

*Sermon for 4 Lent, Year A
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The Bible doesn't seem to talk very much about religious experience, as such. We don't hear very much about the great time that everyone had worshiping in the Temple. We do hear about the visions that some of the prophets had: Ezekiel's wheels and dry bones, Isaiah's lips being touched by the coal. We also hear about some of the things that happened to believers in the NT. For instance, many times they spontaneously spoke in languages that they didn't understand. People were healed, like the blind man in our Gospel this morning.

But when God does single someone out and pays them special attention, it almost always seems to have sort of a business end to it. In other words, in the Bible, when God picks some particular person for preferential treatment, it's not to give him some great rapturous experience; it's because that person has a job to do. Word to the wise: If you don't want a tough assignment, you'd better stop praying for special treatment.

But there's more to it. We are all in trouble. We're in for it. Cause you know who God likes to pick for the tough assignments? The nobodies. That's right. The kid who's picked last for the team. The guy who will never make the 6 o'clock news. The girl no one notices. Me and you.

Look at David. He eventually did make the 6 o'clock news. He even made 60 Minutes and the cover of Time. And I think he was Man of the Year at least twice. But, in our story today, he is the least likely to even be noticed. The story is about him, and he's not even there until the end. Even his father doesn't think he's that important. Jesse has all these sons. And he brings them all to Samuel, because they are all king material, you understand. These are his boys. But someone has to stay with the sheep. David is the most expendable. Even the great king David started as a nobody. The only reason he became "somebody" in the world's eyes was because that was just part of the work God had for him to do.

In the same way, God has called each of us here. I know that's true, because otherwise, we wouldn't be here. If you've been baptized, you have a mission. And that mission is to reflect the light of Jesus to the world around you. Just like David, we are nobodies. And just like David, we have a royal calling. And just like David, it gets worse before it gets better.

What we often forget is that David spent a decade hiding in the wilderness, running for his life, fighting against Saul, his father-in-law, whom he wasn't allowed to kill. God had made David king, but there was still a lot of work to do before it became a reality. In the same way, God has brought us into his kingdom of light. But there is still a lot of work to do for us as well.

The man born blind is another example of this kind of blessing. Can you imagine what it must have been like? He was born with deformed eyes. He has never been able to see at all. There is no healing for this sort of thing. And the common understanding of it is that it is the result of sin and unrighteousness. It is not simply a disability, it is a mark of shame as well. He is reduced to begging for his living. And now, suddenly, he can see! Jesus has changed his whole life. This is an amazing, joyful experience. He has been blessed beyond his wildest expectations.

And now begins his trek into the social wilderness. Because he was blessed and healed by Jesus, the local junta comes after him. He has to tell his story three different times. His parents are called in for questioning. It turns out that everyone knows the penalty for confessing that Jesus is the Messiah: It's expulsion from the synagogue. This could be a serious sentence, under the circumstances. The synagogue was the basic unit of society, and being shunned would have had economic consequences as well as social ones.

Through all of this, the formerly blind man is the model disciple of Jesus. He doesn't understand everything about who Jesus is. At first he doesn't even know where Jesus went to. Then he calls him a prophet, which is true but not complete. But through it all, he knows that Jesus is from God. He has given himself to Jesus, and that is enough for him to be drawn into deeper understanding.

You see, the Pharisees have a problem. They cannot explain the signs that Jesus performs without allowing him to redefine their understanding of reality. He broke the Sabbath regulations, which is against God's Law. But in doing so, he did something that it seems only God can do.

And so they continue to look for evidence that doesn't exist. This Jesus doesn't fit neatly into their categories, so they must have bad data. It doesn't occur to many of them that they might need to revise their categories instead. What is the bad data? Aha! This guy must not have really been blind to begin with. The parents are called in for intimidation. But they corroborate the story. "Yes, he's our son. Yes, he was born blind. And we don't know nothin' about how that happened." They aren't even allowed to rejoice over their son's healing, because the authorities have it in for Jesus.

So the local committee for the investigation of un-Jewish activity tries again. They haul the poor man in for interrogation again. And this time, they up the ante. They say, "Give God the praise [rather than Jesus, that is]; we know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner." And this is where they really show their character. You see, up to now, it was at least an understandable conundrum for people who haven't already accepted that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. We can sympathize with the mental struggle they are going through. But now they have claimed to know something that they do not in fact know at all. When they say that Jesus is a sinner, they don't mean just that he sinned, in the way that we would mean. They are using that word not to mean that he sins like everybody else, but that he is categorically unrighteous, someone that decent people should avoid, like a prostitute or a tax-collector. But that's what the whole debate is about. If they actually knew that, they wouldn't need this poor man to say so.

But what his parents weren't willing to do, the man does. He is willing to stand up to the bullies. "One thing I know," he says, "that though I was blind, now I see." It's not that his experience trumps the scripture. It's simply humility and openness to God in response to the self-righteousness and lack of integrity of the Pharisees. Ironically, now that Jesus healed him, he is the one that can see. They are the ones who are blind.

There is no blessing greater than knowing God. And Jesus draws the man born blind into that relationship with himself. But let's not pretend that it came cheap. Just like this man before the Pharisaical council, just like David in the wilderness, we will all pay a price for our relationship with him. The blessing is free, but it isn't cheap.

God has a plan for each and every one of us, especially us nobodies. And that plan will be costly. But ultimately, there isn't anything greater in life than knowing we are in the will of God, and that he will bring his will to fulfillment.