

1 Samuel 16:1-13  
Psalm 23  
Ephesians 5:8-14  
John 9:1-41

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Lent 4  
Year A

### Sacraments in Disguise

We have two huge stories today, giant-sized stories that are way too big for one sermon, certainly. But much more than that, they are way too big for most of us, most of the time – just as they were way too big for the Pharisees who were so thrown they tried to threaten Jesus, the man born blind, and his parents. Just as they were way too big for King Saul who threatened David and his rag tag band of followers and the health of all Israel up to the last day of his life. Just as the secret, silent anointing of an unknown, forgotten shepherd boy was way too big for the older, more valued and consequential sons of Jesse. Just, in fact, as the tiny, helpless, baby Jesus was way too big for the threats of King Herod or the mandates of Caesar.... Are you catching the scriptural drift here???

These are huge stories, all right, stories that are “world-shattering and world-rebuilding”<sup>1</sup> *and* they are tiny stories, stories about the smallest, the youngest, the weakest, the newest, the most marginal of believers in a God who was calling for new vision of the kingdom.

The story in First Samuel is the beginning of the story of David, the most beloved and life-changing king Israel will ever have (in spite of all his carefully recorded failures and foibles. The prophet Samuel is sent by God on an ominous mission that terrifies him and the elders of Bethlehem to whom he is sent. Saul, the king who knows he has lost Yahweh’s support of his kingship, has everyone in Israel trembling for fear of their lives lest they be seen to associate with Samuel (the king anointer) or anyone who might even be thinking any forbidden thoughts about a new king on the horizon. And God is sending Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint the future king of Israel, telling him to keep his mission secret and to tell the Bethlehemites that he is just stopping by to offer a sacrifice while he is in the neighborhood. This ploy gets Samuel into the house of Jesse where he asks to see a parade of Jesse’s sons, without mentioning anything to Jesse about the real purpose of his visit. As we heard, Jesse happily shows off first his eldest, the tall and handsome Elias, then Abinadab, then Shammah, and the next four sons joining the parade in turn. But Samuel just keeps shaking his head and saying things like, *No, not this one either, and The Lord has not chosen any of these, and, You know the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.* Finally, he has to prompt Jesse, “*Are all your sons here?*”

*Well, no, Jesse says, the youngest one isn’t here. He takes care of the sheep. Immediately when David, the shepherd boy, arrived, 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.*

This story is actually the first of three ways David is introduced. This was the literary practice for characters that were too big, too complex, too important to be presented by a single story. (Think about the two distinct birth narratives for Jesus, and the four different Gospel tellings of his life.) David is presented first as a shepherd boy, next as a young musician, and again as a young unknown warrior willing to face the giant, Goliath (as our Children’s Choir will sing for us at the 10:00 service today). David’s story begins by revealing him as an unvalued, inconsequential, forgotten shepherd boy. He is on the margins - even of his own family - with no traditional claims to social position or authority. On David’s path to becoming the shepherd

of all Israel, the king whom he has just been anointed to be, he will gather to himself a whole band, an army of outsiders, virtually all of them people on the margins who will follow David, God's choice, into an entirely new reality for Israel, the greatest she will know in all of scripture. And all that newness of life will come from a sacrament in disguise – a tiny, hidden event, unpublicized, unspoken, with only the horn of oil to do its work of identifying whom God chooses as the one needed for everyone to begin again.

When we come upon Jesus today, he has just escaped from the temple, where he has been threatened with physical violence by the religious authorities who are so sure they know how to interpret God's ideas about what's right and wrong, proper and improper; and from the things Jesus has been saying and doing, they are **certain** he is a heretic. Now, *As Jesus was going along after he had come out of hiding, he saw a person blind from birth,<sup>2</sup>* and the disciples who were with him all start asking him questions about what the right and proper things were to believe about this man; questions like, *Rabbi, who sinned that this man was born blind – he or his parents? It's got to be one or the other. Which is it?* And Jesus kept answering the only answer he ever had for them, really: *This man is not here because of sin. This man is here so that the works of God may be made manifest in him. This is not about right and wrong things to believe. It is about being blind and not being blind.* The man who will experience Jesus' healing will not care a bit about whether it was done the "right" way or not. *I know one thing, he says, - that though I was blind, now I see!*

With dirt and spittle on a forbidden day by an unauthorized minister, newness of life again comes from a sacrament in disguise. It is a New Creation: Jesus makes a new life fashioned out of clay and washed in the waters of *Siloam*, the waters of the *Sent One*.

The story of the man born blind was way too big for the religious leaders of its day and it is way too big for us whenever we forget what Jesus actually did and taught, and when – in our confusion, with the Pharisees – we spin our wheels and waste our precious life denying miracles of new birth happening right before our eyes. That is when Jesus says, *I've come into this world so that those who don't see may see and, when that happens, those who see may go blind...* He is offering us the enlightenment of the man born blind who sees more and more clearly with each line of the story that his old view of the world, grounded in the most cherished details of his religious tradition has been shattered along with the darkness he lived in. The new reality he is coming to know has no such external boundaries. It is all light and the light lives inside him and pours out of him!

It is a huge story, so often too big for us, *and* it is also a very small story about the least, the weakest, the most marginal of new believers, a beggar, a cracked vessel born of sin and in sin, unsanctioned by the community of the faithful. *This* is the one God chooses. This is the one God calls into Jesus' new vision for the kingdom. This is the one who follows that call in defiance of the old rules, confessing his faith in the *one thing he knows* – the reality of his healing – and that made his tiny story much too big for the world as he had known it before.

It sounds to me as if Jesus thinks we all have a choice: we can stay with the Pharisees, blinded by what we think we know about how the world works or, with the man born blind, we can let Jesus fashion a new life for us out of the clay and water that we really are, and we can follow our healer into a whole, new kingdom reality of LIGHT where we will see that there are no boundaries, no exceptions, no outside, no inside, only the light of God's love everywhere there is.

*Let there be light!*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L. William Countryman, *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel*, 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:3