

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

St Thomas's Anglican Church

Toronto, CA

+In the name of the F, S, and HS

For a number of years now I have been very cognizant about vision and eyes. Certainly, there is my fascination and borderline obsession with the Biblically accurate angel memes where you have depictions of angelic figures covered from top to bottom with eyes, but there is more to it than that. As some of you are aware, I have an eye condition called keratoconus. It is a disorder that results in progressive thinning of the cornea leading to it becoming cone shaped. This may result in blurry vision, double vision, nearsightedness, irregular astigmatism, and light sensitivity. Usually both eyes are affected, and because it is a progressive condition, my vision will continue to decline overtime because of it. There is no cure or procedure to reverse the condition. With rigid contact lenses I can see clearly and last year I thankfully had a surgery that can slow or halt the progression of my keratoconus. The surgery has a 95% rate of success, but there is still the possibility that my vision could degrade to the point where I will need a corneal transplant. Because of this, I tend to be very mindful about taking care of my vision to ensure that I will be able to continue to see. You could say I have my eye on my eyes.

But given the limits of my physical vision, I have over the past few years contemplated and considered our vision for what lies beyond our sight. What is it that we see that we do not see?

Our vision is of course more than the limited band of light the gelatinous orbs in our heads can detect. We have our other senses, and these give our brains the necessary data to map out the world in front of us. But even still, we wander around this world grasping for things seeking to find meaning or understanding in our lives, for food and shelter, for those things we need or want, and though often times we can grasp them, other times we miss them because we cannot properly perceive it.

We need our eyes to be opened, and when they are, we can see more clearly than we have ever seen before. In my own contemplations and journey through life, especially these past three years navigating the pandemic, the lockdowns, and its aftermath, a time in which my vision was degrading until I had my surgery, I have found perhaps that I see more clearly now than when my vision was whole. Christ brings sight because he is the light of the world, the true light that brings sight to the sightless.

The account of Jesus healing the man born blind in our Gospel reading can be relatively straightforward. But much like last week's gospel with Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well there is an underlying question of who is actually blind in this story, the man Jesus heals or the group of Pharisees in this story? Of course, there is the literal blindness of the man juxtaposed with the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees in this story. So, with that basic Sunday school answer, I can say my homily is done and I can step down! Right? Well yes, but actually no. Sorry, you are stuck with me for a bit longer.

Most kinds of blindness are not merely just an on or off switch of "now you see and now you don't". For me, my vision will potentially continue to get blurrier over time, for others the amount their eyes can actually see decreases until very little comes through, sometimes there is increasing sensitivity to light or darkness that decreases vision, and there are many other kinds of blindness. Even people who are born blind may have varying ranges of what they can see. Many of those who had congenital blindness at a very young age are actually quite comfortable with who they are because this is the only world they have known. The man born blind who was given his sight must have had intense sensory overload to see things that he either never saw before or had a limited perception thereof. Imagine a thing that your brain had no concept of before, now do it over and over again until you get the picture so to speak. It would likely take time to adjust having all that visual stimuli coming in.

It is that progression though of greater vision and blindness that occurs in this story that is so compelling. Yes, there is an "on-off" switch moment with Jesus giving sight to the man born blind, but the man's vision, the true vision of declaring Christ as the one who gave him sight grows louder and louder just as this particular group of Pharisees becomes more and more blind because of their own sense of self-righteousness. Christ, the light of the world, has come into the scene, and the light brings sight to one and others are blinded by the light.

There is a process of discovery and revelation that occurs here. The man Jesus gave sight to becomes more and more confident and adamant that Jesus gave him vision. As he sees more clearly, as he perceives more clearly, that revelation becomes stronger and stronger and culminates when he finally hears from Jesus when he asks who is the Messiah that “you have seen him,” or perhaps a more poetic way to put it is “you see me just as I see you.” Jesus gives us sight so that we can see him as he sees us, the beloved children of God. He sees us, he knows us, and he loves us, and that, my friends, is what allows us to truly see that which we cannot see due to our limited spiritual vision.

But we are so easily blinded! When we hurt others through malice or negligence, we wound our own vision. When we tear down others, we ourselves are brought down in our own hubris. This is because when we hurt others once, we sometimes can justify doing it again until it becomes so easy to do. We can do this both on a conscious or sub-conscious level. This group of pharisees keep denying the revelation of the man that he was given sight, and eventually their blindness leads to them driving out the man. Their own blindness to God’s actions is made apparent more and more.

And though sin is often what blinds us to the true reality of the Christ who loves us, it is not the only thing that will impair our vision. The man born blind was not blind because of sin. In our own lives, despair and sorrow, rejection, and trauma can blind us because we find ourselves unable to see and conceive of a world beyond a given present. Just to be clear, these feelings and experiences are not sinful, but it is still blindness all the same. When my eye doctor in 2019 said that my keratoconus had spread to my left eye after being previously in my right eye, I despaired because I knew in that instance that my vision was only going to get worse. When the lockdowns began in 2020, and then continued well into 2021 and only began to let up after January 2022, I despaired because the lockdowns were terrible. In the truly darkest moments, I felt genuine hopelessness. Hopelessness is a blinding reality because it prevents us from seeing that a better world is indeed possible. Dark emotions feed on hopelessness, and we can sink further and further into darkness until we can no longer see, even if we have 20/20 vision.

So, how do we get out of this blindness. Our own efforts alone can only take us so far and keep us treading water, but someone has to pull us out. That is where faith comes in, that is where faith comes and takes away the shadows of our sight. It is the faith that Christ is our light,

and that this light shines through him, through this world, through our communities, and that light banishes the shadows until we come to that revelation that the man born blind proclaimed and that I have been harping on for weeks now, that it is God who sees us, who knows us, and who loves us for who we truly are. And from that foundation, we see Christ reaching down to draw us from the shadows and into his light and we find we have never been alone.

It is both a simultaneously easy and hard thing to do though. And you can accuse me very easily of being Pollyanna because I might be saying, “don’t feel bad because Jesus.” I hate to say it though, the experience of revelation is never straightforward or easy because being a human isn’t easy. I think everyone here can agree to that. The gospel story here ends not necessarily in a triumph, but in a bright melancholy that is both beautiful and tragic. The man is cast out from his community, and though he sees Jesus as Jesus sees him, that pain of rejection will be there. Trauma does not magically disappear.

But Jesus offers hope that new beginnings are possible, that even if all that is around us is shadow, he still stands as the light that shall never go away. And in the end, that light will triumph, and all the shadows will be cast away by the true light that shines in the darkness. Though my vision may continue to degrade, my sight will never go away, and that my friends is what gives me hope.

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