time, the Pharisees were the keepers of community. They were the source of wisdom and strength the larger community relied on.

And so imagine how upsetting it was when this totally unexpected thing happens and they so clearly don't know what to do. What's more, they try to pretend like they do know what to do. They seem to care more about keeping up appearances than figuring out how to truly care for the larger community.

And it's not just the leaders. Neither the community's neighbors nor the man's parents know what to do either. They, too, are supposed to be sources of comfort and reassurance and protection.

These circles of community are not only confused by what's happened, they are divided.

Some Pharisees said, "This man isn't from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law." Others said, "How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?" So they were divided.

It's the same for the neighbors - some believe the man when he says he is the same person they've seen begging everyday in the neighborhood. Others are convinced it's just a more fortunate *doppelganger*.

This division goes all the way to the most intimate connection: The family. When the man's parents are called before the Pharisees to speak about their son, they move away from him: He is old enough, he can speak for himself.

What a mess. A lot of the stories of Jesus' healing cause this kind of commotion, making the people around Jesus wish he'd never shown up at all.

But Jesus' healing does not cause this series of upsetting uncertainties and divisions, it just exposes them. Brings them to light. His act of healing reveals a brokenness that has existed long before this day.

Starting with the opening lines, when the disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned that he was born blind, this man or his parents?"

The Bible's treatment of blindness, and other forms of physical difference, is problematic - something I will talk more about in our Wednesday sermon discussion. And while we rightly reject the view of physical differences as sinful or less than, I challenge us to recognize that we as a society continue to privilege sight and treat it as the

norm. To leave those who are visually impaired to fend for themselves and fight for accommodation.

I have a friend who is blind and, each week, she relies on Instacart for groceries. Last week, she went three extra days without food, because so many of us were ordering groceries online. She ended up having to go to neighbors on her street asking for help, for extra food. Thank God she is resourceful and her neighbors are generous, but I wonder how many of us considered anything like that, when we were rushing to care for ourselves?

In Jesus' time, blindness wasn't just a vulnerability. It was a sign of sinfulness. So, who sinned?, the disciples ask. Which is another way of asking, Whose fault is it?

Whose fault is it? is a question that seeks to take what is confusing or uncomfortable or scary and put it in one place. So we don't have to hold all of those difficult feelings and decisions, and, even more, so that we do not have to take responsibility for them.

It is a question born of brokenness, and continues to break and divide everything it touches.

To get to the bottom of what's going on, the Pharisees call on the man's parents to testify on his behalf. We would hope our parents would stick up for us, fight for us. But they turn away, afraid that whatever trouble their son is in will pass on to them.

It's shocking for us, but I do not think it was for the man. From birth, this question, "Whose fault is this?" had pitted parent against child - wrongly convincing this family that taking care of yourself must come at the expense of taking care of others. Can you imagine the pain? How these parents and their child must've had to harden their hearts just to survive it?

This family was broken long before Jesus arrived.

This brokenness continued in the man's life. When we're introduced to his neighbors, they know him as the man who spent his days begging. Defined by his vulnerability and the stability it cost him. So much so that they cannot even be sure it is him once he is no longer blind, no longer begging.

Finally, this disruptive healing goes before the Pharisees, who are called to uphold God's law in order to establish God's healing. And we find brokenness here too. The Pharisees are not amazed by what has happened. They are offended. Because what has happened challenges their role as those who know the best, do the most, hold the power. Go back and read verses 28-34 later. It is heartbreaking. The man testifies to his healing and his leaders call it insulting.

They do what we all do when our power is more important than the common good: demonize the other, close ranks, focus on the fine print.

Look at President Trump. Calling COVID-19 the China Virus. A clinical virus cannot be racist, but a societal one can. COVID-19 has exposed another virus that's been spreading brokenness long before this pandemic, a truly racist infection that has found a host in our highest seat of government.

Look at members of congress, debating means-testing while hundreds of thousands of people worry how to pay rent in 9 days. Tending to their stock portfolios before taking care of their constituents.

Look at debates among religious scholars and congregational clergy about how to worship right now, how to be the Church. Quoting footnotes of 4th century theologians instead of asking members of our churches, "How can we know God's presence among us?" Or, I don't know, asking God. To be clear, I think there are different and even opposing answers to that question. But why are we looking for them by scouring obtuse early church writings instead of connecting with people's hurting hearts?

In the long, needlessly drawn out, painfully broken scenes of this story, there is a moment where all of the clutter is pushed away, and the message is unobscured: The man answered, I don't know whether he's a sinner. Here's what I do know. I was blind and now I see.

The message today is less uplifting but equally clear: We are facing a pandemic and we do not know what is going to happen. But here's what we do know: how we choose to work together and care for each other will determine where we go from here.

Like the man's healing, this message exposes our own brokenness: Broken healthcare, broken economy, broken relationships - all of which existed before this pandemic. As Christians, even as we face our own fears and brokenness, we must ask ourselves how we will live into this moment.

[I saw an article this week about a priest in Italy who reached out to the members of his congregation, asking them to send him pictures of themselves.](#) That Sunday, he printed out their pictures and taped them

to the pews as he held worship services. The thing that makes this so beautiful is the same thing that makes it so sad: and that is facing the brokenness. The longing to be together and the knowledge that we cannot. The desire to see their faces so great that he carefully printed and taped each picture, and the disappointment that pictures of their faces are not the same. In community, both the beauty and pain are true; desire and disappointment - both are real; there are no easy answers, but there is room to hold it all.

What will it mean if we are in a moment when our division and brokenness is so clear, and we choose not to see it? This is what Jesus laments with the Pharisees at the end of the story - that they would cling to what they know rather than to ask God to bind up what has been so broken.

Through Christ, God heals very old wounds. That is the point of this story. If we face our hurt, we can be healed. That is the lens through which we are called to see, to live, and to love. In all we do, let us help open one another's eyes to this promise. Now and always.

May it be so. Amen.