

Lent 4 A: March 19, 2023  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

1 Samuel 16: 1-13  
Psalm 23  
Ephesians 5: 8-14  
John 9: 1-41

[From John Morris] *Charley Boswell lost his sight in an injury during World War II, but became an outstanding golfer. As part of his post-war rehabilitation, he took up golfing and was amazingly successful in spite of his blindness. With an assistant helping him locate the golf ball after he had hit it and then telling him how far he was from the next hole, Charley became surprisingly adept at the sport. He eventually won a total of 37 national or international tournaments for blind golfers. In his career, he even shot three holes-in-one.*

*Boswell was once being given a special award, with comedian Bob Hope as the emcee of the ceremony. When Boswell got to the podium to receive the award, Hope said, "I'd like to play you some time." Boswell said, "I would love to play a round with you." Hope said, "Do you understand that I only play for money?" Boswell said, "I like to have a little side bet going, too. It makes things interesting." Hope said, "OK, when would you like to play?" Boswell said, "Midnight tonight."*

Good morning you anointed children of light!.... You who once were blind, but now you see! There's the sermon in a nutshell.

The readings for this morning are very rich. We hear of the choosing of David, son of Jesse, who was out shepherding the family flock, to replace Saul as King over Israel. We recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and hear of the Lord as shepherd. Then the epistolary reading tells us of our essential nature as children of light. And finally, we have the wonderful story of Jesus healing the blind man from the gospel of John.

The setting in First Samuel is at the time when the first King of Israel has failed God. This was about about 300 years after Moses when the

children of Israel had moved into Canaan (modern Israel) and taken possession of the land. Up until this point their belief, following from Moses' instruction, was that Yahweh was their King, but they had wise Judges and Prophets to help guide them. Samuel was the last of the Judges and the first of the great prophets. The Israelites were suffering defeats from other nations near them and the 12 federated tribes were having a hard time staying together, so they begged Samuel to give them a king to unite them – after all, all the other nations had a king, so why not them. At first God and Samuel balked at this, but finally Samuel, with a nod from God, relented and chose Saul. Saul was an impressive man and a great warrior – just what the Israelites thought they needed. But Saul disappointed Yahweh, so Yahweh told Samuel to find another king and he told him where he would find him. At this point Saul knew of Samuel's displeasure in his leadership and he begged to be brought back into good graces, but Samuel, under Yahweh's direction, couldn't really comply – they made an uneasy peace and Samuel retreated.

God called Samuel to go to Bethlehem and find Jesse and told him that one of his sons would be the next king. Remember that the tribe around Bethlehem, about 5 miles south of Jerusalem, was the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest of the 12 tribes. Saul made something of a ruse to get to Bethlehem because he was afraid that Saul would find out his purpose, so he took a young heifer and traveled to Bethlehem to pretend to come to offer sacrifice. It not only worked on Saul, but it also worked on the nervous people of Bethlehem when they saw the great judge and prophet Samuel approaching. Samuel found Jesse and asked him to bring his sons before him – he went down the line from eldest to youngest – starting with the strapping eldest, Eliab, because he looked like a great warrior king. But God told Samuel he was not the one, and then these iconic words: "for the Lord sees not as a man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." And he carried on with successive sons – Abinadab, Shammah and on through 7 sons. And when Samuel asks Jesse is this all your sons, Jesse admits there is the youngest, David, tending the sheep. So Jesse calls for him and God tells Samuel he is the one. One of the disappointing aspects of this story is that, though he was small, the story teller says he was very good looking. I've always thought it would have been even better if he was just a bit plain or unattractive looking – so that it was a small, plain looking person who

would become king....would of had a better twist to the story! So Jesse anoints David with his 'horn of oil' right in front of everyone and from that day forward the 'Spirit of the Lord came mightily on David.' There were many more years to come before the saga of Saul and David was over, but this was its beginning. A young shepherd boy, the youngest of the brothers, from the smallest tribe, will become the leader that unifies the kingdoms.

A word about anointing oil and anointing a king. Did you know that this goes back to the time of Moses and there is actually a recipe in scripture for holy anointing oil. Did you also know that this is still part of the coronation ceremony of a British monarch which is presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury using the same recipe with a few additions. The scarlet robes are removed and the sovereign is in a simple white gown called the anointing gown and the Archbishop, using the consecrated oil, anoints the head, hands, and heart – all done out of site. [show old fashioned alb] Then he or she is vested in various royal robes over the simple anointing gown. The Hebrew word 'messiah' means 'annointed one', which, in its Greek form became 'Christ'. When Samuel 'annointed' David, he was performing a somewhat hidden coronation. And the significance of David is of course the prophecy about the messiah coming from David's line (which the gospel of Matthew takes pains to point out with a review of the lineage in the beginning of his gospel) . ....the 'root of Jesse' we sing about in 'O come, O come, Emmanuel'.

