

SERMON- Lent 4 (A)

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1 Samuel 16:1-13

Ephesians 5:8-14

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

March 19, 2023

John 9:1-41

Psalms 23

OPENING:

This passage popped up three years ago right at the start of COVID, when we all were worried about disease vectors and social distancing and the transmissibility of respiratory droplets.

We got a story where Jesus spits on the ground and rubs the resulting mixture into someone's eyes.

But conversion—which is what happens to the Man Born Blind in the Gospel and what happens to you and me after an encounter with the Living God—is a messy thing.

It's not predictable, it's not necessarily repeatable, instead it happens and then we all deal with the consequences.

This is another *long* passage for us in Lent. It's so long because Jesus shows up, heals someone, and then they spend about 27 verses asking how and why it happened. They try to explain it and explain it and explain it.¹

Instead of trying to explain it, I am going to tell you my story of conversion: of spit going into my eye, of being able to see after being blind, of being lost and being found, of going from darkness to light

TESTIMONY:

It was the Summer of 2004, and I was returning late one July night to Shrinemont where I was working at George's Camp. It was dark and you have to climb the windy hill up the mountain and, while doing so, you are under strict orders, if it's after a certain hour, to turn your headlights off so to not disturb the guests. I did so, with my 1997 Chevy *Lumina* knowing every turn, hoping not to wake anyone.

I parked at the infirmary for the final walk to the cabins, closing the door carefully, and then taking a look at the pavilion a hundred feet below. The basketball courts were barren of campers or guests at that late hour but it was still brilliantly lit by the pavilion flood-lights.

¹ Anna Carter Florence, "Homiletical Perspective" (4th Sunday in Lent, John 9.1-14) in *Feasting on the Word* (Year A, Volume 2), 117, 119, 121.

So I turned to take the dark path up to the campsite full of the 100 odd campers and counselors when I heard the bounce and echo of a basketball upon cement.

“Bounce” “Bounce”

I looked back at the pavilion and did not see anyone playing and so turned again to head up the hill. As soon as I turned, though, another dribble broke the night’s silence and I turned again. No one was there. I paused for a few seconds to assess the situation.

LEONARD

As many of you might remember, in the summer of 2004, my twin brother had been killed two months earlier in Karbala, Iraq. Leonard was a young 2nd Lieutenant less than a year out of West Point, less than a year into his marriage, and less than four months into his tour in Iraq as an Armor Officer in a tank platoon. He was killed by a sniper on May 16, 2004—the bullet penetrating his chest just above the body armor. My world went dark.

After the return of Leonard’s body, his funeral and burial, I had insisted upon working that summer at Shrinemont—my religious oasis ever since childhood—where Leonard and I had grown up going to camp and playing sports. And it was a blessing to be working that summer to build the Body of Christ among young people... and deep within myself.

CONVERSION

So, I stared at the empty pavilion that July night. I could hear campers above getting ready for bed and counselors’ loud voices trying to corral them into their cabins. I could see the empty basketball pavilion where Leonard and I had played basketball countless times.

And that sound:

“Bounce” “Bounce”

the disembodied bouncing ball kept echoing across the mountain side.

I was conscious that, if God would ever speak to me through Leonard, this would be the place. And so I stood there staring at that empty pavilion:

It was so dark, and yet there was so much light. So alone, and yet so surrounded.

It was so quiet, and yet the reverberations were so loud.

I felt a pull down the hill, towards the pavilion, towards Leonard in some way. My body was shivering as I felt God all around and inside me.

At some moment in all my confusion, a familiar voice from up the hill pierced the night air: “Lights out 5 minutes!”

It was the voice of my coworker Brooke as she was attempting to put a final limit on the kids’ activities up the hill.

Something happened in that moment.

I paused and took one last look at the pavilion, smiled, and turned up the hill striding rapidly and with confidence.

I have always interpreted that moment as God's call in my life as a choice, as the choice between death and life. I believed, instantaneously but also slowly over time, that God was reminding me of God's presence, of Leonard's love, but also, at the same time, urging me towards life, towards my calling and vocation, towards healing.

I had a choice: I could go chase a ghost down at the basketball court or I could go up and do the work that God has set out before me.

GOSPEL:

I was then, and remain now, entirely skeptical of "that sort of thing." Even as I was hearing the sound of this disembodied dribble, I was trying to deny it empirically.

I am like the Pharisees and even the family members in our Gospel story. They don't trust the Man Born Blind: they keep pestering and interrogating what happened.

I am the same way with my story, I am just as hard on myself. I don't mind if you do too because conversion again is messy and we want to put it all on trial.

The man born blind getting asked "How did he heal you?" over and over.

He keeps answering the same way: "I don't know, I could not see, then that man touched my eyes and now I can see."

This would be the worst episode of *Law & Order* ever, because he never changes his story, there is no plot twist, just a confession, a testimony, a conversion.

In-between is a long explanation. They want to know why and how.

The people were obsessed with the miracle, the healing, the touch, the spit, the clay, the sin. But not the Man Born Blind, "I was blind, now I see."

SHIFT:

So I know there is something called an "Acoustic Shadow." I know this from reading about the Civil War, that sound can move off mountains and landscapes and play tricks on you. I know there is another pavilion down the hill at Shrine Mont with a basketball court.

Mentioning that is like the Pharisees asking "who sinned... you or your parents?" It's immaterial to the question at hand. In my case, I could not see a way forward in my life prior to that moment. After that night, I could. I was blind, then I could see.

Likewise, I know full well that, like many American men my age, that my conception of the afterlife is very much shaped by the movie *Field of Dreams*. That's the movie where Kevin Costner's character builds a baseball field in an Iowa Cornfield and the 1919 Black Sox come back with his dad and they play catch. So I essentially think that heaven is where you get to play sports with people that you love.

I will grant the Pharisees that. Maybe is my conversion story a "strategy of self-survival"? A narrative that I told myself to keep myself alive and above water. You might recall Freud's favorite criticism of religion as a "crutch" for the elderly or the poor or the disenfranchised. But to that you give Billy Graham's reply "But doesn't everyone walk with a limp."

CONCLUSION

I will fully admit that when I tell you my story that it's, again, kind of messy. All the pieces do not quite fit maybe.

But like I said at the beginning, conversion stories are messy, they don't always make sense. They get caught up in the sights and sounds and feelings, the dirt and spit and confusion of this world.

Mine is that simple and that profound, no comets or meteors in the night sky, God never spoke, just some bounces, the emptiness of the night, and a voice that pierced it. I can only tell that story the way that it happened to me.

People of St. Timothy's! What good does this do for you?

If I could send you to Shrinemont and have you turn off the lights to your car at night and then go to the pavilion to play basketball in order that you could have an experience with God, I would.

If I could spit in the ground and come up with some mud and heal you I would.

But we worship a person, not the miracle.

We worship a living God, not a technique.

Conversions are messy, Jesus never heals the same way twice, and each of us never experience him the same way.

I know that I live and I see differently. I know that Brooke, my friend in that story, is downstairs teaching Godly Play, and has her own conversion story to tell.

I know that all of us do, and we should be invited to tell them. Regardless of the messiness of them.

I know that Light overcomes the darkness, that there is a water to drink even at the Bottom of the Well, and there is healing **AMEN**