

IV Lent: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:[1-7] 8-14; John 9:1-13 [14-27] 28-38

Title: A Mid-Course Correction

Our story begins this morning with Samuel in the starring role. Samuel. God's own man. God's representative in that time and in that place. Samuel sees what God would have him see. And that vision is different from what anyone expected -- different even from what Samuel expected. By way of this Gospel, we are being reminded that, where God shows up the unexpected seems to happen. And so woven throughout this story of the anointing of David is a thread of tension between what the players, based on their assumptions, expect and what, it turns out, God desires and intends.

Let's take a look and see how this true.

Samuel shows up at the home of one Jesse the Bethlehemite and says, "Jesse, I have come here to Bethlehem to identify and to anoint one of your sons to be king over Israel." In response, Jesse, along with his sons as well as all the leaders of the town gather for a worship service to prepare their hearts and minds for this task of choosing.

Quite frankly, at first even Samuel, God's servant, assumes along with everyone else that God would have Eliab, the oldest son, be king. For in that culture, the oldest son held the place of honor, prestige, and responsibility. And so, understandably, the mindset for everybody sort of was, "Well, bring Eliab on over here and let's get this over with."

But God would have none of it. God has another plan. God will demonstrate that God has a different way of seeing things.

And so God says to Samuel: I know you're thinking that we're going to anoint Eliab over there. But understand: The old paradymns, your assumptions about the way things are going to work here -- none of that applies. God does not think as mortals think or see as mortals see. When and where God is present, expect some surprises.

Samuel's job in that place is to speak for God. To be a revealer of the mind of God. To see what God would have him see and to report it to everybody else. His job, if you will, is to be a revealer of surprises. That is, in fact, the job description of a prophet.

And so God says to Samuel. I know Eliab is the oldest son. And I know you think he's tall and handsome, but you know what -- Eliab is not the one I have chosen.

And so Samuel says to those gathered, "Contrary to what you may have assumed or expected, Eliab here is not the one."

And so Jesse then proceeds to present each successive son to Samuel. And in each case Samuel says, "No, the Lord does not choose this one either."

And so there was this sort of parade of sons until six or seven have passed by. And Samuel says to Jesse, "The Lord has chosen none of these. Are ALL of your sons present and accounted for Jesse?"

And Jesse says, "Well, yes, I mean except for the youngest who is down in the field keeping the sheep. I mean somebody has to keep an eye on the livestock, and I just assumed, I mean I never dreamed...."

And Samuel says, "Go get the boy. And then the prophet turns to those present and says, "no one is to sit down until the boy arrives.". And so David is sent for. And when he arrives we know from the story what Samuel says. He says, "This is the one." And Samuel then anoints him with the oil that he has prepared and brought for this purpose.

Nothing happened that day the way anyone thought that it would or even should. Everyone assumed that God's choice would be Eliab. And certainly no one even gave so much as a passing thought that it might be David, the youngest, the most insignificant -- or so they thought.

In fact, if Las Vegas had been around in those days, the odds on David being anointed king would have been something like a million to one.

But it WAS David. And it was David because as God Godself tells Samuel, "The Lord does not see as mortals see."

Just as everyone in the story concerning the anointing of David brought certain assumptions to that event, the players in this story from John's Gospel this morning bring certain assumptions as well -- assumptions that, in the course of things, don't hold up.

And so here we have Jesus walking along with his disciples, and as it happens, they happen upon a man who has been blind from birth. Rabbi, ask the disciples, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"

The question gives away that even the disciples bought into this deep-seated belief which was widely held in the ancient world that if one was suffering misfortune, it *must* be because of some sin in their life. Indeed, it must be that misfortune is being visited upon the poor soul by God himself as punishment for their misdeeds.

What we are about to see is something like a mid-course correction of earlier beliefs, earlier assumptions, even beliefs and assumptions – now listen ---beliefs and assumptions the authority of which had been Biblical texts which the church leaders has brought to bear. But as we are constantly seeing, Jesus is pretty big on mid-course corrections. The mid-course correction on this day will have to do with the belief that God visits pain and misery on people as some kind of divine punishment or retribution for earlier acts of misbehavior.

And so we have this question: "Who sinned this man or his parents."

