



# Lent 4A

March 16, 2020

## The Lectionary Gospel —

### John 9:1–41

Author: Scott Hoezee

#### Sample Sermon: Now I See:

It was probably the big goofy grin on his face that kept some folks from recognizing him. Oh, they'd seen him for years. But rarely had they seen him at eye level. Instead they'd long ago grown accustomed to seeing this hapless man *sitting*, legs akimbo, on the ground near the entrance to the farmer's market. He had a tin cup in front of him, a white cane propped up next to him, and he stared out at the world with eyes that were clearly as dead as two pale pieces of china. He was the epitome of pathetic. He was not the kind of person you wanted to linger over. A quick glance is about all most people managed before averting their eyes.

But now, suddenly, he's walking around town grinning like a Cheshire cat and repeating over and over—as though a mantra—"I once was blind but now I see!" And the townsfolk stopped and stared. "Is that? No, couldn't be. Still . . . I think that's him." Others chimed in, "Of course it's not him—blind people don't get better. It's probably just someone who *looks* like him." But the man himself put that idea to rest. "No, it really is me. *I once was blind but now I see!*" And as he walked along, the goofy grin got so big it practically squinted shut those eyes that were now as alive and as limpid as lake water on a clear blue day.

A big, goofy grin. I'm sure it's the right way to picture this man. But do you know what's heartbreaking, what's tragic, about John 9? This man is the *only* one who is smiling. How can that be? A grand miracle had taken place! You'd think that everywhere you looked you'd see goofy grins, broad smiles, maybe even a few folks wiping away some tears of joy. It's not every day, after all, that the power of God gets displayed so brilliantly. But that doesn't happen. Instead this story is mostly about as grim and somber and serious as you can imagine. The whole thing ends up being about as cheery as reading a courtroom transcript. Why is it that no one seems able to savor the miracle?

And make no mistake: this was a very big miracle. It's even grander than we mostly realize. For many of us, we've grown accustomed to reading stories about Jesus' healing a blind person—a

person who then starts walking or running around the same as anyone else. We are so accustomed to this kind of thing in the gospels that we forget how powerful such a miracle is. Because as the late neurologist Oliver Sacks once pointed out, for once-blind people to function, they need to have not just their optic hardware repaired but they need to get the necessary mental software installed, too.

The ability to see is one-part a physical phenomenon but also one-part a mental exercise.

Functioning as a sighted person requires having access to a long backlog of visual *experience*.

That's why even today blind people who surgically receive the ability to see cannot instantly begin to act like all other seeing persons—they cannot just stroll out of the hospital following surgery. Without having had any prior experience with things like depth perception, the formerly blind find themselves reaching for objects that are actually well out-of-reach even as they may knock over a glass of water which is closer than they thought.

Likewise the once-blind misjudge steps and bump into walls all because they have not yet acquired the knack for interpreting visual data. Some even continue to use their white canes for a while so that they can slowly begin to connect how the world has always *felt* through the tip of the cane with how it now *looks* through their eyeballs. As it turns out, this matter of sight is a bit more complex than we might think. But that just makes Jesus' miracle all the more marvelous!

Yet only the one man is smiling. Everyone else is deadly serious. And the reason for this is as startling as it is tragic: there were some who just didn't want God around. Or they were OK with the idea of encountering God but then it had best be on *their* terms and according to their pre-conditions.

For the Pharisees it was simple: "If God were here, we'd know it because he'd look just like us, act like us, and follow our rules. This Jesus fellow doesn't fit that bill so his divine pretensions are as sinful as they are laughable." They'd know God when they saw him and Jesus . . . well, he was not it!

It's sobering, isn't it, to see the contortions of the Pharisees here? They will condemn anyone, say anything, deny iron-clad facts if that's what it takes to prop up their own views of God. If it were not so tragic, it would be really, really funny. But as it stands, the only funny thing in this story is the healed man's goofy grin and his own contagious enthusiasm for Jesus. "*I once was blind but now I see! I've been touched by the power of God!*" When the Pharisees tell him that God had nothing to do with this, his reaction is as honest as it is accurate: "Well, OK, but if you can explain what happened to me without reference to God, I'd love to hear it! Because—and forgive me if I've mentioned this before—*I once was blind but now I see!*"

Some people are annoyingly happy.

