

Sermon for 19 March 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fourth Sunday in Lent/UMCOR Sunday

Scriptures: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23 (UMC p. 137, *response 1*); Ephesians 5 :8-14; John 9 :1-41

« **Stuck** »

Deep into Lent, we're confronted with the tough going we know all about as Jesus' friends.

Scripture gives us examples: Samuel faces God's giving up on Israel's first king, Saul ... who was God's own choice. It's as though God is learning from humans' mistakes.

That's a hard take on humankind's nature; but God's stubborn willingness to try again with David keeps the story going, and the boy whose grateful mother gave him to the Lord in gratitude for having a child in the first place now cooperates and anoints David as Saul's successor.

Sounds like life for us believers, over and over.

Then Psalm 23, sung by the man David, provides beautiful support for all of those hard years we go through as believers .. and describes our many times of grateful renewal and regrouping, rebirth.

Then Ephesians shows us what it's like to be in a group of believers ... family ... "Don't you ever lie to each other, or abuse each other ... be kind, and also face your mistakes and listen to one another ... run your show like being good is better than anything that just satisfies your ego... That's what God wants."

In other words, life in the real, like you all know it, is the only thing we're supposed to talk about in church.

Then John's Gospel gives us a story where a man blind from birth gets healed, without ever even asking for it ... and neither he nor anybody else gets to be happy about it. His family rejects him, Jesus the healer did it but disappeared, everybody who's reputable argues over how it happened ... and we're not getting anywhere ... unless you accept the final pompous conclusion John gives Jesus as saying, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

That seems like an awful thing to say; but this is how we talk in church.

The Bible scholars remind us that the church was suffering a great deal by the time the Gospel of John was written, late in the first century A.D. Christians were no longer hopeful of staying Jewish, and the Romans were doing their best to put both Jews and Christians out of business as they themselves fell more and more apart as an empire ...

It looked to lots of people like what we dread is going to happen in our time or our children's.

In our case, either the course of nature, or of human affairs themselves, is headed for destruction, and only outside intervention can possibly save it all.

That's Lent this year. That's the middle of our retreat to get a better grip on our faith. That's how the Holy Spirit comes ... to a people despairing of anything we can do after the way God has allowed things to develop.

Where is Psalm 23 when we need it?

Somewhere near Samuel, who patiently obeys God's orders to call a meeting with Jesse and his sons because God has plans for a new direction under a fresh administration we're supposed to launch and support.

Somewhere near Paul, as he patiently teaches the little Ephesian fellowship that nothing but the kindest, bravest, most honest kind of home life and work life are worth doing, because we have enough light to see by, and enough skill to improve things right where we are ... which in our time means reaching all over the world, because nothing we do stays hidden long, with the internet and the skills we have as human beings at this stage ... but only if we do better than anybody does in that Gospel vignette John gives us today.

Only if, as the Bible commentator I read and trust, Fred Craddock, a Disciples of Christ preacher and teacher ... in other words, one of those people talking Gospel sense that every one of us runs into and knows well and keeps showing up if we study and pray and work at believing like we and those who presented us at baptism agreed we'd always do, and we said we trusted we'd always have around to learn from, God would never leave us without teachers and good sense and inner strength enough to join hands with ... only if we face up to the truth that we're all stuck, and the truth is, "The healing has made it clear: light comes to those who recognize that life is blindness without Christ; darkness comes to those without Christ who claim to see."

That's an awful way to put it, unless you recognize that there's an inner light that comes to everyone, and there's a beautiful unity to everything around us

Phrase it any way that suits you. Admit people these days are often creapped out by such Bible stories as John tells. Find out another way to put it. Above all, don't act like it isn't the center of your life. Your credentials aren't good for anything else. This is the point. In mercy and simplicity, give yourself to the trust that Jesus is Lord ... and learn how to act that out in modern language, until you're out of this world.

Otherwise, we're all stuck. That's how stubborn God is. Failing once, failing a thousand times, the center of reality ... Jahweh ... Elohim ... the Energy running things ... choose your name for it ... is that intent, that gracious, that abiding, that adoring of what is real and alive and among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

