Lent 4A, March 22, 2020

Here’s a good preacher story.

Imagine with me for a moment that you are at a beach on a beautiful sunny day.  There is a large crowd on the beach, but no one is in the water.  You notice a large sign that says, "No Swimming." and that there is a lifeguard on duty.

Suddenly, you hear a cry for help from the water.

Someone is trying to swim despite the sign, and they are in trouble.  The lifeguard doesn't move.

He looks towards the drowning man and yells,

"You didn’t read the sign?!  Who told you to go in?

You can’t swim here!"

Then someone runs to the water, jumps in, and saves the person about to drown.  You might think he would be treated as a hero. But no…  Suddenly, the lifeguard and a group of his buddies are yelling at the would be hero,

"You didn't read the sign either!

How dare you go to the water?"

"How are we ever going to have any order around this place?"

As ridiculous as this scenario is,

There are parallels to our gospel reading.

Here’s the thing: The way John tells this story, it takes only two verses for the miracle and thirty-nine for the reaction.

*Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents?*

*No one,* Jesus answers.

Whenever there are physical tragedies,

be sure that you’ll hear the blame game – it’s their fault – it’s the pagans, abortionists, feminists.

It’s the gays, lesbians and transgendered.

It’s those conservatives, fundamentals, right-winged wingnuts.

We love to point the finger. We even pick our news stations based on whose blame we most agree with.

*Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents?*

The truth is, when you don’t want to face the music,

you find a scapegoat.

Adam ate the apple, but when God confronted him,

Adam nervously blurted, "Eve made me eat that fruit."

Well, Eve didn't want to take the fall, either.

So she blamed the snake.

Kids are naturals at this game.

"Dad, she hit me."

"I did not. He hit me first."

Sometimes we point fingers to dodge responsibility,

but sometimes we point because we just don’t understand.

*Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents?*

So wonder with me, for a moment, would you,

if they’re not asking the wrong question.

What if it’s not about fault at all, but about God’s divine love, mercy, and grace.

What if it’s about how Jesus is able to take our messes,

our hurts, and our deficiencies, and using the most improbable methods make us whole and send us out to love and care for each other. (Sharon Blezzard)

The religious leaders and authorities don’t believe that such a miracle could have occurred.

Who heals a certifiable blind beggar using spit, dirt, and a few words? Certainly not the God of Abraham & Sarah!

Yet 2000+ years later,

Jesus is still in the business of miracles.

He takes us, ordinary sinful, yet named and claimed disciples, and equips us to be his people.

He takes our humble gifts and multiples our meager offerings in ways that can’t be explained rationally.

Who sinned, Jesus?

The question was put to Jesus by Pharisees who could see quite well in a physical sense.

These were the religious leaders, the guardians of tradition, the pillars of the community.

The irony is, the more we try to be good (not a bad thing, by the way) the greater the danger of feeling morally superior. Christianity isn’t a kind of moral contest,

the gospel is about God’s love for us in spite of our brokenness. You think you aren’t broken? Look again.

Several years ago some of you may remember, [**“the dress”**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress). It became an overnight internet sensation.

Almost instantly everyone was arguing about the color of “the dress.” Was it blue and black or white and gold?

No one seemed to be able to agree.

As much as we think we know what we see,

looks can be deceiving.

Optical illusions do the same thing.

The truth is that what we think we see and what is truly present can be so very different.

The reading from 1 Samuel goes to the heart of the matter -- the blindness of mistaken perception.

When we are so locked into outward appearances,

we are vulnerable to this blindness.

*"... 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 does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."* [v.7]

In one way or another we are all blind.

It is simply much easier to see the sins of others than to see our own. Just like the man born blind we are also told to wash in the pool of Siloam, the pool named Sent.

We are God’s Sent people, going towards pain and suffering, to bring compassion, relief, and mercy.

For me, the word "healing" has been a lifelong process and I know that I am still being healed…on a daily basis.