For the Pharisees, there's just too much joy going on here and so in the end they throw this man out on his ear. If they cannot get him to stop celebrating the goodness of God, they can at least put him out of earshot.

Among the great ironies of this story in John 9 is this: both the disciples and the Pharisees try to make a connection between bad things and God. "God must have been pretty mad at someone to produce a guy like this," the disciples say when they first see this blind beggar, "so who messed up, Lord? This fellow or his folks?"

That's how a lot of people operate: you see something bad, you chalk it up to someone's sin and make God out to be the one who punishes sin. The universe operates on the principle of *quid pro quo*, of tit for tat. Oddly, though, when the people in this story encounter the profoundly *good* thing of an awesome healing, they do everything in their power to *not* connect that good thing with God. Some, it seems, are more comfortable with making God out to be the dispenser of punishment than the decanter of something good.

Apparently it's fully possible to be in the presence of the light of the world and still be in the dark. But if it weren't for the fact that it's the religious people in this story who seem the most prone to put on spiritual sunglasses to keep out the light, John 9 might be less troubling. As it stands, however, those of us who consider ourselves religious folks today have plenty of reason to wonder whether—or how often—we fail to celebrate the work of God just in case the shape of that work doesn't fit the bill of how we think things ought to go. How often don't we let our own scruples keep us from celebrating God's presence in the lives of others?

It was shortly after World War II when the World Council of Churches decided to check on how its money was being spent in a remote area of the Balkans where the World Council was trying to help needy churches re-build after the war. So it dispatched Dr. John Mackie, who was at the time an officer with the WCC and the president of the Church of Scotland. Accompanying him were two other pastors, both of whom came from a fairly conservative, pietistic denomination. One afternoon they paid a visit to an Orthodox priest in a remote village. The man was clearly thrilled to receive the visit in that he otherwise worked in rather lonely isolation.

Immediately upon seating the guests in his study, the priest produced a box of fine Havana cigars and offered one to each of his three guests. Dr. Mackie gingerly took one, bit the end off, lit it, and took a few puffs, saying how fine it was. The other two pastors looked horrified. "No thank you! We do *not* smoke!" they quickly said.

Feeling bad that he maybe had offended the two brothers, the priest wanted to make amends and so left the room only to re-appear with a flagon of his finest wine. Dr. Mackie took a glassful, swirled it, sniffed it like a connoisseur, and then praised its fine quality. Soon he asked for another glass.

Meanwhile his traveling companions drew back even more visibly. "No thank you! We do *not* drink!" they snapped. Well, later when the three returned to their car, the two pastors assailed Mackie.

"Here you are an officer with the World Council and the leader of Scotland's Church and yet you smoke and drink!?" "No, I don't," he barked at them. "But **somebody** in there had to be a Christian!"

"God cannot have been involved in this incident because it does not conform to our rules and patterns" the Pharisees concluded. "Disagree with us, and you're a greasy sinner. Period. End of discussion." That's how the glory of God gets missed, even in the church yet today. Traditions and scruples and rubrics and books of order can make us spiritually blind just as surely as any injury to our eyes could make us physically blind. But maybe we'd smile more even as God's people if we found ways to remain open to the endless surprises of God's Spirit.

It's curious, isn't it, to notice that in John 9—so long as the wrangling and wrestling and arguing is going on in an effort to debunk the miracle that had so plainly taken place—Jesus disappears from

view. From verse 7 until verse 35 the Son of God is nowhere to be seen. I don't think it's coincidental. The minute we start denying the work of God in Christ Jesus our Lord so as to make things neat and tidy and in conformity to how **we** like things done, it's pretty tough to see the real Jesus. And it's really difficult to generate any goofy grins over his ever-surprising and always-marvelous work.

