

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Sunday, March 26, 2017
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Just like any other undergraduate or graduate school program – seminary has its own survival short cuts. One is – if you’re reading from the Gospel of John pay attention – something significant is being said. We’ve been hearing from John’s Gospel throughout Lent and today’s passage invites us to take a deep breath and make some connections. Why John in Lent, what are we learning about God, about Jesus? Recall that 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.*” In a real sense, the rest of John’s Gospel simply points back or serves to illuminate that basic yet momentous claim – God and Jesus are somehow inseparable.

Now this is both absurdly challenging and yet wonderfully exciting because we quickly arrive at the possibility that if we want to know about God we can look at Jesus and gain some real insight.

And throughout John’s Gospel Jesus explains exactly who he is: “I am the way, the truth, and the life, I am the good shepherd, I am the true vine, I am the bread of life,” and this morning: “I am the light of the world.” Notice Jesus uses very specific language explaining who he is, I AM. It’s no accident that we recall other sacred I AM moments of self revelation - particularly at the Burning Bush when Moses asks who he should say sent him, and the voice replies: I AM who I am, you shall say I AM sent you.

Now there is much to be said about today’s Gospel story of the man born blind. Our challenge is to unpack this dense passage without losing sight of the Gospel’s overarching significance: Jesus gradually revealed, increasingly made known, his identity and purpose becoming evermore clear and in focus – I AM.

Today our journey deeper into this recognition of Jesus is by way of a healing tale. Jesus gives sight to an un-named blind man.

Notice that the man didn’t ask for or initiate his own healing, rather the disciples raise a question about what they suppose is the cause of the man’s blindness – sin; and Jesus counters their distraction by turning their attention towards God. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” Jesus explains. He was born blind so that God’s works, or God’s purpose, God’s identity, might be revealed.

And so Jesus efficiently grants the man sight by way of mud and his blindness is washed away. Jesus is the light and he sheds light. Things get complicated when no one believes or even recognizes the man once he has vision, once he can see clearly. His neighbors, the religious leaders, even the man’s parents cannot fathom his experience of being healed and transformed.

The whole cast of characters gets lost and become distracted along the way – the disciples by imagining the consequences of sin, the neighbors by traps of labeling, the Pharisees by the law, his parents by their fear.

All of these rabbit holes are worth exploring because they are our pits as well. We, of course become distracted worrying about sin and blame, differences and norms, authority and power. We could be and are any of the supporting characters in this story – so caught up with our own lives that we miss the I AM at work in our midst.

All of this is worth noting, but to get at the fundamental purpose of this story, illuminating the essence of who Jesus is, we must stay focused on the blind man himself. Notice that his life and journey remain complicated and thorny even with his sight restored. Despite obvious proof and his simple straightforward account no one believes him. His parents distance themselves and he is driven out by the Pharisees, all because he had an encounter with I AM. We certainly should be able to relate to these events as well. Our lives usually remain messy even if we have a serious considered faith, even if we enjoy experiences of God at work in our lives or are fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of miracles. Clear sight, vision, transformation do not often translate into smoother lives.

But journeying with Jesus does involve some kind of clarity about God and the identity of the great I AM. We shouldn't miss the progression of the blind man's understanding of Jesus. His increasing awareness follows the arch of the story. He begins by calling Jesus a man. "How were your eyes opened they ask," he responds, by "the man called Jesus." Later he answers the same question by calling Jesus a prophet, a category shared by Moses, he's getting closer. Finally, at the end of the story, when Jesus seeks him out yet again, the man confesses that Jesus is Lord. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asks. "Lord, I believe."

The point here is that the more we know Jesus, the greater he becomes, and yet at the same time, the more unknowable the great I AM often becomes. Friends, we can learn a great deal about the essence of the identity of Jesus by walking in the footsteps of those transformed by him. It is also true that we often miss the real miracle of those encounters.

Whether it's seeing, walking, being rid of demons, these are never the real gifts – life remains difficult regardless. The miracle is always the encounter with the I AM, the experience of living water, clear vision, a transformed soul, a brush with God.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes eloquently about the great I AM and the mystery that exists in knowing Jesus: "When he says I AM, there is no difference between the two - God and Jesus. When you look at him, you see God. When you listen to him, you hear God. Not because he has taken God's place, but because he is the clear window God as glazed into flesh and blood."

Who is this man who reveals himself as I AM? Taylor offers: "He has revealed himself as water, bread, shepherd, vine, light, life; all of these and many more. He has answered before and he will again. But in the end, we cannot nail him down. We tried that once, and ever since he has been the presence of God in our midst. He is I AM - and that is the only answer we really need," especially in Lent.

Amen.