

MARCH 30, 2014: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
I Samuel 16:lb, 6-7,10-13a Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

Just glancing at today's three readings, we immediately notice each has something to do with seeing. Those who profess a biblical faith understand that sight is an essential component of that faith. We differ from unbelievers not so much because of the doctrines and dogmas we profess, but because of the way we perceive reality.

The Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians perfectly describes that component from a Christian point of view. "Brothers and sisters, you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." It's the ability to see as the risen Jesus sees that "produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth." It alone shows us "what is pleasing to the Lord."

Yet even in the Hebrew Scriptures, people of faith are expected to see differently from others. Today's I Samuel passage provides a classic example. Yahweh sends Samuel, the last of the judges, to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons the next king of Israel. Saul, the reigning king has become a terrific disappointment to Samuel and the people. When Samuel originally anointed Saul he was looking for someone who stood head and shoulders above every other Jewish man, someone who could knock heads with Israel's perennial enemy: the Philistines. No wonder he's attracted by Eliab's "lofty stature." He's another Saul.

It's at that point that Yahweh must remind Samuel of something all people of faith should presume: "Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but Yahweh looks into the heart."

Eventually it's David - the runt of Jesse's litter-whom the judge anoints. Samuel's reopened eyes of faith notice something in the boy that his father has overlooked.

Whenever we have readings from John's gospel, we should be prepared to stay standing for a long time. It almost always takes the evangelist at least a chapter to develop the theology he's trying to convey to his readers. In today's pericope, John's not only interested in Jesus giving sight to the man born blind, he's also concerned to demonstrate that the sight the man receives takes a while to develop. The man's eyes of faith didn't open as suddenly as his physical eyes opened.

Notice, when his neighbors first ask, "How were your eyes opened?" he replies, "The man named Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.'" At this point, Jesus, in his eyes, is just a human being like all other human beings. Later, when the Pharisees question him about Jesus, the man goes one faith-step further, "He's a prophet," he responds. It's only at the end of the chapter that his eyes are completely opened when Jesus asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Finally the man sees Jesus as more than a man, more than a prophet, and "worships him."

John is telling us that it takes time to actually develop our eyes of faith. It's not something we have all at one time. The older we grow in our faith, the more our eyes are able to see what before we overlooked.

For John's Jesus there's just one way we can sin by sight. As he tells the unbelieving Pharisees, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying 'We see,' so your sin remains." Those who refuse to continually grow in seeing things, people and situations as Jesus sees them will one day have to answer to their self-imposed blindness.

Perhaps it would be good to memorize and often use the early Christian hymn that ends our Ephesians passage. "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." No one could have said it better.

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APRIL 6, 2014: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Ezekiel 37:12-14 Romans 8:8-11 John 11:1-45

Students of Scripture always point out that John has no miracles in his gospel; he only has "signs." Already in chapter 2, at the wedding reception in Cana of Galilee, the evangelist mentions that Jesus performed "the first of his signs" to save a newly married from embarrassment. John never refers to Jesus' changing water into wine as a miracle.

Webster defines a sign as "something (such as an action or event) which shows that something else exists, is true, or will happen." That's how John employs miracles. They're actions pointing not to themselves, but to something else. Whenever Jesus works a miracle in John, we always have to ask, "What's the deeper meaning?" We only understand John's miracles when we go beyond their face value.

Though most Christians, for instance, know the basics of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, many have no idea what John is trying to convey by narrating it. They miss where the sign is pointing.

The fourth evangelist is a proponent of "realized eschatology." In other words, he's convinced that whatever most followers of Jesus once believed would happen only when Jesus returns in the Second Coming, or when a Christian dies, we already have right here and now. Raising Lazarus is a sign of that belief.

Notice the interchange between Martha and Jesus. Jesus assures her, "Your brother will rise." Martha replies, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus then tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even if they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Then, the \$64,000 question: "Do you believe this?"

Within a short period of time, Jesus gives a sign that those who believe in him are already alive even before their physical deaths by calling Lazarus from his tomb.

Ezekiel, in today's first reading, doesn't quite employ realized eschatology when he speaks Yahweh's word to the Jewish captives during the Babylonian Exile. But he does something similar. Because the prophet must make God's promise of a return to the Holy Land meaningful to those who will die before the event happens, he poetically quotes Yahweh, "I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel." Scripture scholars presume Ezekiel's audience didn't take these words literally. They simply were meant to give them hope that they would return to Israel in the person of their children and grandchildren who actually would experience that longed-for event. Though dead, all who heard Ezekiel would be alive in the person of their descendants.

Paul treats this alive/though dead idea from a different direction. Writing to the Christian community in Rome, he distinguishes between the life the Spirit instills in imitators of the risen Jesus and the many deaths our human bodies must endure. "If Christ is in you," he contends, "although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness." In other words, if you're doing what God wishes you to do by becoming other Christs, you have the same spirit living in you that the risen Jesus has living in him/her.

But, getting back to John's realized eschatology, commentators usually mention that though the evangelist believes what will happen at the end is already here, it's not here exactly as it will be in the end. To convey this concept they employ the term "already, but not yet."

I presume Jesus crying at his friend's tomb is an essential part of the not yet; a sign for us that our "alreadys" will always include a lot of tears.

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