Jesus disappears from this story when the main action is an attempt to define what God would or would not do. But once we get back to just the man with the goofy grin, Jesus re-appears from out of nowhere to ask the man such a simple question: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Just point him out to me," the man replies, "I'd love to lay these eyes on the fellow!" "It's me," Jesus says, and for the first time in his life, the man discovered what it is to get bleary-eyed with tears. He worshiped Jesus without hesitation, without checking in any catechism or rule book to see if worshiping this man would be an orthodox thing to do.

It's such a moving spectacle, at least for those with eyes to see. Of course, it was totally boring to the few Pharisees still lingering on the fringes. Their steely-eyed scowls told Jesus and this man all they needed to know. But by this point in the story, even those unbelieving yahoos were not enough to overcome the joy of the last scene. And I imagine that as Jesus eventually went on his way, this man waved at him and kept on waving until Jesus finally disappeared out of sight.

As the man turned to go back home, he was no doubt tired after such an eventful day. On his cheeks you could trace the tracks of his tears of joy. And as the picture on this story now fades to black, the last thing we notice as he trudges home is that once again, the edges of his mouth are starting to curl up. Because wherever we find the real Jesus at work, there's just no repressing all those smiles. Or as Jesus once put it, "Blessed are you who mourn now, for you will *laugh!*" In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

***Additional Resources for Lent and Holy Week now available.***



## Old Testament Lectionary —

### 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Author: Stan Mast

In our first reading for this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we are introduced to the most famous king of Israel, David son of Jesse. It's a favorite passage for many Bible students because of the parade of likely candidates from Jesse's family, each of whom is rejected, and then the entrance of the least likely candidate, the shepherd boy wandering in from the fields with burrs in his hair and the smell of

sheep in his clothes.

Right at the heart of that delightful story of David's anointing is the passage that has seized the imagination of millions. "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Verse 7 has been used to warn against judging a book by its cover and to justify wearing slovenly clothes and slurping coffee during divine worship.

But verse 7 is not really what this passage is about. It is about Yahweh's continued campaign against sin and evil, a battle that began in Paradise Fallen and will end in Paradise Restored. The RCL is helping us follow that campaign during Lent by focusing on stories that feature "One for All."

First, there was Adam (and Eve), the first humans, whose terrible choice ruined it for all of us. Then, there was Abram, the first patriarch, whose election by God as covenant head became the source of blessing for all the world. Moses came next in this parade of mediators, the great leader and prophet who led Israel into liberty and received the royal law of liberty on Mount Sinai. Now we come to the first king, by whom God will establish a line of royalty from which the greatest "One for All" will be born.

Of course, David was not the very first king. That's why we find Samuel, the king maker, in deep mourning as our story opens. "The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel?'" That points us back to chapter 15 which ended in tears—the tears of Samuel, the tears of God, and, though unmentioned, the tears of Saul (see verses 14 and 15 of this chapter). He had been the very first king of Israel, a magnificent specimen of a man, a head taller than all of his people, much loved by them, and by himself.

That was Saul's fatal flaw—he had a big head. He thought he knew what to do as King even better than God did. So, in a critical moment, he obeyed God, but not completely. When God commanded complete destruction of the Amalekites, a people who had continually opposed God's great campaign to establish his kingdom on earth, Saul did only part of the bloody job of redemption. In the name of sound politics and sacrificial duty, he spared the King of the Amalekites and many of their flocks. God was so displeased that he rejected Saul as King, because if God's representative on earth would not obey completely, how could he lead God's kingdom.

That's why our text opens with sorrow all around, but God is determined to continue his campaign. Two times before this, God had promised that there would be a new king. Now he shakes Samuel out of his mourning and sends him on a crucial mission— "be on your way—" which sounds very like God's command to Abram and Moses. Like those great Ones, Samuel obeys. Unlike Saul, "Samuel did what the Lord said (verse 4)."

