

APRIL 3, 2011: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
I Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

Almost everyone knows that John differs from his three evangelistic predecessors when he describes Jesus' miracles. Mark, Matthew and Luke usually demand a person have faith before Jesus can do miraculous things in his or her life. No faith; no miracle. John, on the other hand, expects faith to surface only after Jesus performs the miracle.

Teachers of John frequently employ today's gospel pericope to demonstrate this theological characteristic. Notice, the blind beggar never asks Jesus to restore his sight. The Galilean carpenter simply makes mud out of spit and dirt, unexpectedly rubs it in the poor man's eyes, then tells him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam!"

Even after his cure, it takes the beggar a while before he acquires faith in Jesus as God. When the authorities begin to question him, he refers to his benefactor as just "the man called Jesus." Then, after being interrogated further, he ups his appraisal to the point where he eventually states, "He is a prophet." Only at the end of the narrative does John have him profess faith in Jesus as "Son of Man," proclaiming, "I do believe, Lord," and worships him.

Always conscious of his readers, the gospel writer then tells us why he included this particular miracle in his work: "Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.'"

As we so frequently hear in our Sacred Scriptures, faith is rooted in seeing things other people overlook, an aspect of biblical faith perfectly demonstrated in our I Samuel reading.

Yahweh sends Samuel to Jesse's home in Bethlehem to anoint Israel's next king - a rather touchy, dangerous mission since Saul, the country's first king, is still alive. Looking at Eliab, Samuel sees the same physical characteristics Saul possesses, a man standing head and shoulders above everyone else, a person of "lofty stature." He's ready to pour the royal oil over his head when Yahweh steps in and reminds Samuel, "Not as humans see does God see, because humans see the appearance but Yahweh looks into the heart." Samuel eventually anoints the runt of the litter, the kid who wasn't even invited to the party: David.

This experience of God picking the younger over the older influenced some of the Genesis' best known theology. Since its three main sources were composed after David's reign, rarely is the first-born in patriarchal families Yahweh's chosen one. Our sacred authors reasoned, "If Yahweh could choose against type in the case of David, then Yahweh could have done so before and probably will do it after." It's all a matter of knowing what to look for.

The Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians hits this faith-nail on the head. "You were once in darkness," he or she reminds the community, "but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light!"

The risen Jesus calls us to be light in a world filled with darkness. Our mission is first to open our own eyes, then help others open theirs. We're here to expose a world existing all around us; a world we rarely notice.

When we do this, we become part of a consistent biblical tradition. Yahweh always demands we focus on reality as Yahweh focuses; the same way Yahweh's Son Jesus teaches us to focus.

Two thousand years ago, motivated by this insight, an early Christian created our beautiful Ephesians hymn: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light!"

If any of you have yet to read the first chapters of Chabris and Simons' *The Invisible Gorilla*, I'd suggest you'd do so soon. They'll go a long way in helping you understand today's three readings.

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APRIL 10, 2011: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT Ezekiel

37:12-14 Romans 8:8-11 John 11:1-45

No one's 100% certain what's going to happen when we die. We need only listen carefully to today's three readings to discover that our ancestors in the faith had differing ideas about this unavoidable event. As a biblically-formed people, we must be careful not to uncritically accept some catechism explanations about the afterlife, explanations based more on a desire to reconcile contradictory biblical theologies than on an honest attempt to explain the reasons behind those divinely inspired, different beliefs.

In my grade school catechism classes, for instance, I learned that "the gates of heaven were closed" because of Adam and Eve's sin. No one could get into heaven until Jesus died for our sins. Only later did I discover that teaching was based on the observation that, except in the late Wisdom writings, none of the Hebrew Scriptures' important people were ever spoken of as "going to heaven" after they died.

Scholars tell us the basic reason for the sacred authors' silence about heaven, as we know it, wasn't because they thought the gates of heaven were closed. Until those late Wisdom books were written - a century or so before Jesus' birth - they simply had no concept of heaven. As we know from the Wisdom readings employed in our funeral liturgies, once heavenly belief entered their theology, most Jews believed that those faithful to Yahweh in this world continued to live with Yahweh in heaven, even before Jesus' death and resurrection.

That means in the 6th century BCE, when Ezekiel's Yahweh speaks about opening graves and raising people from the dead, God's not referring to having certain individuals live forever in heaven. Yahweh is simply promising to return those Jews to Israel who died before being liberated from the Babylonian Exile. The understanding is that, after they live some years in the Holy land, they'll once again die.

It's important also to note that part of the reason behind our belief in a particular and a general judgment comes from differing opinions in the Christian Scriptures about what happens to Christians who die before Jesus' Second Coming.

In I Thessalonians - the earliest Christian writing we possess - it's clear Paul thought dead Christians would have to spend a short time in the grave until Jesus arrived and raised them up to a new life. We presume Mark and Matthew, who expected his Second Coming in their life-time, shared Paul's belief.

Things change with Luke. He takes for granted Jesus won't return until he and everyone in his community have died. He believes that, at the moment of death, Jesus' followers experience a "personal Parousia:" Jesus comes for them and immediately takes them into heaven with him. That's why his Jesus can assure the good thief, "This day you will be with me in paradise." If the good thief were in Mark and Matthew, their Jesus would have promised, "After a short time in the grave, you'll be with me in paradise." Luke's personal Parousia eventually develops into our particular judgment; Paul, Mark and Matthew's Second Coming becomes the general judgment, even though our sacred authors thought of them as either/or, not both/and.

But, as we hear in today's gospel pericope, John's Jesus goes one step further by assuring Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me even if they die will live, and those who live and believe in me will never die." John's convinced that what we're looking for in the future we somehow already have right here and now. His Jesus would have told the good thief, "Once you believe in me, you're already in paradise."

Perhaps the best way to approach life after death is just to fall back on Paul's insight: "If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you." I suggest we let Jesus work out the details.

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