Lent 4—Year A
I Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Whew—this is a complicated and loooong passage from **John's gospel**—41 verses to be specific—thank you lectionary!—and I'm indebted to Anna Shine for several conversations this week where we kicked this passage back and forth.

Jesus is walking along, and he sees a man born blind from birth. His disciples ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" What's the cause of this **impaired condition**? And in that time, the answer was often, **sin**. Somebody must of **sinned** to cause this bad thing to happen. So, who **sinned**? Who's at fault? Somebody's got to be at fault. We have to find a place to lay blame because if we can assign blame then we can make sure to control for that variable and make sure that it doesn't happen to us. We may scoff at that 1st century worldview and call it an outdated view of a condition, but you don't have to dig too deep in our time to find that same worldview when it comes to illness. In some Christian circles, if you're sick, then it must be your lack of faith. If you just prayed harder, then you'd be made well. Or, going a bit further, how often do we see someone afflicted with an physical illness and wonder if they played a part in causing it, or if someone suffers with a mental health condition or substance abuse, we start scanning their history to look for who caused it. Our world casts plenty of judgment when it comes to the circumstances one might find themselves in. We have a very hard time believing that *some things just are*.

Well, **Jesus** nips this "who's to blame" thinking in the bud: **"Neither this man nor his parents sinned…"** For **Jesus**, it's not about affixing blame or locating sin as a cause of this, or any number of conditions in which we find ourselves, but it's much more about transformation.

But then it gets a little problematic when **Jesus** says, **"He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."** That's even worse, *so God causes illness*? Ooooh, I don't like where this is going at all. We'll come back to this.

Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud with his saliva, and spreads the mud on the man's eyes. He tells the man to "go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent)." Then [the man] goes and washes and comes back able to see.

The neighbors and those who'd seen him before as a beggar began to ask "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" They disagree. Some said, "Yep, it's him." Others were like, "Nah, it's someone like him."

The man kept saying, "I'm the man." But the neighbors kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?

He just told them what happened: **"The man called Jesus, he made some mud, spread it on my eyes, told me to go to Siloam and wash. I did. I went and washed and received my sight."**

They said to the man, "Well, where is he?" The man's like, "I don't know." How would he know where Jesus went because Jesus was long gone by the time he got to Siloam to wash and he couldn't see *anybody* before then, let alone see where they went?

So, the **neighbors** do a most neighborly thing, they **haul the man who had been formerly blind off to the Pharisees**. Now we get a juicier detail. The text tells us, **"Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes."** This is about to go south in a hurry.

The **Pharisees start in on questioning the man about how he received his sight.** The man holds steady, but you do wonder if he's starting to get a little exasperated, **"He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."**

At this point, the **Pharisees diverge—some say, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath,"** i.e. *"Jesus broke the rules."* **But others say, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?"** And just like so much in our world today, we hear, **"And they were divided."**

So, **they ask the man another question, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." And the man replied, "He is a prophet."**

Now the language jumps to **"the Jews"**—that tips us off that there is a bigger agenda here. This is one of those places where the reality of the author of John's community gets played out in the narrative. It's late in the first century, and the followers of Jesus, who were also still practicing Jews, have just been thrown out of the synagogues. And their exclusion made for a lot of grief in their own hearts. So, whenever we read "the Jews" in John's gospel, we have to understand that there is very real pain and grief in play.

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"

The parents reply, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we don't know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." Beautiful answer—completely honors their son's sense of agency.

And then the text tells us: **"His parents said this because *they were afraid of the Jews*; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be *put out of the synagogue*. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'"** It isn't just about respecting their son's agency, but the fear that comes through association. That's more complex and problematic. *When someone is taking some shots, and we step back, is it truly to honor their agency, OR to keep ourselves out of the line of fire because we are afraid?* I once heard a speaker at the Wild Goose Festival speak about **true solidarity**, and she said, ***"If you're not getting hit by some rocks, you're not standing close enough."*** That's something for us to sit with.

The Pharisees call the man in for questioning a *second* time. "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." So, apparently, the *"he's-a-sinner" faction of the Pharisee party* won out.

The man answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

And now we see the man's exasperation spill over, **"Errr! I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?"** Then he throws in a zinger, **"Do you also want to become his disciples?"**

Then they *reviled* him, saying, "*You* are his disciple, but *we* are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." When all else fails, play the status card. Remember that whole conversation in **Paul** a few weeks ago about some saying **they belong to Apollos** and some to **Paul** and

some to **Cephas** and some to **Christ**. Yep, we humans do this all the time when we are backed into a corner and feel defensive.

And then the man loses it, **"Here is an astonishing thing! You don't know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God *does not* listen to sinners, but he *does* listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."**

They answered him, "*You* were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach *us*?" ***And they drove him out.***

Word got to Jesus that they'd driven the man out, and when he hears this, he goes and finds the man, and when he found him, he said, "**Do you believe in the Son of Man**?"