He went with a horn filled with oil. Indeed, filling that horn is God's first command to sad Samuel, clearly hinting that this journey was all about anointing. And, of course, it was. The word "anointing" is found three more times in these few verses. As all students of Scripture know, the word "anointing" is the word from which "Messiah" comes. Samuel is commanded to go and anoint the next king, who will be the Messiah for his people and the type of the Messiah who became the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

But, like so much of the subsequent story of God's campaign, this one is filled with surprises. God is always doing things in ways we do not expect. Thus, God commands Samuel to go the smallest clan of the smallest tribe of Israel. As God so often does, he will choose the least likely (I Cor. 1:26-29) to accomplish his great work. Jesse is a name we've heard before, in the genealogy at the end of Ruth. This mission is not a helter-skelter foray into the unknown. God knows what God is doing, even though we don't, most of the time.

The surprises continue when Samuel expresses fear of Saul. Ain in itself, that's not surprising, given that Samuel had told Saul he had been rejected as King. The surprise lies in the "pious ruse" God advises Samuel to pull off. "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord'." Now, Samuel did sacrifice that heifer, but the sacrifice wasn't really the reason for Samuel's presence at Jesse's home in Bethlehem. He was there to "anoint for me the one I indicate." This kind of subterfuge doesn't seem to comport with God's truthfulness. It's surprising, unless we say that in war sometimes you have to bend the truth to accomplish your mission.

The central surprise in the story is God's choice among Jesse's sons—not the oldest, in accordance with tradition, not even the second or third, for which there is precedence in the long story, but the last son, the one out tending sheep, the most menial of jobs. "The Lord does not look at things man looks at... the Lord looks at the heart." God was looking for a man "after his own heart (I Sam. 13:14)." The man after God's own heart was, of all things, a shepherd, an unlikely choice that would shape Israel's kingship and Israel's Messiah.

So, it is surprising, again, that the writer of I Samuel would gush over David's appearance—"ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features (verse 12)." He adds later, "he knows how to play the harp... a brave man and a warrior... speaks well and is a fine looking man (verse 18)." Human appearance doesn't determine God's choice, but human appearance isn't the point of the text either. The point of this text is not verse 7. The point is all the verbs with God as the subject. It is God who rejects Saul. God who speaks to Samuel, God who sends, God who chooses, God who anoints through Samuel, God who sends his Spirit onto David after his anointing. Those last words of verse 13 are "the heading for the entire story of David that is to follow. He is the divinely designated ruler of Israel."

This passage is all about God continuing his campaign to save the world, using One to save All. When one of his chosen Ones fails, God does not quit. Instead he keeps moving through history, determined to use even the weak and lowly and despised to accomplish his great purpose of saving the world. The war with disobedience and rebellion that began in the Garden will come to its climactic battle on the cross after a crucial moment in another Garden. And through many surprising turns of events, that war will come to its victorious conclusion in the New Heaven and the New Earth in which only righteousness dwells (II Peter 3).

This season of Lent is a time for mourning as we consider our sins and failings. But as we grieve our sins, we must hear the Word of the Lord telling us to "be on your way," because our King has won the victory at the cross, reigns from his throne, and is coming again to make all things new. The sorrow of Lent is overcome by the joy of the Anointed One for All. So, keep marching with the new King, the Son of David who is the Son of our surprising God.

## Illustration Idea

Consider these stirring words from C.S. Lewis' classic [The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe](#). Through a magical wardrobe four children have stumbled into Narnia, the Kingdom where the wicked White Witch has imposed a perpetual winter. Early in their explorations of Narnia the children meet Mr. Beaver, one of the talking animals in this delightful series of books. Mr. Beaver announces, "They say Aslan is on the move—perhaps has already landed." (Aslan is, of course, the Lion who is the Christ figure in these delightful books.)

Lewis continues. "And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was... but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer."

Aslan/Yahweh/Jesus on the move through history changes the way we feel about everything. That's why we keep reading these old stories about God on the move.



