

**4th Sunday of Lent
April 3, 2011
5:30 PM Liturgy**

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What would it take to surprise you? I mean to really surprise you?

The kind of surprise that would leave you saying: “Whoa. That’s weird.”

Well, fasten your seatbelts. This could be an interesting—or even shocking—liturgy.

This passage from the 9th chapter of John’s gospel is one of the most complex literary and poetic expositions in all of the gospels. It is, as Fr. Raymond Brown says, “Johannine dramatic skill at its best.” And Sandra Schneiders comments that just about everyone in the scholarly community considers this passage a “literary masterpiece.” It is that and more.

If this story were told in any of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, or Luke—we could take it as just another straight-forward healing or miracle story, or as just one more example of Jesus’ mounting trouble with the Jewish authorities over the Sabbath. And the story is both of those things. But in John’s hands, it is also a much larger and much more important story. For John, the man born blind represents the whole human race; he is us. And his journey to faith, to life and to light, is filled with surprises. And I mean real surprises—not just historically but for us in today’s church, in today’s

time. If we really pay attention, we can draw some very surprising and liberating conclusions for our own lives.

If there is a single word that captures today's whole liturgy, it would have to be: surprise. Surprise is reflected in the book of Samuel reading. Any one of Jesse's seven sons could have served Israel well as king. They were all competent, caring, religious people. But they are all passed over. And the "runt of the litter," so to speak, little David, gorgeous though he may have been, having not even been invited to the selection party, is chosen. We hear the prophet speak: "He is the one. Anoint him." God does not see as humans do. This, too, is a story about how God judges, about God's expectations. It is a story about who is included and who is excluded from the kingdom. And it is not who you think it should be. Surprise!

And here comes John's surprise. John frames his whole story between two statements about sin. Jesus walks by a blind man and his disciples ask: "Who has sinned? This man or his parents?" And the story ends with Jesus saying to the Pharisees: "...if you were blind you would have no sin; but now you are saying 'we see,' so your sin remains." The big question is: what really is sin? And what just *appears* to be sin to the un-enlightened? What does it really mean to be in the light of the risen Christ, and what does it

really mean to dwell in darkness? Who is included? And who is excluded?

And John's answer turns everything upside down. Nothing remains as it appears after Jesus' resurrection. It is a brand new world we have inherited. And Jesus *subverts* every notion of righteousness and justification before God. Those who think they see and understand are really those who remain blind. And those who are blind, see! Most of us, I'm afraid, continue to miss just how confusing and how radical John's story really is. (By the way, I am most indebted to James Alison, a British theologian, for this stunning analysis. My only defense in rather shamelessly lifting his entire analysis is a quip I heard in graduate school: immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.")

What Jesus does is far more complex than giving back physical sight to a blind man on the Sabbath. Jesus is *acting as God* in this story to finish creation. The man was born incomplete; he is blind "from birth." The clay Jesus fashions, is a pun missed in English translations (and even in the Greek). The word for clay is, in Hebrew, *adamah*. It is the same "stuff" from which God fashions the first human in the very creation of the world. In Genesis, he is called Adam, the same Hebrew word as in John's story. That is not an accident; John knows exactly what he is doing here.

God does not rest on the Sabbath any more; God is still making creation whole in Jesus. The Pharisees, like all good law-bound believers of any faith, miss the point completely. They actually become more blind because of the challenge to their pre-conceived notions of God's gracious out-pouring of love, God's on-going creation of the world. For them, God, too, is bound by the Law.

This blind man is excluded from Israel as a sinner because he is blind, incomplete. Slowly he comes to see, and in the end, is not only included, he is in the center of the light. To re-visit Samuel again: *God does not see as humans do.* And what is sin? To quote Alison: "Sin is resistance, in the name of God, to the creative work of God which seeks to include us all."

Jesus subverts all our notions of order, of goodness, of clear moral understanding, of what can separate us from the love of God. St. Paul says it succinctly today: Nothing can separate us from God. For once we were in darkness (blind) but now we are in the light. We just need to wake up, to awaken ourselves. And let ourselves be pleasantly surprised.

So who are today's blind? Who are today's "excluded"? Who are today's "sinners"? And in light of today's liturgy, are we really that sure?

The journey to Easter is an invitation to see with the eyes of God—for a

**change. To see ourselves as God sees us. Blind and in the dark? Yes.
Sinners? Yes. But because of that very blindness, we able to see and name
the light. Because of our sin, we can see; we are freed forever in Christ
Jesus. Now. Today. Surprised yet? I am.**