But to everyone's surprise and amazement, Rabbi Jesus' response is, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned.," says Rabbi Jesus. And that's all Jesus has to say on the matter. Except to say that as long as we're here, I'll make one further point.

And so with some spittle and mud as his agent he ointments this man who has been blind from birth. Rubbing the mixture on his eyes Jesus gives the once blind man his sight. But more than that he *anoints him* -- anoints him not king as was the case with David, but Jesus anoints this one who has been given the gift of sight. He anoints him --- - worthy. Jesus declares him worthy. With the words, "This man was born so that God's works might be revealed in him," the man received not only physical sight but the insight that he is worthy.

Don't you know those words must have broken over that man like dawn breaking into and washing over the earth creating a new day.

"This man," he will hear Jesus say, "is here for a purpose." He'd never heard that before. Other people maybe were here for a purpose, but not him.

Up until now he assumed, and understandably so given how the world, not to mention the church, has treated him, assumed that God had made some kind of mistake even allowing him to be born. But, by God, Jesus is having none of it.

Jesus sees the infirm man and says, "This man here? He's here so that the works of God may be made manifest in him. This man who was born blind is going to bring honor and glory to God. His misery, his blindness, has nothing at all to do with his sin or anyone else's for that matter. And his blindness has nothing at all to do with any assumptions we might be tempted to make about his life, or his worthiness.

Jesus healed the blind man. But oh the reaction from the religious community and in the community-at-large. Nobody seemed to be much pleased. That is to say except the blind man who could now see. He was VERY pleased. And the more the people around him kept telling him he had no right to be pleased, the more insistent he became that he knew something about God that they didn't know. They may be the experts, but he was beginning to see that God had some ideas about things that just didn't fit their assumptions -- assumptions about things like wholeness, and value, and worth, and justice, and love.

Why if there had been a *Jerusalem Journal and Constitution* that day no doubt the headline would have read, Holy Man Heals on the Sabbath. And the subheading would have said, Religious Leaders Concerned. Convene hearing. And then I suppose the story would have been told much as we have it here.

And what do we have here? A story of a man healed of his blindness. Certainly. But also a story of religious leaders who, because of their well entrenched ideas of who God is and how God works, are at first are in denial. "It couldn't have been this man," they say. But the man keeps on insisting, "No it is true. I am the man. I once was blind but now I see. I am the one you assumed God was punishing. I am the one you assumed God loves less. I am the one you assumed to be unworthy. I am the man."

And so they bring him into an ecclesiastical court -- not once, but twice -- trying to get him to recant his story. But he'll none of it. In fact the more he tells of gaining his sight, the more bold he becomes in the telling of it! And the more the experts try to tell him he is NOT loved by God the more he insist that he is. And, in fact, in one of the more humorous moments in all of scripture, speaking of Jesus the man says, "You seem so curious about this Jesus, maybe you would like to become one his disciples too."

The experts are not amused. They can stand it no more, and so they play their trump card: They put the newly sighted man out of the community. He's expelled. Eventually, of course, they will do this and more to Jesus. In fact, they will kill him. But for now Jesus welcomes this one who has been put out of the community into a *new* community. A community of a broader vision, and a community where love and light is abundant. A place where vision is clearer than it has ever been before, and a place where old assumptions about God and how God relates to his children are cast aside.

I conclude this morning with a passage from a book first published in 1903, yet which remains popular to this day. I suspect that, as I read, you may very well recognize the work:

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout.

As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water... first slowly, then rapidly.

I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness of something forgotten -- a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me.

I knew that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful, cool something that was flowing over my soul, gave it light, hope --- joy, set it free!

Helen Keller, not only blind but also deaf, describes her experience of receiving her "sight," if you will have it; of her first experience with the wonderment of language which cannot but be something like the wonderment experienced by anyone whose eyes once were blind but who now see. And who, therefore, are exposed to their potential as a child of God. And who now given eyes to see come face-to-face with the wonderment that is the possibility of living in the fullness of the light that is the Light of the World. To feel the misty consciousness of a way of loving and being loved that is like something long forgotten. To know indeed that there are barriers, but barriers that in Christ and by the Grace of God can be swept away.

Amen