## The Lectionary Psalms —

### Psalm 23

Author: Scott Hoezee

Psalm 23 is hands-down the most famous of the 150 psalms in the Psalter. In terms of recognizability, Psalm 23 is probably right up there with popular ditties like "Roses are red, violets are blue," with Shakespearean sonnets like "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," and well-known song lyrics like "Happy birthday to you." If you hear even just a snippet or two of such well-known poems and songs, your mind fills in the rest automatically.

It was 1969 in Mrs. Luyk's Kindergarten room at Seymour Christian School that I first saw Psalm 23 written out on construction paper and tacked up above the blackboard. My first homework was to memorize those same words. Since then, I've seen these words chiseled onto headstones, set into stained glass windows, calligraphied onto greeting cards, embroidered onto numerous wall hangings, and set to many different tunes. In fact, most hymnals/songbooks include multiple settings of Psalm 23.

That's quite amazing given that the pastoral imagery of this poem is quite remote from our everyday

life. We can understand why the song “Happy Birthday” is so well-known: we all have many occasions every year to sing it for someone. Similarly love songs and sonnets are things we can relate to because most of us know what it’s like to be in love—plus, Valentine’s Day, wedding anniversaries, and marriage ceremonies give us any number of chances to reach for famous romantic poems and songs.

But Psalm 23 is mostly all about a shepherd and sheep, and very few of us have ever even met a shepherd. Certainly we don’t have regular contact with sheep (wool sweaters don’t count!) Speaking for myself, my primary contact with lambs comes when I’m tucking into a rack that is nicely crusted with a mustard-thyme coating of bread crumbs (definitely not an image germane to Psalm 23)! In terms of imagery, Psalm 23 doesn’t seem to have any natural connection to us in the modern world.

Most of us are far more familiar with lawyers, doctors, plumbers, and mechanics than we are with shepherds. We’ve had more experience with police officers directing traffic than we have had with sheep being directed along by a shepherd.

And yet the popularity of Psalm 23 persists. Why is that, I wonder? Psalm 23 has about it all the hallmarks of an echo from a bygone era. Our lack of contact with the pastoral world makes these words on our lips sound like some kind of anachronism. It’s like hearing a teenager saying he’s going to “dial” his friend’s phone number. That’s a funny, out-of-time expression seeing as very few people under the age of 20 have ever even seen a rotary phone with a dial on it. If we even have a landline, we don’t dial phones anymore, we punch the numbers in. Yet the old language hangs in there.

So here: by all rights Psalm 23 should fall on our ears like a foreign phrase. Yet it doesn’t. Why? Is it merely nostalgia? Or is there something more going on here? Because when you stop to think about it, by all rights Psalm 23 should have another strike against it, too: in this nation of rugged, self-made individuals where every person is encouraged to become his or her own ethical referee, taking life as it comes and making up the rules as he or she goes along: in a society like this one, why would we want to have much to do with an ancient psalm that talks about being led around by someone else? We live by the customer mentality in America. I want it my way right away (and while we’re at it, I will be the one to determine what my way is).

As thoughtful writers like Eugene Peterson and David Wells once noted, even the church has been affected by this wider cultural mentality. Church leaders are still referred to as “pastors,” which means “shepherd,” of course. But more and more seminaries are training pastors not so much to be shepherds but leaders, facilitators, vision-casters, managers.

And yet Psalm 23 endures. Why? Because in the deep places of our souls, I suspect that we all sense that maybe everybody needs a shepherd. Way down deep in places we don’t talk about when we’re laughing it up at a party, we long for someone bigger, wiser, and stronger to take care of us. In these days when we think so much about Homeland Security, we all realize again how much we’d enjoy more security than we usually have any given day.

Psalm 23 evokes this for us and in us. Everybody needs a shepherd because no one gets off the planet alive. But if we need a shepherd in this ultimate sense, it seems only natural to want to start being led by this same shepherd as soon as possible. We need someone already now who can



restore our often troubled souls.