"And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Some of the **Pharisees were in earshot**, and they took offense. **"Surely we are not blind, are we?"** And in **typical Jesus fashion** he responds with paradox, **"If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."**

And so we end back where we began, with this whole question of **sin** and **blindness**, but completely turned on its head. ***So, what is the true blindness and what is the true sin? That's really what God and Jesus want us to wrestle with this morning.***

So many thoughts, so many questions. *First of all, did any of the neighbors ever celebrate the fact that their neighbor* ***can see****? Did any of the Pharisees ever stop to celebrate that a* ***healing*** *has taken place? No.*

Let's go back to that line that **the man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him**. The Greek word for **reveal** means **to make manifest, to bring to light, that which is hidden**. ***What God is making manifest is the man's humanity, blind or not; that he is a full and whole human being within his condition, not in spite of it.*** Yes, **he will regain his sight, but his sight serves to *reveal the blindness* in those around him who *never saw him* as a human being, but *only as a blind beggar*. He is so much more than a blind beggar; he's a human being made in the image of God, with agency and power.**

The world around this man doesn't let him evolve. They think they ***see and know how and where to place him, and they would rather hold him in that box, force him back into that mold, than change their mind.*** Have you ever **gone through a significant transformation** in your own being and then **met resistance in those around you who can't see you in this new light**?

And for the ***Pharisees, what has to change in their worldview if they admit this possibility?*** They have to **let go of their understanding of sin and blame**. That's hard, and scary, because if you can't parse out blame, the world is a little bit more out of your control. **They would rather *exclude*, *than* be out of control; they'd rather cut the man off, *than* change.**

Where are we the Pharisees? **How fully do we see others? What has to change in our world if we truly admit that another has changed? Where in our lives do we dig in with a fierce "don't ask me to rethink what I see and what I know?" Where do we make a choice to just separate ourselves from whatever is pushing us**—that's the *very definition* of "**having our sin remain,"** to ***choose* that separation from others**.

In an odd twist, **"blindness" actually forced the man into a relationship with others**, albeit begging puts one in a dependent stance, but **at least man had no illusion that he could make it in this world without the help and assistance of others**. *Whereas*, those with **"sight" had the illusion that they could cut others off and be just fine**.

Where are we the parents who **dance between honoring another's agency *and* fear, *where do we claim no opinion*** because we **don't want to get hit by the rocks the powers-the-be are throwing**, because we **don't want to risk this guilt by association and the exclusion that inevitably comes with true solidarity**?

Where are we the man who experiences lifechanging transformation through encounter with Jesus, **encounter** that **so often involves spit and dirt and mud**, **encounter** that **frees us so deeply** that it **rattles the world** who would **rather maintain their blindness**, **resist seeing what is now before them**, **than risk the change that must come if they truly see and recognize the depth and beauty and power and force of our God-infused, God-reflecting beloved being**.

The truth is…we all dance in this world moving between blindness and sight.

- May **our blindness always drive us toward one another**—how else will we find our way forward?
- And **may our sight always be in service of helping others to see**.
- May **we risk standing close enough to get hit by some rocks**,
- and **may we choose the discomfort of changing what and how we see rather than drive others out**.

If we do these things, then God will truly use all the ways we are born blind to reveal God's beautiful, powerful, glorious works. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
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The Collect
Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Readings
The First Lesson—1 Samuel 16:1-13

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD." But 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**." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and **the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward**. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

The Psalm
Psalm 23
Dominus regit me

1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

The Second Lesson—Ephesians 5:8-14

Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the **unfruitful works of darkness**, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

"Sleeper,awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."

The Gospel—John 9:1-41

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His **disciples** asked him, "Rabbi, **who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"** Jesus answered, "**Neither** this man **nor** his parents sinned; he was born blind so that **God's works might be revealed in him**. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The **neighbors** and those who had **seen him before as a beggar** began to ask, "**Is this not the man who used to sit and beg**?" Some were saying, "**It is he**." Others were saying, "**No**, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, **"I am the man."** But they kept asking him, "**Then how** were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They **brought to the Pharisees** the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a **sabbath** day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "**This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath**." But others said, "**How can a man who is a sinner** perform such signs?" And they were **divided**. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that **this is our son, and that he was born blind**; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. **Ask him; he is of age**. **He will speak for himself**." His parents said this because **they were afraid of the Jews**; for the Jews had already agreed that **anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue**. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the **second time they called the man** who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that **this man is a sinner**." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though **I was blind, now I see**." They said to him, "**What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes**?" He answered them, "**I have told you already, and you would not listen**. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they **reviled him**, saying, "You are **his disciple**, but we are **disciples of Moses**. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! **You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from**

God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "**Do you believe in the Son of Man**?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "**Lord, I believe**." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that **those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind**." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely **we are not blind, are we**?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."