

SERMON FOR FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT MARCH 22, 2020
Westminster Presbyterian Church -Rehoboth Beach

LESSONS (*see complete text at the end of the sermon*):

1 Samuel 16:1-13

John 9:1-41

“SEEING WHAT REALLY MATTERS”

During the Sundays in Lent we have been considering the stories from the Old Testament and Gospels as “high stories”—instead of histories—that invite us into the stories to see ourselves in the light of Godspirit. Lent is a time for us to look, hear and ponder what really matters most to us as we hear the stories.

Today we hear two more stories. Both of them are stories about seeing. In the end they are about seeing what really matters. In the first story we catch Samuel in a bad moment. He is grieving the loss of Saul. Oh, make no mistake, Saul is very much alive and still king. No, Samuel’s grief is what clinicians call anticipatory grief. Samuel has come to realize that Saul is not fit to be king. His continuous lack of discipline, arrogance, and disrespect has

placed him afoul of solid moral leadership. Years ago when Samuel anointed him as king, expectations and hopes ran high. Saul was the tallest, strongest, best looking man in Israel! If he'd been living today he would have been the star quarterback on Tribe of Benjamin High School team and later would have led the Israel University football lions to the championship. He was a born leader.

As he stood there to be crowned king, we can imagine Samuel's joy. He had had his doubts about this whole notion of Israel's having a king like all the other nations. But there stood Saul, and Samuel's doubt had melted away. But incident after incident, Saul had betrayed Samuel's trust. Saul had too often assumed that because he was king he could do what HE thought best.

Ever since Samuel was a young man in Priest Eli's home he had been keenly aware of God's presence and had a sacred sense of duty. And now years later he has realized that Saul is not cut-out to be king, because it doesn't just take military leadership, physical prowess, and smarts to be a leader. It takes much more and Saul didn't have it. Saul couldn't see it.

So Samuel grieves about what will happen. But then, like a slap in the face, he hears as it were the voice of God ringing in his ears, "Samuel, how long are you going to mope around worrying about and grieving for Saul?"

The past is past. Get up! Look to the future, it's time to form a KNC—KING NOMINATING/ANOINTING COMMITTEE (of one)." Samuel heads off to Bethlehem in the tribe of Judah, hearing that a man there Jesse has several sons. One of them could be the one that Samuel should anoint. He goes there as a good example to all Pastor Nominating Committees: to worship, pray, offer himself and invite the community to worship with him. The invitation goes out to Jesse who brings seven sons (remember that in the Bible, seven signifies perfection and completion—like the seven days of creation).

The first one who shows up with Jesse is a stunner! Jesse's eldest son, Eliab. Samuel looked at him and thought, "Whoah, this guy is it. He's tall, strong, good looking...Just what a king should look like! In addition to that, he's got an ideal name (because Eliab in Hebrew means "God is my father"). With a name like that certainly he'll always keep his priorities straight! But then Samuel hears the rumbling in his own soul: "Nope, you're doing the same thing as you did with Saul. Humans look at outward appearance as what really matters, but God looks at the heart." See? way too often we get duped into thinking that what can be measured is what matters: Looks,

charisma, strength, popularity or wealth. But these things rarely uncover what's at the heart of being human and of sacred duty.

So Samuel, like a wise PNC, doesn't stop at the first candidate. Instead, he interviews more—6 more to be exact. Each time they are impressive, but not quite as impressive as Eliab. Nevertheless, Samuel already has that gut feeling—that voice from God—that Eliab is not the one. Did Samuel realize that he was being wowed by Eliab just like he had been by Saul? Did Samuel see in himself a certain blindness to what really matters? Your guess is as good as mine; we'll never know. What we do know, is that all seven sons meet with Samuel and all seven didn't cut it. So, Samuel turns to Jesse and asks "Is that it? Do you have anymore sons?"

Jesse sounds almost embarrassed: "Well just one more, but he's just a shepherd in field tending my flock." Jesse doesn't even let Samuel know his name—he's just a sheep herder not a leader. Nevertheless, Samuel asks to interview him. We don't know what transpired in that interview, but something clicked. This youngest son, the eighth, this odd-ball out-of-order son, was the one. In that moment, Samuel saw what really mattered. He saw the heart of a shepherd. Moses, before David, had been a shepherd after being groomed in pharaoh's court. It was Moses' life as a shepherd that

prepared him more fully to lead God's people out of Egypt than his training as a warrior and ruler in Pharaoh's court. The heart of a shepherd—of patience, of giving one's life for the sheep, of caring more than condemning: could that be the heart of shepherd? Could that be what is so beautifully portrayed in the twenty-third Psalm? Whatever, Samuel, in that instant saw what really matters.