Psalms 23 starts out with what looks to be an overly rosy picture. The images of green pastures, still waters, and righteous paths sound very nice but not necessarily like a description of an average day. Similarly the banquet imagery to which this psalm switches near the end doesn't apply to every moment of our lives, does it? Sometimes our cups overflow and we have a table prepared in the presence of our enemies, but at other times our cups dry up and it seems like our enemies are feasting on *us*!

But the center of the psalm introduces that necessary element of realism, too. Psalm 23 does a good job covering the spectrum of our lives from good times to bad ones, from sunny seasons to death's darker valleys. The constant in life needs to be the presence of that shepherd. The statement of faith contained in verse 1 does not deny that sometimes we experience hardship, fear, loss, and even death. The point of that opening verse is that in good times and bad, in times of great gain and great loss, if the Lord God Yahweh is our shepherd, we have what we need.

In fact, the Hebrew of verse 1 is intriguingly left open-ended. The verb "to lack" does not have any object. The new translation says, "I shall not be in want," but the older version may have been closer to the Hebrew original: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ." what? If someone says, "I think I am missing . . ." the logical thing to ask is, "You think you're missing *what*." So in Psalm 23:1: if the psalmist wants to say he is not lacking, you might wonder what specifically he's talking about.

But instead it's left open-ended as if to say that if the Lord God is with us, whatever else in life we may wish we had, the bottom line is that we are still OK so long as we are under this shepherd's care.

In Hebrew poetry lines don't rhyme but use parallelisms. A first line is echoed by a very similar second line yet the second line usually deepens the meaning of the first. As Tom Long once pointed out, we do the same thing when we speak parallel lines such as, "My son is thirteen. He's a *teenager*." In a sense both lines mean the same thing but the social-emotional freight gets loaded onto the word "teenager" in the second line, deepening the meaning behind the number "thirteen" in the first line. It's the second line that lets everyone know that you are conveying more than the chronological age of your child. He's not just thirteen, he's a *teenager* replete with all the adolescent *Sturm und Drang* and struggle that can go with that.

The opening verse here does the same thing. "The Lord is my shepherd" gets mirrored by the parallel line, "I will not lack." This poet just said the same thing twice but the second line now fills in the meaning of the first line. What kind of a shepherd is our God? The one in whose presence we will never finally be lacking. In his presence and under his guidance, we'll never be alone, never be abandoned, never travel down a path where he cannot follow in his goodness and love. So what is it you will not lack? You'll never lack for a God who loves you, who cares for you, and who has prepared a place for you. *That* is who your shepherd is. And he abides with you even when you enter that place none of us can finally avoid: the valley of the shadow of death.

Is it any wonder that the Lord Jesus who entered death ahead of us in order to blaze a trail to eternal life picked up on this pastoral image to say, "I am the good shepherd and my sheep know my voice." Jesus is the one who has revealed that if all along in this world death has been casting a kind of

shadow, maybe it's only because a brighter light has been shining behind death all along—that's how you get a shadow after all: a light shines behind something. Jesus is the shepherd who knows the way through death to get at that light.

The world and our culture have changed much since that era when Psalm 23 was composed thousands of years ago. But we still like it. We like it because we need it. Everybody needs a shepherd. And the good news of the gospel is that we now follow that most remarkable of all shepherds: the one who is himself one of us, a Lamb—a Lamb that looks to have been slain at that.

This Shepherd-Lamb walks with us, his shepherd's crook now in the shape of a cross leading us on, prodding us, protecting us, and taking us home in the end. When we were in Kindergarten and the teacher had us memorize these words, our young voices sweetly intoned that line about a banquet "in the presence of mine enemies." Truth is, back in Kindergarten we didn't know what an enemy was and probably we didn't have any real ones.

But we're older now. Now we've got enemies and we are altogether too acquainted with that final enemy named death. Now more than ever we need a shepherd to guide us through death's chill shadow in this dangerous world. Life is not easy. It's not all still waters and green grass. We wish it were and we pine for the day when maybe that will describe our every waking moment. But until that day comes, we can know and celebrate again and again that the Lord is our shepherd. With this great and good shepherd of the sheep with us, we lack nothing because in his presence we already have everything.

