

“Seeing, Sort of”
July 19, 2020

I Samuel 16:1-13
Mark 8:22-26

“Talk about a difficult time.”

That’s how Washington DC Police Chief, Peter Newsham, described these days last week. He continued: “These are times I don’t think any of us have faced in our lifetime.”

But maybe we could have seen them coming.

During the summer three years ago, I preached a sermon that started with the story of Jordan Edwards. Do you remember Jordan Edwards? My guess is most people don’t. Jordan Edwards was a fifteen-year-old African-American, an honor student described as “someone who did everything right.” We was shot and killed by a police officer in suburban Dallas. At the time he was “the youngest of more than 330 people who have been shot and killed by police that year. About 25 percent of those killed were African-American, and about 7 percent were — like Jordan — unarmed.”¹

I was left with the question: Will this ever stop?

We now know the answer.

We wake up each day and realize, as the police chief said: “These are times I don’t think any of us have faced in our lifetime.”

We didn’t see these days—our days—coming because we only sort of see.

Years ago I read somewhere—and I can’t remember where—that in the coming years, church members will be saying to their ministers: “Don’t tell us what you know. Speak to us out of what you don’t know.” That is, talk about those aspects of the life that leave us in wonder and awe. Talk about the mystery of God and of our times. Give voice to your questions because all of us are living with questions.

If I pretended to have all of this sorted out, would you believe anything I said?

These are days when all a minister can do is speak of what he or she doesn’t know.

That is certainly where I start as I prepare to preach during this pandemic, during this economic crisis, during this time of racial reckoning, as the school year approaches with all its uncertainty, when the longing question, “When will we be able to worship together?” can only be answered with a sorrowful, “I don’t know.”

Not knowing is OK, I tell myself. After all, scripture seems to be one long story of not knowing.

Yes, it begins with Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—and we see how well that turned out.

The prophets lamented the lack of knowledge of the people, God upbraided Job for how little he really knew, Paul followed suit and often upbraided early Christian congregations for their slight knowledge. And we remember even Jesus crying out: “My God, my God, why...”

Not knowing.

The DC police chief spoke about the difficulty of these uncertain and unfamiliar times at a meeting of law enforcement and religious leaders who gathered to ask and to seek to answer the question: “Where do we go from here?”

That’s a good question—and it assumes that we know where we are at currently, where “*here*” is. But where do we go from “here” when we don’t even know where we are.

What they *did know* was that there is mistrust between police and the black community and that widespread mental health and addiction challenges need to be addressed to make progress. The hope they expressed was that the church could play a role in building better relationships.

When asked about what churches might do, one police officer said; “healing starts in the church first.”²

That sent me in my unknowing back to that story of healing in the Gospel of Mark—and also to the story of the anointing of King David.

Those two stories speak to us about sight and insight, about vision and understanding.

Under the prodding of God, Samuel reluctantly and fearfully goes to Bethlehem to anoint a new king. God has told Samuel that he will find a new king among Jesse’s sons. And, as is often the case, God is a little sketchy on the rest of the details.

So when Jesse lines up his seven sons, each one seems like a possibility. There’s Eliab, who surely could be the chosen one. Or maybe Abinadab. Or Shammah.

When important choices must be made, when, as the old hymn says, new occasions teach new duties and we’re not quite sure what those new duties are—or even how to correctly see the new occasions—how do we make the right decisions?

If there are, as our church covenant claims, ways of Jesus Christ *yet to be made known*, how do we walk in such ways when they are only in the process of showing themselves to us?

Even when you are certain that God is with you—and few of us have that certainty—making the right choice is difficult. As he surveys his options, a small voice keeps echoing in Samuel’s head: “The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

That’s a good part of the problem, isn’t it?

Our sight is limited.

Our *insight* is even poorer.

None of us sees with the eyes of God—and that is a cause for both humility and thankfulness. Humility because we know that our decisions, our choices will be flawed and never as good in the eyes of someone else as they are in our eyes.

Thankfulness because the limits of our own ability throw us together with other finite and humble human beings. One word for such a limited and fallible gathering is “church.”

If we are going to make the right decisions in these days, we need to learn to talk honestly with one another about our difficulties and our doubts. We need to create places where we can be open with one another.

That, at least is where we can start.

But even as we talk with one another, even as we follow the way that Jesus recommends and bear one another’s burdens, we can’t expect instant enlightenment.

In Bethsaida some people bring a blind man to Jesus seeking his healing touch. After laying his hands on the man, Jesus asks, “Can you see anything?”

His curious reply is, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”

In all the Gospels, this is the only account of a healing that does not take place immediately. Here new sight comes only gradually. And some would suggest that this is the reason both Matthew and Luke didn’t include this story.

But there is something encouraging for us in this story of healing in stages.

It reminds us that discernment is a process. Remember that story about the Adam and Eve and the serpent? In it the serpent promises instant awareness: “Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” If we want quick solutions, the serpent has them for us.

If we choose to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, our sight, our healing, our wholeness will take a little longer.

The quick answers are not the ones we really need.

Vaccines are not developed overnight.

The economic turmoil will not be solved quickly.

We will not overcome centuries of racism and racial injustice because we read a few books, attended a few meetings or marched in a protest.

It's easy in these days to tell you what I don't know, because there is so much that I don't know. I think that most of us white liberal Christians find ourselves in a situation somewhat like that blind man. We see the longstanding problems of racism in our nation. We've been talking about them for years, decades. We have been enraged by police violence. I've spoken to many out of my anger about the racial disparities in our criminal justice system.

But let us not think that we now have clear sight.

We don't know everything. We don't see everything.

We may have started a journey, but we are nowhere near the destination.

We see people, but they look like trees, walking.

We seek the answers that come when we have been touched for a second time, recognizing that "clear sight" does not come quickly. "Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

This does not mean "every day in every way we're getting better and better." It does not mean that we are moving toward perfection. It means that in midst of the difficulties and setbacks and struggles of life, we are moving forward, we are moving toward health, toward possibility.

In our work, in our decision making, God invites us into a life of progress, not perfection.

There's a poem:

To look at any thing,
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say
"I have seen spring in these
Woods," will not do—you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
The leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very peace
They issue from.

If we are to know what needs to be known in these days, we must "look at it long." Quick labels will not do. We must enter in. We cannot be the detached people we so often long to be.

When we desire to see and to *know* what we see, we must slow down and take our time. We must accept the invitation to enter into the small silences.

Open your eyes and look around at what is happening.

Where is God bringing balm in response to suffering?

Where is God bringing love in response to hate?

Where is God feeding the hungry, healing the brokenhearted?

And how might you be a part of that?

I don't know. I can't answer those questions for you.

And the answers are not as simple as many would suggest.

I see people, but they look like trees.

May God improve my sight.

May God help us all to see.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/another-black-boy-was-killed-by-police-its-time-for-more-than-hashtags/2017/05/02/03ced94e-2f66-11e7-9534-00e4656c22aa_story.html?utm_term=.47dc41804a78

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vi/2020/07/16/where-do-we-go-here-dc-area-clergy-police-talk-reform-racism-mental-health/>