"Healing" happens when we are loved and welcomed, when what we think and say and do matters.

When I lived in Pennsylvania, I discovered the real effects of Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD.

It's a painfully accurate acronym.

It means that deprived of sunshine, we tend to become depressed. One successful treatment is to sit under a natural light bulb for a certain time each day.

The treatment also works for many depressed persons during the late fall and winter months when the days are shorter. In other words we need light!

Little wonder, then, that the metaphor of light is used throughout the Bible as in today's epistle reading from Ephesians.

“For once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.”

Did you catch that? Not only is Christ shining upon you.

You have- in some strange, wonderful, divine way-

you have ***become*** light.

Christ removes the scales from our eyes and fills us with his light. That's how Paul can encourage us to live as the very "children of light."

And if Christ's light shines not only upon us but somehow through us, too, well, that changes everything.

An ancient Greek fable tells the story of people who had lived in caves beneath earth's surface for generations.

Living conditions on the surface demanded this sub-terranian lifestyle.  But -- there was always a longing within the people for the light.  Stories were told about the sun and how on the "surface" there was light everywhere and everything flourished in the light.

Sitting around the fires beneath the surface, children could only imagine what it would be like to live in the light.

Then stories began to be told about someone who would come and lead the sub-terranian dwellers to the surface where there was light.  A deep longing was felt within the hearts of the people for the time when they could journey to "the surface".

Then it happened.  A young woman began to inspire hope in people's hearts about life in the light. She said that if people followed her, they would find a way to the surface and to the light.

So the day came and the young woman began to lead the people to the surface. The journey was long, but finally they emerged into the light of day!  But they did not like the light!  It was too bright.  It hurt their eyes.

They complained that it was better in the shadows of the caves.  They wanted to go back.  They demanded to go back! And so was the light rejected!

The Pharisees came into this story assuming they could see.

They "saw" that their laws were the path to life.

They "saw" that Jesus could not be a genuine prophet or healer because he did not abide by their Sabbath laws.

They "saw" that because this man had been born blind, he was a sinner and could teach them nothing.

But Jesus, once again chose a person whom society had utterly rejected.

The newly sighted man emerged from the pool of Siloam with a sense of mission and self-worth that stunned his neighbors. They couldn’t believe he was the same person who used to sit and beg. His encounter with Jesus filled him with new hope that he might live a life of real purpose.

As we seek to be faithful in these tumultuous times,

the questions we must ask ourselves are:

Who is the most vulnerable?

Who is the most easily disregarded in our community?

We are inextricably connected to, and dependent upon, each other. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

We can no longer be blind to those all around us in need of life's basic necessities of food, water, shelter, healthcare, community and love.

Can disciples of Jesus stop looking for ways to blame people for their painful circumstances and instead look for ways to reveal the work of God in their lives, in our communities, in our world?

If ever there was a time to come together as the church and show others the healing love of Jesus, this is it.

The words to David Haas’ hymn reminds us that we claim God’s love and healing in our own brokenness and then we become wounded healers for each other. It goes like this.

I will come to you in the silence  
I will lift you from all your fear  
You will hear My voice  
I claim you as My choice  
Be still, and know I am near

I am hope for all who are hopeless  
I am eyes for all who long to see  
In the shadows of the night,  
I will be your light  
Come and rest in Me

Do not be afraid, I am with you  
I have called you each by name  
Come and follow Me  
I will bring you home  
I love you and you are mine

I am strength for all the despairing  
Healing for the ones who dwell in shame  
All the blind will see, the lame will all run free  
And all will know My name

Do not be afraid, I am with you  
I have called you each by name  
Come and follow Me  
I will bring you home  
I love you and you are mine

I am the Word that leads all to freedom  
I am the peace the world cannot give  
I will call your name, embracing all your pain  
Stand up, now, walk, and live

Do not be afraid, I am with you  
I have called you each by name  
Come and follow Me  
I will bring you home  
I love you and you are mine