***Additional Resources for Lent and Holy Week now available.***

### **Illustration Idea**

I am told that unlike cattle who like to be driven from behind, sheep prefer to be led. Sheep apparently have an uncanny ability to form a trusting relationship with their shepherds. I read sometime back that a sleeping flock of sheep will not stir if their own shepherd steps gingerly through their midst. But let a stranger so much as set foot near the flock, and the sheep will startle awake as though a firecracker had gone off. In fact, in the Middle East to this day, you may see three or four Bedouin shepherds all arrive at a watering hole around sundown. Within minutes these different flocks of sheep mix in together to form one big amalgamated flock. But the various shepherds don't worry about this mix-up because each shepherd knows that when it's time to go, all he has to do is give his own distinctive whistle, call, or play his little shepherd's flute in his own unique fashion, and all of *his* sheep will separate themselves from the mixed-up herd to follow the shepherd they've come to trust.



## Ephesians 5:8-14

Author: Doug Bratt

Few Lectionary texts begin more mysteriously than this Sunday's Epistolary Lesson. "You were once darkness," Paul reminds Ephesus's Christians, "but now you are light in the Lord" (8).

The apostle seems to assert that God's adopted sons and daughters don't just naturally live in spiritual darkness. We naturally *are* spiritual darkness. God doesn't just summon God's beloved people to walk in the light. In Ephesians 5:8 Paul also insists that we *are* "light in the Lord."

Those who choose to proclaim this Sunday's mysterious RCL Epistolary Lesson will, as always, want to begin to unpack it by setting it in its literary context. Paul begins chapter 5 by identifying his readers as God's "dearly loved children." He then calls his adopted brothers and sisters in Christ to imitate God by especially living a "life of love" (2).

Yet while our culture easily confuses love with some kind of sexual activity, God, says the apostle, sets clear limits on acts of sexual intimacy. To a society that in some ways glorifies sexual acts, Paul insists, "there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed" (3). The sexual intimacy that we so easily confuse with love has, in other words, its proper place for God's dearly loved children. But it's only in the context of marriage.

In fact, Paul goes on to insist in verse 4, not even the kinds of vulgarity that so easily attach themselves to sexual intimacy outside of marriage's context have any place in God's people's lives. There is no room, he insists there, for things like "obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking." Do not even be "partners" with those who peddle in such inappropriate behavior and language, Paul adds in verse 7.

Why? Well, answers the apostle, "once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (8). In doing so he is perhaps saying that those who act and talk in spiritually darkened ways easily become spiritual darkness itself.

It's perhaps the mirror image of the saying that if you want to love someone, act like you love her, and your feelings will follow. Paul may, in fact, be claiming that those who act in spiritually darkened ways are in danger of becoming spiritual darkness itself.

But, of course, God's dearly beloved children whom the Spirit is transforming don't want to be spiritual darkness or even act in spiritually dark ways. By God's amazing grace, we want to be spiritual light. Christ has graciously "shone" (14) on naturally spiritually dead people like his followers. Now we want to reflect something of the glory of God that we see most clearly in Christ. God's dearly beloved people want to be so characterized by our imitation of Jesus Christ that we actually *are* "light in the Lord."

How can God's adopted sons and daughter be characterized by "light in the Lord?" Since we are light in the Lord, we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, act in ways that reflect our status before

God. “Live as children of light,” the apostle insists. “Be who you are,” we might say. “You are light in the Lord. Now be light in the Lord.”

Of course, as my colleague Scott Hoezee noted in a wonderful earlier Sermon Starter on this text (March 20, 2017), God’s dearly beloved children don’t live as children of the light because we’re better than those who live in darkness. Jesus’ followers don’t live as children of the light because try to be better than people who are darkness. We live as children of the light because we are by God’s wondrous grace children of the light.

How, then, do God’s adopted sons and daughters live as children of the light? Paul summons us to let the Spirit fill our lives with “all goodness, righteousness and truth” (9). These are, after all, among God’s chief characteristics. Jesus’ life was characterized by goodness, righteousness and truth. What’s more, God created us to live in good, righteous and true ways.

