

Sermon – Fourth Sunday of Lent

Scripture Texts: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *In a complex and often fearful world, people all too often use binaries to seek comfort and control. We are called, instead, to develop wisdom by turning away from fear and following where Jesus leads – even when we can only see a step at a time.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Binaries are great in theory
 - a. Observe the binary (*i.e. the choice between exactly two alternatives*) in our passage from Ephesians: a choice between light and dark.
 - i. It's obvious that we should pursue the light, which is found in "all that is good and right and true" – and that we should reject the dark with its "shameful" secrets.
 - ii. This is reflected also in the hymn we sang, which some of you know is one of my favorite hymns. We clearly want to be children of light.
 - iii. This is emphasized throughout John's Gospel, and also in our community with the name of our church, with our Lucia fest and its emphasis on light.
 - b. Binaries like the one between light and dark are found throughout our readings today:
 - i. David's coronation – Samuel is a prophet tasked with listening for God's guidance and sharing it with the people. Here, he is tasked with choosing a new king after Israel's first king, Saul, has been rejected. And, in doing so, we are presented with this binary between the perspective of God and that of mortals: we "look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."
 - ii. The Disciples – We see another binary in the disciple's question at the beginning of the Gospel passage: upon encountering a man who had been born blind, they ask "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This choice between two alternative sources of sin reflects a larger binary in the eyes of the disciples and many people of faith: that sin and rebellion lead to punishments like blindness or disability or misfortune, while God will spare and protect those who are faithful followers.
 - iii. The Pharisees – Later in the Gospels, the Pharisees present us with another binary, for in their view you either observe the Sabbath or you are "not from God." The Pharisees declare that they "know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner" because he does not conform to their religious systems and expectations.
 - c. But, binaries don't often hold up in reality.
 - i. In our story about Samuel, God may look at the heart rather than outward appearance, but David is no sooner introduced than we are told about how handsome he is and what beautiful eyes he has. And, if we follow the story, we

end up seeing that David is also a deeply flawed king, whose failings lead to even greater harm than those of Saul.

- ii. In responding to the disciples, Jesus rejects the assumption that either the man or his parents must have sinned to cause him to be born blind. And, we know that disability and misfortune are not nearly so predictable as the disciples want them to be. Senseless evil happens to decent people all too often; and sometimes people get away with all manner of evil deeds without ever seeming to face the consequences.
 - iii. And, the Pharisees end up looking foolish by so confidently proclaiming Jesus himself to be a sinner who cannot be of God, and by rejecting the honest testimony of the man born blind and of his parents.
 - d. Even the Ephesians passage ends with a call for us to move past the simple binary and to develop wisdom.
2. What is the draw of binaries?
- a. If we would develop wisdom, we must ask ourselves why binaries are so powerful. What is the draw that keeps pulling us back to them?
 - b. First, binaries are easy to understand. In a complex world, it can be helpful at times to boil things down to a simple contrast or a simple choice. This is the basis of mathematical logic, where we study statements that can only be either true or false.
 - c. Second, binaries can be powerful; we can do an awful lot in mathematics with that binary logic, and binary programming with its zeroes and ones is the basis for so much of modern computing. Binaries are also powerful rhetorically, but that power can be easily used to manipulate and control. I think of Star Wars, when Anakin Skywalker falls to the dark side and declares to his former friends that they are either with him or against him. Binary, us vs. them thinking is the basis for every war and unjust system in human history.
 - d. Most interestingly, though, I think that binaries are used to mitigate fear, as we see in both the OT story and the Gospel passage today.
 - i. Fear of failure, like Samuel: In the OT passage, the elders of Bethlehem are afraid at Samuel's arrival, because they know that anointing a new king might embroil them in a civil war. But Samuel is also, I think, afraid here – afraid because he chose Saul and he knows he could easily fail again.
 - ii. Fear of disability or misfortune, like the disciples: As they see the man born blind, the disciples are reminded of the unpredictability of the world and the fragility of our lives. Any of us could suffer a disabling accident, or be thrust into a situation of caring for a disabled loved one. The disciples are afraid of this reality, and want to believe that enough faith and obedience will spare them. But, in doing so, they throw this blind man under the bus, devaluing his life and trampling on his humanity.
 - iii. Fear of unstable circumstances and the loss of power, like the Pharisees: While it is easy to make the Pharisees the villains here, they do have reason to fear. Rome has conquered their land and brutally punishes everyone any time someone rises up to challenge their authority. They recognize that the following that Jesus is attracting, and the new world of which he speaks, challenges not only their authority, but also may challenge Rome's – and could therefore lead to devastating consequences for everyone.

3. Following Jesus into wisdom

a. Wisdom begins with humility.

- i. There is something to be admired in the (formerly) blind man's parents: though they are fearful, they do acknowledge the limits of their knowledge. This recognition is the starting point for all learning and growth.
- ii. Jesus comes so that the blind can see, but then those who claim to see will be revealed as blind.
- iii. Limits on what we can know are an inherent part of being human; this isn't to say that we should stop seeking to understand, but we must recognize that our ideas and systems will always fall short.

b. Wisdom ultimately runs counter to fear.

