

“Living in the Dark”
1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, & John 9

Sermon by Jan Edmiston
4th Sunday in Lent – March 6, 2005

My grandparents lived on Main Street in Mooresville, North Carolina. Not much happened in Mooresville, at least until the NASCAR people came to town¹, but because they lived on Main Street, if something *did* happen, my grandparents were among the first to hear about it. My grandfather’s soul was restored on the front porch of his house where he’d sit in a patio furniture rocker for hours and hours watching the world go by. People honked as they passed and he’d wave, and keep rocking.

One Sunday afternoon, the whole family was sitting on that porch, watching the world go by, and I was bored. There just wasn’t much to see. But that was about to change.

In the distance, we heard the shrieking peal of a siren coming our way. My grandfather kept on rocking. “Sounds like somebody’s got a fire.” He looked down one end of Main Street and then down the other, and didn’t see anything. And so he kept on rocking. “I’ll bet it’s the Beatty place; that woman keeps a mess in her house.”

The siren was getting louder and the fire engine closer and my grandfather kept on rocking. “Ole Homer’s had trouble with the electricity for quite a while now. I’ll bet his barn on fire.”

The fire engine was getting closer and closer. My grandfather kept rocking and the other adults kept fanning away the flies and we kids, by now, were out in the front yard ready to wave at the fire engine when it whizzed by. But much to our shock, the fire engine did not whiz by.

Instead, it pulled into my grandparents’ driveway and drove around to the back of their house! And as we turned around to look and we saw that it was *their* house that was on fire. Somebody had left the stove on after Sunday dinner and the kitchen was in flames. A neighbor several houses down had called but nobody heard the phone ring from the porch, and when nobody answered, she thought we’d all gone out for a drive, so she’d called the Fire Department.

We had all lost our senses – at least for that afternoon. We hadn’t *smelled* the fire. We had not *felt* the fire. We certainly hadn’t *seen* the fire. But it was ***our*** house on fire. **It took somebody way down the street to see it.**

Sometimes, when we think we have a ***clear*** view of reality, we happen to be ***blind*** to reality. ***Only God*** sees ***life*** as it really is. Only God sees ***us*** as we really are.

¹ Mooresville is now the proud home of The NASCAR Technical Institute and the NC Auto Racing Hall of Fame Museum, clearly making it the heart of NASCAR country.

Jesus was leaving the temple one Sabbath day when he saw a man blind from birth. Apparently it was common sight to find this blind man just outside the temple begging for money. Assuming that worshippers had just heard a message about caring for the poor, this would be the perfect place to park yourself with your hand out. People were more likely to be feeling generous after having their souls restored.

The disciples – in the mood for a little theology lesson – asked Jesus:

Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

It was commonly believed that maladies like blindness must be somebody's fault. And this is not such an ancient thought.

Haven't you heard people blame victims who are diagnosed with AIDS or lung cancer or obesity? Haven't you heard about parents who are blamed for their children's birth defects? (Certainly, there are consequences for destructive behavior, but disease is not always the result of anything *we* or *our parents* did.)

Haven't you heard somebody say, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" It might be spoken either because something wonderful has happened or because something devastating has happened. But if scripture teaches us anything, it teaches us that you and I are not the center of the universe. You and I are not the cause of every good thing that happens or every bad thing that happens. Sometimes things just happen. And sometimes God allows things to happen for God's own purposes.

Jesus explained it this way:

*Neither this man nor his parents sinned;
he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.*

So does this mean that God allows birth defects and genetic maladies to serve God's purposes? That sounds a little sick, don't you think?

Well, we are not about to solve all the mysteries of suffering and disease this morning. But maybe the point is that as long as Christ is allowed to bring light into a life, then God's purposes will be served. God can use even the most horrendous crisis in life to bring light.

Ann Lamott is a wonderful writer who tells the story in her new book² about her friend, David Roche, who has a dramatic facial deformity. David was born with a large tumor on the bottom left side of his face, which was removed when he was a young boy. But in order to remove the tumor, they also had to remove his lower lip. And in order to keep the tumor from returning, they had to burn his face with so much radiation that it

² From the chapter "Sincere Meditations" in *Plan B – Further Thoughts on Faith*. Riverhead Books: New York, 2005.

permanently changed the shade of his skin to a dark plum color. The first thing people see on David's face is this grotesque deformity. They don't usually notice that his eyes are crystal blue and his hair is "silvery."

David is a public speaker and the pastor of a congregation he calls The Church of 80% Sincerity. (You'll have to read the book to find out more about it.)

Ann Lamott first observed this amazing man when he was speaking before a group of adults and children at a benefit for refugees in Kosovo. When he took his place on the stage, people were polite enough not to gasp in horror, but he just stood there for a moment to let the audience get a good long look at his face.

"David, what happened to your face?" he suggested they ask him. And then he proceeded to tell the story of how this happened to him. And then he also told stories about his childhood and his teenage years. His traumas were the same traumas we all have, he said. But everyone listening surely thought *his* must have been worse.

He told the story of going on a date with a girl named Carol.