Now let me jump to this long gospel reading. Following on last week's story of the Samaritan woman at the well, this is another very long story with some great characters and artfully written to get at some important points. The disciples and Jesus stumble across a man blind from birth and the disciples ask who had sinned that this man was born blind. This was a common assumption in the day – going back to old scriptural references that the 'sins of the fathers are visited upon their children'. But Jesus says it is not about who sinned, but that 'the works of God may be made manifest in him'. And then he makes reference to himself as the light of the world---light of course, helps us see!! And he spat on the ground and made clay and 'annointed' the man's eyes – aha!, anointing of a different kind! Does this mud-making sound familiar to you at all---shades of Yahweh and the creation story? And he tells him to go wash in the pool of

Siloam, which he did, and came back seeing. Then neighbors couldn't believe that the seeing man they now saw was really the blind man; and he reveals to them how he got his sight.

They took the man to the Pharisees, the ones who were most particular about keeping the law, especially laws of the Sabbath, which it was that day. The Pharisees interrogated the man and tried to convince him that Jesus was a sinner because he broke Sabbath rules. They even called the parents of the blind man and they certainly didn't want to run afoul of the Pharisees so they confirmed he was their son, but wouldn't get into the argument and referred them back to their son. So back to him they went and wanted him to praise God and not give Jesus any of the credit. (Oddly enough, I think Jesus would have been happy with this too). The blind man was quite cagey too, and with a bit of sarcasm (can't you hear it) said, "I don't know who he is, but I can tell you this, I once was blind but now I see." And when they insisted again that he tell them what happened, he was 'marveled' that they just couldn't get it, and wondered if maybe they wanted to become his disciples?! (more sarcasm!) He finally castigates their unbelief by appealing to the work that Jesus did as being strongly in the prophetic tradition as a work of God.

Ultimately, they cast him out and Jesus finds him. They have this very intimate and loving exchange and the man wants to follow Jesus. Then the author of this gospel puts some wonderful words into Jesus' mouth about judgment on those who pretend to see, but who are really blind; and offers grace and healing to those who are blind but long to see. It is not hard to see how the composer of 'Amazing Grace' leaned on this story to shape those immortal words, "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."!

Let me share with you an interesting meditation on this little story from one of my favorite books: *Meeting Jesus, a New Way to Christ*, by Santucci. This book is all about trying to place yourself in the time and place of Biblical stories and trying to imagine the people and the scene and what might have been going on for them. This section is a wonderful little back and forth that contrasts the blind man and the Pharisees.....

*The Pharisees: Let's summon him a third time and start putting an end to this imposture. But we mustn't frighten him; we must talk trustfully and persuasively. Listen to us, friend.*

*The Man born blind: My mother's still beautiful. Until today, whenever I touched her face I felt a few wrinkles, but seeing her is another matter and I'm proud of her. Perhaps it's the color of her eyes which are like lovely bright cornel berries, or perhaps her joy at my cure has made her young again.*

*The Pharisees: Listen to us. We're speaking for your good and we know what we're talking about. The stranger who put mud on your eyes is a common sinner....*

*The Man Born Blind: I like the color of mud, too. When I was blind they told me it was an ugly despicable color, whereas it was the first thing that met my eyes and it seemed to be shining like silver dust. When you see it, mud has lovely speckles and reflections.*

*The Pharisees: As we were saying, that fellow is a common sinner. We've often seen him eating with publicans, revelers and other wicked people. He talks to Samaritans and has shameless conversations with prostitutes.*

*The Man Born Blind: I saw a prostitute this morning for the first time. I imagined they were beautiful and bewitching. This one was wearing a shawl with blue and purple flowers, vivid colors, and round her neck she had a necklace of gold coins; but her face was wan and covered with wrinkles and she didn't arouse my senses. It's much nicer to see a bunch of grapes.*

*The Pharisees:....and in addition his disciples don't observe the fasts, but eat and drink. Now follow our reasoning. Today's the Sabbath, isn't it? And doesn't Moses lay down that we should abstain from all activities on this day because it's dedicated to God? So how can this man who doesn't keep the Sabbath come from God?.....*

*The Man Born Blind: Look over there in that crack in the wall. That's a lizard. I recognize it because when I was a child I held one in my hands – my mother caught it so that, though I was blind, I should learn what was what. Its throat throbbed against my fingers and my mother told me they have quick forked tongues. But I didn't know they were such a lovely green. I thought they were black or white all over. (p. 81-82).*

Seeing the world in black and white indeed.....Oh, how the blind man taught the Pharisees how to really see!

So how is it that we are blind or become blind? Do we do it to ourselves. Is it willful, is it creeping and subtle by outside forces. How do we, as Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians, walk as children of the light. I know that there is definitely a tendency to blind ourselves. We put on our persona, our public image, which, let's face it, is somewhat practical, but deep down

we know there's more, and that's why we're here, we're seeking for light, we want to see. In prayer we call this the awakening from the false self to the true self.

Did you know that one of the things that early Christians called their baptism was 'the illumination'. What a wonderful description. And do you remember what also happens at our baptism---we are anointed with the oil of chrism to symbolize the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We become the anointed of God!

There is a lot of darkness around these days, but do not forget, anointed ones, that you are children of light. Christ is our light and is lighting our way.

Go now to the place where God has given you responsibility.  
Remember the peace and love we have celebrated; and do not fail to show  
to all people the new life that is already among us.

Have courage. Hold on to what is good.

Return no one evil for evil, but overcome evil with good.  
Strengthen those who fail, support the weak, and honor all the Creator  
has made.

And the blessing of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, go with  
you and remain with you now and always.