

Sermon: Fourth Sunday in Lent (A) 3/25/26

Peace Lutheran Church, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Text: John 9:1-3-41

Edward Hays, a Jesuit priest, loved to teach the faith by telling stories. One of his **best** stories was “The Quest for the Burning Bush¹,” in which he wrote about an interfaith delegation of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars who went on an expedition to find the famed burning bush of Moses...you know, the bush that burned but wasn’t consumed and out of which Yahweh called Moses to lead God’s people out of Egypt. The delegation called a press conference to announce their mission, then flew by private plane to the tip of the Sinai desert. From there they set out for Mt. Horeb, painstakingly examining every single bush they passed. For three years and at a cost of millions of dollars, the scholars examined **thousands and thousands** of bushes, but found none that emitted even a **few** sparks or showed **any** sign of being divinely charred. They bent down and listened carefully to every branch on every bush, but not once did they hear the voice of God...or any **other** voice. Finally, they prepared to return home, disillusioned and defeated.

However... “[a]t the very hour that the expedition members were boarding their plane in Sinai, near Milesville, South Dakota, a farmer’s wife was in her kitchen doing the dishes when her dish towel exploded into flames. Out of the flaming towel came a voice, ‘Mara, Mara, remove your slippers for the place where you stand is holy ground.’”

I love that story. It makes me laugh out loud every time I hear it. But it’s **more than funny**. It can, I think, **also** help us to think about what’s going on in today’s **very** long gospel about the healing of the man born blind. There aren’t any burning **bushes** in that story, but there is plenty of heat and light...as narrow expectations of God are blown open by Jesus’ actions and the faith of one unlikely man.

The gospel writer presents his story like a play with a **huge** cast of characters: disciples, neighbors, Pharisees, parents, Jesus, and the man born blind. Interestingly enough, it's not the blind man who starts the plot rolling. It's **Jesus** who sees him, who answers disciples' questions about the connection between sin and the man's condition, then moves, unasked, to heal the man. All this, **despite** the fact that the man hasn't yet said a word **and** hasn't asked to be healed. Jesus takes the initiative, because Jesus, the Light of the world, came to enlighten **everyone**. With God's own authority, Jesus takes dirt and saliva, makes mud, and smears it on the man's eyes. The gospel writer is hoping we will get the creation connection he's making, a **new** creation accomplished through mud, Word, and the waters called Sent. Unfortunately, everybody **else** in today's story **doesn't**.

In fact, they begin to behave badly, **very** badly, **very** unkindly, and at times like theological Keystone cops. As light dawns for the man born **blind**, **they** continue to stumble in the dark, unable to accept that divine light could operate in a way so **contrary** to the rules they were convinced governed God's work in the world. They couldn't accept that God would say, "Let there be light!" to a **sinner**. So they couldn't be happy about the healing. Instead, they **grill** the man born blind, looking for something to show that his healing was **not** an authentic act of God.

Like the folks in Edward Hays' story, the Pharisees and others were trying to sniff out God in the places they'd grown **used** to expecting God to show up; so they missed out on the unexpected fireworks of divine healing right in front of them. By the **end** of the story, it's clear they'd probably have missed the flaming **dish towel, too!** But even if they **did** notice it, they'd probably have tried to douse the flames or shut out the light, lest they be asked to consider something they didn't want to know about God, themselves, or the world.

Many **more** healings were possible in today's story. Many **more** people **could** have received their sight, that is, faith. For the Light of the

World was **with** them, “the **true** light that enlightens **everyone**.” But, as Jesus said a few chapters earlier, they “loved darkness rather than light.” They couldn’t accept that they were languishing and dying in the dark, closed off from God...who was so near. So they kept the eyes of their hearts shut, drove the man away, and hoped Jesus would realize **he** wasn’t welcome **either**...

which was **another** point the gospel writer wanted to make, that those on whom Christ has shined, those healed of their blindness, cannot go back to the way things were or **even**, at times, to the community from which they’d come. It’s the same in **every** generation, in every **place**. This story was **first** written to address the gospel writer’s **own** community whose members included people expelled from the synagogues because they refused to temper their confession of Christ.

In the 2nd century persecuted Christians painted this story on the walls of the catacombs in Rome where they worshipped secretly. And a few centuries **later** this story became part of the preparation of those who had asked to be baptized, lest they fail to understand the consequences of confessing Jesus as Lord, the reality that living as a child of the light will mean **trouble as well as blessing**.

Yet **whenever** and **wherever** this story is told, **we** are reminded that it is full of promise: the promise that Jesus will not abandon the faithful. Earlier in the story Jesus disappears once the blind man sets off for the pool of Siloam. But when Jesus learns the man has been driven out of his community, Jesus drops everything and searches for him. And when he finds him, Jesus leads him through the catechesis of faith. And, thus led and strengthened by Jesus, the man acknowledges and worships him as Lord.

Once we **too** were blind but now we see. We, **too**, have been made a new creation by water, Word, and the Spirit sent by Jesus. We, **too**, have confessed, “Lord, I believe,” and find ourselves seeing the world

through **Jesus'** eyes, as the object of God's mercy and love. But we **also** see that there are consequences that come with being given the eyes of faith. The burning bush sent Moses back to the land he'd fled; the flaming dish towel meant no more business as usual for Mara of the pots and pans; the man born blind was *persona non grata* in the community into which he'd been born...just as you and I sometimes find some folks no longer want to spend time with us because they find us too forgiving, too concerned with justice, too devoted to peace.

Of course, this is nothing new to Jesus or to God. Jesus **himself** was driven out of his community, rejected by his own people, taken outside the city walls to die. Yet even in the **tomb**, God found him and brought him forth to shine like the sun on those who dwell in deep darkness and the shadow of death. And Jesus did not abandon **us**, even when we abandoned **him**. When he rose on Easter morning, he did not escape quickly into celestial safety and leave the world to its dark and dirty ways. No, **immediately** he went to search for his disciples, to open their eyes to the full reality of who he was and to what his dying and rising meant for them. Then he created them anew, breathing on them the Holy Spirit, and sent them out to complete his ministry, to seek the least and the lost.

Now **we** are called to live as "children of light." With the cataracts of sin removed, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, **we** are called to seek out those who believe themselves unworthy of divine mercy, those who are too ashamed to approach God, those who've been told they're too much of a risk to live at home with God. Because God looked at us **through** Jesus Christ, **we** now are called to regard others as God in Christ regards **us**, refusing to judge by outward appearances or past history, as we heard in the reading from 1 Samuel. **We** are now called to let the light of Christ shine in us and through us, so that, unlikely as it may seem, **we** may be God's burning bush, God's flaming dish towel, offering our neighbors healing, light, and love.

It is not a matter of our own will, thank goodness. It is a matter of the grace and power of **God** at work in us. At the very beginning of John's gospel we read, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." I want to walk as a child of **that** light. What about you? I hope your answer will be "yes" because, God knows, the world needs more light right now. Amen.

1 Edward Hayes, *Twelve and One-Half Keys: Parable-Stories for Those on a Mystic Journey* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Forest of Peace Books, 1981)