Imagine if you can, a slightly overweight teenager with only one lip and an oversized tongue and rather garbled speech who wanted to have a social life like everyone else, but worried that nobody would even dream of kissing him because it might seem like kissing a monster. It took him months to stir up the nerve to ask Carol out, but she accepted. They went to a movie and then spent hours talking, and he wanted so much to kiss her but he was afraid. He didn't even try.

When Carol finally said, "I need to go home now," David blurted out that he really wanted to kiss her, and this is what how she responded:

David, I thought you'd never ask.

By the time he gets to this part of the story, as he's standing on the stage, people clearly begin to see him in a new way. "I look different to you now, right?" he asks the audience. The teenagers, especially, nodded. "To be in adolescence is, for most of us, to *be* facially deformed."³ They got it right away.

As David Roche continued to talk with the crowd, telling them poignant stories that could relate to, laughing with them – they saw him in a new way, with new eyes. They saw him as he had learned to see himself. They saw him as God saw him. And he was a beautiful person.

"We with facial deformities are children of the dark," David told the crowd. "Our shadow is on the outside. And we can see in the dark: we can see you, we see you turn away, but one day we finally understand that you turn away not from our faces but from

³ *ibid.* p. 111.

your own fears. From those things inside you that you think mark you as someone unlovable to your family, and society, and even to God.”

“All those years,” he continues, “I kept my bad stories in the dark, but not anymore. Now I am stepping out into the light.” And then he said the most extraordinary thing of all: **“This face has turned out to be an elaborately disguised gift from God.”**

If God’s child named David Roche can see his “deformities” as “an elaborately disguised gift from God” then isn’t it possible that *we* might one day see *our own deformities* as peculiar gifts that allow us to see ourselves and others in a new, holy way?

Unfortunately we live in the dark much of the time. We might not be physically blind like the man who begged by the temple entrance, but like the Pharisees, we are morally blind sometimes. We are spiritually blind. We spend much too much time living in darkness.

I have a friend who took a swipe at single mothers one day in a conversation with a group of us. “Why do these women have so many babies?” he was asking. “Don’t they know realize that raising their children without a father causes a breakdown in our society? No culture can thrive with so many single parents!”

As I was listening to this little rampage, I was trying to figure out how I might gently remind this friend that his own mother was a single parent, that his own father had left his mother with three children under the age of six when he was two years old. But I wasn’t sure how I could say this without completely humiliating him. It was astonishing how blind he was to the fact that he was describing his own family and he didn’t even realize it.

We are often blind to the reality of our own lives. We are often “in the dark” about who we are and what we are. And we are content there – living in the darkness.

Like my friend, the Pharisees were spiritually blind. The Pharisees were blind to the fact that *they* – supposedly the best educated and holiest men of the temple – were more concerned with the rules (that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, God forbid) than with the fact that Jesus had just miraculously healed a man who was blind from birth with a little mud and spit.

They set out to do whatever legalistic gymnastics they could to discount this miracle:

- Maybe this wasn’t the same man who had been blind. Maybe he just *looked* like the one who used to beg by the temple.

- Maybe his parents could refute this claim. (They didn't want to be kicked out of the synagogue so they said they didn't know anything about the situation.) "Go ask our son yourselves; he is of age," they said.
- They interviewed the man himself once and then again. Exactly how did Jesus do this? "All I know," the man said, "Was that I was blind and now I see. He opened my eyes."

As we move closer and closer to Easter, this is the perfect time to pray to God to open *our* eyes.

Is there a person who is driving us crazy? Maybe God could allow us to see that person with the eyes of Christ.

Is there a hurdle we are trying to overcome, but it is so overwhelmingly difficult, we are killing ourselves trying to conquer it? Maybe God could allow us to see a new way to prevail, a strategy we've never noticed.

Is there a way of life we long to have, a goal we imagine attaining, a place in this world we have seen in our dreams which has become our god, the thing we more than anything else in life? Maybe God could help us see life in a different way to the point that we find contentment in worshipping something more lasting than a certain lifestyle or a certain possession.

Jesus came so that people could see. But we continue to live in darkness. We have been exposed to the Light of the World. But still we live in the dark.

When David Roche – the man with the facial deformity – finished his talk, Ann Lamott writes that “there was thunderous applause” and I can't help but think that people were applauding God as much as they were applauding this instrument of God. God had transformed this man in the man's own eyes and in the eyes of that audience. He was once seen as a monster but now he was seen as a glorious child of God with crystal blue eyes and silvery hair.

“He bowed shyly . . . beaming at us all,” Ann Lamott writes. “He held his palms up as if about to give a benediction. His hands caught the light like those of the youngest child there.”⁴

We, too, are God's children and a light has shined upon us. To see ourselves as *God* sees us, to see others as God sees *them*, to see the world with the eyes of God – this is our prayer. This is our benediction. May God's light touch *our* lives and heal us and help us to see.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 112.

Let us pray:

Oh, Lord forgive our blindness.

Only by your hand are we healed, O Lord. As you blend together the peculiar ingredients of our lives and create something new, take even what is disgusting and use it for good.

Wash us, O God – in spit and mud, in whatever it takes to help us see clearly. We pray this in the name of Jesus who came so that we might see. Amen.