

Fourth Sunday in Lent Year A

Light!

The gospels need to be approached as a sort of unfolding - the unfolding of who Jesus is and what that can mean about who we are called to be. So perhaps it helps to think of a time-lapse video of a flower opening, one petal at a time until the entire flower is open and we can see every detail down to the tiniest specks of pollen on the stamen and anthers. The difference being that the gospels begin by saying just who Jesus is.

John's gospel begins with the most astonishing claim: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

There are all kinds of things that can be said about this story of The Man Who Was Born Blind: things about sin, about blindness both literal and metaphorical, about miracles, about how societies divide themselves, the barriers we erect for those not just like us and so on. He is an outcast. He is forced by societal norms to live on the margins of society.

Yet, the most fundamental purpose of the story as it works in John's gospel is to illuminate, if you will, the essence of who Jesus is. The revelation comes from his own mouth: "I Am the light of the world." John has already told us this "in the beginning." And we need always to remind ourselves that whenever Jesus utters the words, "I Am," we are meant to recall that sacred moment of self revelation at the Burning Bush when Moses is being given a task and asks, "Who shall I say sent me?" The voice from the bush replies, "I Am who I Am...you shall say...I Am sent me to you."(Ex 3:14)

The very first word God utters in creation is, "Light!" Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." This story sheds light on just what that means. And what it means is justice for all people and the need to respect the dignity of every human being.

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, the protagonist is Jean Valjean - who is forever called by his prison number, 24601. A person reduced to a number. The stage version of the story depicts prisoner 24601 as a complex character. Is he just a thief, plain and simple? Is he a victim of an unfair system of justice? Is he a compassionate businessman and mayor? A benevolent step-father? A valiant revolutionary of the Paris Uprising of 1832? A compassionate liberator of his most persistent enemy, Inspector Javert? Or, in his own words, is he "no better and no worse than any other man"?

Just as Hugo attempts to shed light on the complexities of post-Revolutionary France, so the Jesus in John seeks to shed light on all sorts and conditions of humankind - and the artificial and often arbitrary ways in which we treat others - especially others who are not at all like ourselves.

The Man Born Blind is a figure not unlike 24601. That is, like prisoner 24601, the man is cast into a lifetime of darkness - he must be a beggar on the streets. What he says carries no weight.

Even Jesus' own disciples believe The Man is Blind because of his own or his parents' sin. Note that the man does not seek to be healed. He is so marginalized that he does not even have a name. Jesus states that he is the light of the world, and as long as he is in the world there is work to do. After Jesus restores the man's sight, he seeks to shed light on what real sin exists in the world.

For the man is not a victim of his own sin or that of his parents. Rather he is the victim of an entrenched system of fear that declares some people unclean. We watch and we listen as all those people and societal institutions expected to support the Man Born Blind just step away - they recoil, even though now he can see! His parents disown him. The Pharisees chastise him. The neighbors pretend he is not the same man. All those societal systems meant to be a support just collapse, until in a most astonishing moment, the Man Born Blind becomes not only his own advocate, but he defends Jesus against all criticism as now he is lecturing the Pharisees, the doctors of the law of Moses.

He whose being has had no standing whatsoever in the community when the story begins is now the one who is exhorting them, the arbiters of society and religion to "see" -to see the Light of the World - The Word that was with God and is God. Egads, he seems to say, this can be no other than the will and the work of God!

Leave it to people to look at the wrong end of a miracle every time. The miracle is not that the man can see. The scandal is not that the Sabbath has been broken. The miracle in one part is the fact that Jesus is the Light of the World that can turn the darkness of blindness and the darkness rejection and persecution of the world into light.

But more than that, this story is meant to demonstrate that we can be people of that light. We can turn darkness into light. Just as Jesus changed the life of the Samaritan woman (John 4) by giving her dignity, by giving her purpose, by giving her a new identity, by asking her to do something for him - give him a drink - so the Man Born Blind is given a new lease on life.

Anyone, the neighbors, his parents, the Pharisees, whomever, could have granted The Man Born Blind more purpose in life, made him a more integral part of the community, rather than writing him off as an outcast. Jesus is the one who says, "There is something you can do for me." The woman becomes the first evangelist. The Man Born Blind becomes a vocal advocate for God and a defender of Jesus The Light of the World! He now dares to step beyond the barriers the others created for him.

There is something you can do for Jesus. Whatever it is, it will heal you and heal the world.

If the Samaritan Woman at the Well, The Man Born Blind and 24601 can do God's work so effectively, what are we being called to do? What barriers are we willing to break down so that people like the woman, the man and 24601 can be granted personhood? How can we become advocates for inclusion rather than exclusion?

Looking at the world in which we live, there is not much time given to us to ask such questions. Lent means to be such a time. Once Easter arrives, though, it is time to follow the examples of The Man Born Blind and the Samaritan Woman. We too can be people of the Light, of Jesus the Light of the World.

Amen.

Written by The Rev. Kirk Kubicek, who was ordained in the Diocese of Chicago in 1983, and has served as a parish priest in the dioceses of Chicago, Connecticut and Maryland. After nearly 18 years as rector of St. Peter's in Ellicott City, MD, Kubicek spent six years as Chaplain and teacher at St. Timothy's School for Girls, an Episcopal and international boarding and day-school in Stevenson, MD. In the mid-1980's he was trained to work as a Stewardship Consultant through the Office of Stewardship at the Episcopal Church Center and helped lead retreats for the Ministry of Money, a ministry of the Church of the Saviour, Washington, DC. Recently retired from full-time parish ministry, Kubicek serves as an interim and provides supply work throughout the Diocese of Maryland. He is also a drummer in various rock and jazz bands, currently playing with On The Bus, a Grateful Dead tribute band centered in the greater DC Metro region. He plays guitar and writes music to supplement worship and preaching events. Some of these songs can be seen on youtube at www.youtube.com/user/SoundsDivine1. His sermons are archived at www.perechief.blogspot.com. Feel free to contact Kubicek at kkub@aol.com.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.