

Year A, Lent 4
1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
March 2, 2008 – 8:00 liturgy
The Rev. John Spicer

Who Knows Best?

In both our Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning, God is full of surprises. The people in these stories know what *ought* to happen. The problem is, God's intentions don't necessarily fit in with the way they know it's "supposed" to be.

In the first reading, God has rejected Saul, whom God had made Israel's first king. So God tells the prophet Samuel to go and anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king. Samuel goes to Bethlehem and sees Jesse's eldest son – a tall, powerful, young man, someone who *looks* like a king. But God has something else in mind. None of the obvious candidates is the man for the job. Instead, it's the boy out in the field, the one whose status is so low that he isn't even invited to the party. So God tells Samuel, "Do not look on [the] appearance [of Jesse's sons] or on the height of [their] stature...; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Instead, God tells Samuel, call for the kid out in the field. Believe it or not, *he's* the new king.

Something similar is going on in that long Gospel reading about the man born blind. All through this reading, God is challenging conventional wisdom in one form or another. The disciples provide the first example. They assume the man's blindness must have been caused by sinfulness; the only question is whether it was the man's sin or his parents' sin that made him blind. As Jesus does so often, especially in John's Gospel, he gives them a response that doesn't answer their question at all but redirects them to a larger truth: The point isn't the cause of his blindness (which isn't *anybody's* sin, by the way); the point is the opportunity for God's glory to be revealed through this man's situation. So Jesus quietly heals him, bringing light into the man's eyes just as he brings God's light into the world.

Then the fun begins – especially once the Pharisees, the religious leaders, get hold of the man. They want to know just how this miracle has happened – at least, they want to know as long as they can fit the miracle into their understanding of God's mechanics. The man says clearly what happened: Jesus put mud on his eyes and told him to wash, and it healed his blindness. End of story. But the religious authorities insist that *can't* be the real story. This healer, Jesus, is a sinner, they say, because he was breaking the Sabbath to do the work of healing. The man before them can't *really* have been blind from birth because things like that don't happen in the Pharisees' world. The man must be lying, because everybody knows sinners like Jesus simply can't do miraculous things. Everybody knows *that*.

It's also worth noting the fearlessness of the formerly blind man. No matter how the authorities insist that he must be wrong – no matter how they insist that he buy into their withered vision of God's kingdom – the man simply insists on the truth that he himself has experienced: the truth that mystery *happens*. "I don't know whether [Jesus] is a sinner," the man says. "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." (John 9:25) And if you experts don't like it, too bad. The man understands that the religious leaders have no real power compared with the one whose power he experienced directly – and the man isn't afraid to tell that truth.

And the authorities indict themselves in their tortured attempt to shoehorn God into their worldview. The irony of this story, of course, is that those who are blind can see God clearly, and those who are supposed to have great insight are actually blind to God's truth. In fact, the Pharisees proudly proclaim their own blindness: "We are disciples of Moses," they crow. "We know that God has spoken to Moses; but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." (John 6:28-29) It's the ultimate admission of failed discernment in John's Gospel: missing where Jesus comes from. Where he comes from, of course, is what makes all the difference. He is not simply a talented healer or a prophet; he is the incarnate Word of God who has come from heaven to dwell among us. Recognizing that truth is what turns the formerly blind man into a holy seer: "If [Jesus] were not from God," he says, "he could do nothing" (9:33). It's not theological rocket science. Where else would a healer come from who is able to give sight to one born blind? But the religious experts can't see past the limitations of their own expertise. They have no patience with mystery.

In the car this past week, I was listening to an interview on National Public Radio with an author named Bart Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina. Ehrman has written a new book about the problem of human suffering – a problem he calls *God's Problem*. It's a problem, Ehrman says, because, for him, the presence of human suffering has made him lose his faith. He can no longer believe in God because he can't reconcile the question of theodicy: If God is both good and powerful, how can God allow human beings to suffer? It's a question that's always perplexed scholars – as well as every other person who's ever experienced the hell that life can become. For Ehrman, it's enough of a problem that he's decided the answer is that there must be no God. In the interview, he said, "This problem of theodicy eventually got to me, and I came to realize that I couldn't answer this problem. Even though I knew what the standard answers were..., [they] were no longer satisfactory to me. And I eventually decided I could no longer believe in an all-powerful, loving God."¹

It's tempting to turn this into a sermon on the problem of suffering, but that isn't really where these readings today are leading us. Instead, let me just wonder out loud if the problem with Dr. Ehrman's argument isn't so much God's failure to deal with human suffering as much as it is our insistence that we have a right to understand everything on our own terms. The Pharisees certainly thought so. But I just don't think that's part of the deal God gives us.

What seems perfectly clear and reasonable to us may be just the opposite in God's eyes – and by the same token, what is clear and reasonable to God may be very difficult for us to see. The king is cast down; and the shepherd boy, the *last* in line in the family, becomes a far greater ruler. Blind men are able to see the messiah, but the religious experts miss what's happening before their very eyes – no doubt, at least in part, because to recognize it would imperil their own position and authority.

In fact, it's not just that God's ways may not make perfect sense to us; it's that God's deepest patterns and highest priorities tend to run *counter* to what seems reasonable to us. Here are just a few examples – statements of God's purposes that we've heard from Scripture or the Prayer Book a hundred times but that really don't align with what the world teaches us about reality: The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The greatest among you must become the least. You have to give in order to receive. You have to give up your possessions in order to find happiness and security. You have to serve God in order to find perfect freedom. You have to love your enemies; and in doing so, you'll defeat them with kindness. You have to walk the way of the Cross in order to come to heavenly glory. You have to die to this world and its expectations in order to find eternal life.

If God worked on the basis of *our* logic and *our* expectations, why would we need God anyway? We could simply govern ourselves and look to our own wisdom as the source of all truth – which is precisely our most fundamental sin, the sin of self-idolatry.

Of course, it's not just the religious experts, ancient and modern, who want God to work within their expectations. What is it about God's reign and the life of discipleship that *we* can't quite wrap our minds around? Perhaps it's the unfairness of the miraculous – why one blind man might be healed while another remains in his suffering. Perhaps it's God's claim on our wealth and the transformation that comes to us when we actually give a sizeable portion of our money away, putting it in God's hands rather than our own? Perhaps it's God's claim on our time – that when I choose to be prayerful rather than ever more “productive,” when I give God Sabbath time from my own life, then the Holy Spirit empowers me for far better work than I could ever do with my own time and effort.

You know, really, the truth is that these insights aren't all that insightful. We *know* these things are true even though we struggle to understand them on our terms, just as the blind man and the people around him knew that he had been healed of his blindness even though it didn't make any sense. Deep in our guts, we know that God doesn't follow the world's rules and expectations. But our temptation is that, if we can keep God neatly wrapped up within our expectations, then we can be sure that God won't ask of us anything that might really rock our world.

I guarantee you that God is trying to get your attention. In each of our lives, there is some counterintuitive, probably even countercultural, truth that God is trying to show us, so that we might turn ourselves and our journeys in a new direction. We can insist all we want that we know best and that the world's understanding of power or money or time is what's right. But be careful. God might still have a trick or two up the divine sleeve; and in the end, no amount of logic or human tradition or “I've never done it that way” can stand in the way of God's new life. The shepherd boy *is* made a king; the blind man *is* made to see – and woe to us if we insist that we know better.

1. *Fresh Air*. “Bart Ehrman, Questioning Religion on Why We Suffer.” Feb. 19, 2008. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19096131>. Accessed Feb. 28, 2008.