Fast forward several centuries but a few miles away from Bethlehem in Jerusalem. There's a man with congenital blindness. He doesn't ask to be healed, why it doesn't even occur to him to ask. That's because he, along with everyone else, knows that he deserves to be blind. Why? Because his parents or he is a sinner who earned that punishment. So, he knows very intimately the agony of a life of isolation from normal society. He knows what social distance means!! That has been his WHOLE LIFE. Who wants to hire a sinner? Who needs a blind man? So there he sits in the lot that he believes God has assigned him: to beg for a living. He doesn't ask to be healed because it doesn't occur to him. It doesn't occur to anyone else either because everyone believes and has been taught that he's blind because he's a sinner and that is a fact. So there he sits until Jesus passes and gets really upset with his disciples when they parrot that dismissive dogma. I can see his eyes flare

up—this one who just a while ago drove money changers out of the temple court. He says “This man is blind so that you all can see what really matters to God!” What are the barriers and boundaries, the assumptions about other people different from us that we assume are facts but likely are blinding us to God’s love and to God’s kin-dom?

Jesus shows what really matters, following common therapeutic practice he makes a poultice from his spit and rubs it on the man’s eyes then tells him to go wash it off. And the man can see! In that act, Jesus welcomed this sinner as a brother, and showed him the dignity he deserved as God’s beloved child.

Now if you had been blind from birth and could finally see, what would you do? Go back and sit quietly in your beggars corner and keep working? No way-this is a moment of jubilation and he screams his joy to everyone who’ll listen. But what happens? His friends and acquaintances DO NOT BELIEVE THAT HE CAN SEE? Why? Their whole lives they have been indoctrinated that blind men are sinners. That’s been a safe boundary, an opportunity for everyone who’s not blind to say, “O but by the grace of God go I.” But Jesus cries back, “God’s got nothing to do with it, except to glorify God’s name by showing this man healing compassion!”

So now this guy is, by his very presence, overturning everyone's sense of who's righteous and who's sinner. And because of that he's a threat to them. So what do they do? They accuse him of being an imposter! Let's call the blind man Jake. For his whole life he has been known as poor blind Jake. Now he can see! But now, he is called FAKE JAKE. He didn't ask to be healed. He didn't like being blind but he had learned to be content with his blind beggar status—with his social isolation. But now that he can see he is still in social isolation, by everyone's refusal to welcome him.

Enter the religious doctors and teachers, those who should know best, certainly they will cut through the confusion. But they compound the confusion. They too insist that he is faking. At the least, he must confess that the one who healed him is a sinner. Because Jesus healed him on the Sabbath. if it been an emergency that would have been ok. But healing a chronic condition on Sabbath was not because it could have been done another time.

Isn't it unfortunate? Everyone is so blind by their pre-determined convictions that they fail to see what's right in front of them: as Jake himself proclaims, "All I know is that I was blind and now I see." But as they had chased Jesus out of the temple, so now they throw Jake out of their midst.

What really mattered is that this human being was made whole but they were blind to that good news. How sobering it is to see how our pre-convictions, our predetermined sense of right and wrong can blind us to the simple yet profound good news of Jesus, that God's kin-dom of extravagant welcome for all people is in our midst.

It's fascinating that immediately after this story Jesus proclaims in John 10 that those whom the world ignores, condemns, and throws out, like Jake are like sheep in Christ's fold and he says "I am the Good Shepherd." These stories challenge us to realize that most of what we see in leadership around us is not what really matters. The heart of a shepherd is what really matters. I think later in the Gospel Jesus refers to this self-giving, patient, welcoming heart when he says, "there is no greater love than this, that one lay down one's life for her or his friends."⁸⁸ These stories compel us to question and challenge the labels that we use for others who are different from us. They challenge us to avoid assessing what really matters by nationality, race, gender, ethnicity, or even religion. I imagine that the Good Shepherd's eyes still flash fire when individuals and groups are dismissed because others are blind to their humanity, to their being our siblings in God's kin-dom. It all boils down to this as we anticipate holy week, when Jesus reminds his

disciples throughout the ages: "By this all nations will know that you are my disciples when you show love for one another." Amen.

Rev. Douglas Griffin

Interim Pastor

The Lessons

First Lesson – 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Introduction: Prior to today's story there has been much transition in Israel's leadership. The prophet Samuel has lead Israel's loosely affiliated tribes. But they clamored to have a king and Samuel anointed Saul from the tribe of Benjamin as their king. Saul was a striking young tall and strong. Surely he would be a good king. However, the chapters leading up to today's lesson reveals a king who is unpredictable, impetuous, and arrogant. Several times he disobeys Samuel's divine instructions and does things his way. Samuel hears from God that Saul will be rejected as king—he will not have a dynasty. Samuel is heartbroken

Hear now the first lesson and listen for the word of God.

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord

chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Second Lesson – John 9:1-41

Introduction: Jesus is in Jerusalem after one of the Jewish festivals. During this visit he has encountered pretty strong opposition to his teachings from the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. They accuse him of being unfaithful, a sinner, and even in league with Satan. They chased him out of the temple.

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He

said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jew[ish opposition] did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you?"

How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are

not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."