- i. There is a well known proverb (Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10): "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom / knowledge.
- ii. But this isn't the same kind of fear that we see driving people to binaries. That is a fear which erects barriers to knowledge by seeking comfort in reductive binaries, a fear that keeps us from relationship with those who are different than us, a fear that paralyzes.
- iii. On the other hand, the fear of the LORD is a reverence that recognizes our limits. This fear is better understood as humility; rather than reducing or paralyzing or dividing, it leads us into deeper curiosity, deeper faith, and deeper relationship. Ultimately, the fear of the LORD gives way to love, and perfect love drives out fear.
- iv. So, we would do well to ask ourselves: Where are we motivated by a fear that paralyzes and divides? For example, I see a great deal of fear driving national debate and policy around immigration – fear of those who are different and of changing demographics. More broadly, it seems like both right and left are too often driven by fear, struggling to name & question the fears that drive them.

c. Wisdom is not obtained quickly, but through faithful persistence.

- i. Look at the progression of the man born blind in this passage: he begins with uncertainty about Jesus, just testifying to the facts and admitting what he doesn't know. A bit later, after testifying a second time, he declares Jesus to be a prophet. When he is questioned a third time, he begins to get feisty – but he also comes down more firmly behind Jesus as one coming from God. And, when he is finally questioned by Jesus, he not only expresses belief but he bows in reverence before Jesus (the Greek for "worship" can also be translated this way, which would make more sense at this point in the story).
- ii. We see this illustrated in *Prince Caspian*, the second of the Chronicles of Narnia, as the children are lost in the woods and slowly catch glimpses of Aslan; rather than relying on their own sense of direction, they must follow these glimpses in faith and courage until the full path and plan is revealed.
- iii. So, it is with us. The life of faith is about growing in wisdom and love by following Jesus. It isn't always easy or natural to know what that means – WWJD is great in theory but falls short in practice. Still, as we turn away from fear and humbly recognize the complexity of the world in which we live, we will catch glimpses of where and how Jesus is at work in the world; and when we take steps in the direction of Jesus, further steps are revealed.

- d. This is particularly relevant when we look at the question of suffering and disability.
 - i. The disciples are afraid of facing similar misfortune and try to insulate themselves by blaming the victim. Jesus insists that it doesn't work that way, but that "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."
 - ii. Now, to be honest, I find that lacking as a justification for the ongoing existence of suffering and evil in God's good world; but perhaps a full answer / theodicy is not what Jesus is trying to provide here. Indeed, I think that a full and satisfying answer to the question of evil is not something we should expect in this life.
 - iii. Instead of focusing on causing and effect, Jesus calls us to look for the glimpses of God's healing and redemptive power in the circumstances of misfortune and suffering that we encounter – and to move toward those glimpses.
 - iv. This might look like praying for a miraculous healing (and such prayers *are* occasionally granted!), but it can also look like helping someone afford a medical treatment, or providing comfort and companionship to someone suffering, or treating a disabled person with dignity that recognizes their full humanity rather than fearing or pitying them.
- e. Though it can be hard to see in our complex and often bewildering world, Jesus is establishing a new creation – a creation in which there is room for those who have failed, where suffering is redeemed, where disabled folks are valued as whole people, and where power is used on behalf of the weak. May we have the humility, the faith, and the hope to choose to walk – step by faltering step – in the light of that world.

Amen.

Notes:

- Binaries are great in theory and rhetoric, but don't hold up well in real life
 - Ephesians seems to demand a binary, but the verses immediately following the appointed passage then call for wisdom
 - We are called to seeing as God does, which makes space for complexity, which demands that we develop wisdom, and which is rooted in love & mercy
- Coronation of David is very messy – not just a matter of Samuel telling everyone who God picked.
 - Notice that we aren't supposed to look at outward appearance, but then the text goes on to emphasize David's outward appearance
 - It is a scary thing to choose a new king while the old one is still in power – both Samuel and the elders feel that fear
 - Even once David is anointed, it will be years before he is actually recognized as king.
- We desire simple answers, and simple culpability - as seen in the attempts to blame the man or his parents for his having been born blind in John nine
 - Jesus rejects simple culpability
 - The Pharisees seem to be motivated by a combination of fear, legalism, and pride. These do not lead to light or life, but to blindness and death.
 - The man who was healed not only ends up seeing, but rejects the intimidation and certitude of the Pharisees.
 - We do need to be careful about how we approach disability, recognizing that most folks dealing with disability do not receive miraculous healings. Do we treat them as if they have sinned, or as if they are deficient? Do we recognize their full humanity?
 - I'm not satisfied by Jesus' statement about why the man was born blind; this doesn't seem to be an adequate theodicy. But, perhaps we are being called to stop looking for cause and effect, which is incomprehensibly complex, and to turn our attention instead toward how God shows up in the broken places.
- As we seek to develop wisdom, there are questions to ask:
 - Wright – see the progress of the blind man in the John passage: follow what you can see and be led into greater wisdom
 - Where in our worlds do fear, legalism, and pride seem to be causing harm?
 - Fear of immigrants as being dangerous, though it's remarkably rare; legalism that misses the reality that illegal immigration it is a civil (not criminal) offense, and that so many are trying to do things the right way as much as possible;
 - pride that says we are better without "them".
 - Recognize that both right and left are too often driven by fear. It is valuable to recognize this, to name and inspect the fears that drive us.
 - What helps us to see and to love more clearly?
 - Where is fruit of joy and hope being born?
 - Are we able to resist certainty and intimidation?