On top of all that, since even the children of the light may have a hard time discerning what goodness, righteousness and truth look like, Paul summons us “find out what pleases the Lord” (10). The pursuit of those Christ-like virtues isn’t an individual chase. It’s something God’s dearly beloved children seek to discern in conversation with the Spirit through the Scriptures and Christ’s Church.

Verses 11-14 suggest that part of what children of the light discern is a commitment to both completely avoid and expose “fruitless deeds of darkness” (11). While we may think those deeds of darkness include the sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking Paul earlier mentioned, Ephesians 5’s proclaimers also want to remember what Paul goes on to say.

Those deeds of darkness may include foolishness and drunkenness (17-18), as well as acting in unhealthy ways in relationships between wives and husbands, children and parents, employers and employees. The deeds of darkness Paul calls us to avoid and expose are, in other words, not just moral in character; they’re also relational.

The Washington Metro Area Transit Authority has been running a campaign whose slogan is, “If you see something, say something.” It’s designed to encourage riders to speak up and out when they see something inappropriate or suspicious on its trains and buses.

Those who proclaim and hear Ephesians 5 might riff on that slogan: “If you see something that’s darkness, say something about it.” Because God speaks up against all sexual immorality and coarseness, as well as any kind of impurity and greed, God’s dearly beloved children do as well. Because Jesus constantly advocated for healthy relationships, his followers do as well.

Of course, those who proclaim and hear Ephesians 5 on this particular Sunday live under the virtual worldwide cloud the coronavirus (COVID-19) casts. Nearly all of us wonder just how God wants God’s dearly loved children who are light in the Lord to live as children of light in the shadow of this virus.

The Paul who writes Ephesians 5 obviously doesn’t directly address this question. He, after all, writes nearly 2,000 years before COVID-19 broke out. Yet those who proclaim this Sunday’s Epistolary Lesson do well to consider some possible applications of it to this current health crisis.

Paul's emphases on spiritually "light" and "dark" words suggest that language plays a significant role in living as children of light. Children of the light who talk about the people affected by the virus are careful not to spread the kind of racism that seems to be emanating from possible sources of this virus. God's dearly loved children are also careful about the language we use to describe the coronavirus and its victims. What's more, Jesus' followers work to expose untruths about the coronavirus.

The shadow threats like COVID-19 cast are dark and sobering. But children of the light who wish to live in the light understand that nothing can dim the light that Christ both casts and implants deep within us. We seek to reflect that light in all of our world's dark corners, including those darkened by COVID-19.

### **Illustration Idea**

In a January 30, 2020 *Christianity Today* article entitled, "What Martin Luther Teaches Us About Coronavirus," Jenny Yang describes Martin Luther's response to the re-emergence of the Black Death in his hometown and surrounding area. Luther offered advice for God's dearly loved children who were dealing with the contagion. It may help both Ephesians 5's proclaimers and hearers to think about living as children of light in the coronavirus's shadow.

First, says Yang, "Luther argued that anyone who stands in a relationship of service to another has a vocational commitment not to flee." People in ministry, Luther wrote, "must remain steadfast before the peril of death." Those who are sick and dying, after all, need someone to comfort and strengthen them, as well as administer the sacraments to them.

What's more, notes Yang, Luther called public officials to stay at their "posts" in order to maintain civic order. Public servants were to continue their professional duties. Parents and guardians were, said Luther, to do their duties toward their children.

But, adds Yang, Luther did "not encourage his readers to expose themselves recklessly to danger. His letter constantly straddles two competing goods: honoring the sanctity of one's own life, and honoring the sanctity of those in need." Luther also defended the need for public health measures that included quarantines and seeking medical help when it's needed. "In fact," Yang adds, "Luther proposes that not to do so is to act recklessly."

Luther's advice is both pertinent and challenging in challenging times for both those who are darkness and those who are light in the Lord.



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