

Lent 4A
Peace, Seattle
March 26, 2017
1 Sam 16:1-13, Eph 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

COMING TO SEE

In the novel, All the Light We Cannot See, we meet Marie-Laure, a girl born in Paris in the years before WW2, who is afflicted with juvenile cataracts and loses her sight completely by age 6.¹

Her father, a locksmith at the Paris Natural History Museum, provides her with books in Braille so she can read, and anchors her world by crafting an exquisitely detailed scale-model of their neighborhood; a model she memorizes with her fingers.

On their strolls together through their real neighborhood, the father works endlessly to show her markers that will help Marie learn to navigate the world independently. Each year, for her birthday, he crafts increasingly intricate puzzle boxes to further develop and test her skills.

All this is prelude to the day he knows will come, when Marie will be forced by circumstances to negotiate the tumultuous world on her own.

But Marie-Laure is not the only protagonist in Anthony Doerr's novel. The other main character is Werner, a German orphan two year's older than Marie, whose gift for working with radios makes him a valuable commodity within the war machinery of the Third Reich.

Doerr constructs this fascinating and complex tale by flipping back and forth between these two characters, unlocking the story piece by piece, like one of the father's intricate puzzle boxes.

Marie and Werner's lives, which begin worlds apart, are finally connected in the ruins of a bombed out coastal village, changing their destinies forever.

Our texts this morning are about seeing and not seeing, sight and insight; and what it means to live in relationship to the light.

In 1st Samuel we learn that seeing as God sees is not something that comes easily to human beings. When Samuel is charged with choosing a successor to Saul from among the sons of Jesse, his eye at first is focused on outward attributes, until he gets the message:

Do not look at their appearance or stature...for the LORD does not see as mortals see;
they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.

So it is that Jesse's youngest son, David—the runt of the litter—ends up being the one Samuel anoints as king.

In Ephesians, Paul hangs his thoughts on the poles of darkness and light. When you became part of Christ you left behind the realm of darkness, he says. Walk, then, as children of light and bear the fruit of light in all that is good and right and true.

Finally, we come to the gospel story of a man born blind who receives healing at the hand of Jesus. It's a story about physical sight and spiritual sight; a story about what it means to see in Jesus God's light come into the world and the consequences of living with that insight.

¹ Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*. (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2014). Winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Literature.

WHO SINNED, the disciples ask, THIS MAN OR HIS PARENTS, THAT HE WAS BORN BLIND?

IT'S NOT ABOUT SIN, Jesus tells them. IT'S ABOUT THIS MAN'S LIFE, HIS STORY, REVEALING GOD AT WORK IN THE WORLD.

What unfolds for the rest of the Chapter 9 is a tale in which the blind man's new sight provokes confusion from his neighbors, opposition from the religious leaders, distance from his parents, and, at last, brings him eyeball to eyeball with the one who had given him sight.

Like the Anthony Doerr story, there our layers of meaning, carefully wrought details, and a structure that finds us circling back again and again. And all the while as the story unfolds, we watch both the sight and the insight of the man born blind grow, while other characters maintain their blindness.

This rich story, like so many in John's gospel, gives us so much to unpack. Today I'd like to focus on just a few things.

(1) First, our story begins with mud—the same mud that, in the beginning, God scooped from the ground to fashion the first human being.

Dirt and spit mixed in Jesus' palm anoint the man's eyes, and, following Jesus' command, he goes to Siloam, washes, and comes back able to see.

The name of the pool—SILOAM—means “SENT.” And you and I are invited to recognize the blind man's journey to Siloam as our journey—and the pool as that place where we, once blind to the fullness of God's love, found our eyes rinsed clear, and our selves drawn onto a journey of dwelling in the light of his presence.²

Baptism, like the Siloam pool, is the threshold to a new way of seeing. And in the story the man's ability to see grows clearer and his testimony stronger as he moves from physical sight to spiritual insight.

St. Ambrose of Milan, 4th Century Bishop, said it this way: YOU WENT, YOU WASHED, YOU CAME TO THE ALTAR, YOU BEGAN TO SEE WHAT YOU HAD NOT SEEN BEFORE.³

(2) Second, it's after he begins to see that life becomes more complicated for the man who was formerly blind. His neighbors debate whether the guy before them is the same guy they used to see with a begging bowl in his hand.

Some say YES others NO; and even telling his story doesn't make a dent in their preconceptions.

A trip to the Pharisees, guardians of orthodoxy, only makes things worse. They not only doubt his story, they doubt the possibility that God could work through such a sinner.

And so the ones most qualified on paper to “see,” the religious leaders, the life-long churchgoers, prove least able to perceive what God is up to!

² Susan Briehl, *That You May Have Life Scripture Study*, p. 34. GIA 2005.

³ A paraphrase of what Ambrose wrote in *The Sacraments*. 3.2.15 (SC 25bis.100). The full sentence reads: “You went [to the font], you washed, you came to the altar, you began to see. That is to say, through the font of the Lord and the preaching of the Lord's passion, at that moment your eyes were opened. Before, you seemed to be blind of heart. But now you began to perceive the light of the sacraments.” Also found @ http://pastorduncansblog.blogspot.com/2009_04_01_archive.html

Hauling in every witness they can get their hands on (including the man's anxious parents), they demand the truth and then refuse to hear it.⁴ How BLIND a community's spiritual vision can become.

Truth be told, we (let me say I) act an awful lot like those Pharisees at times.

I grow accustomed to reality as I know it—and long for it to be. Transformation of the kind Jesus brings can feel too risky, even if it does bring healing, which brings me to the third and final point.

[3] Will we take the risk?

There are two other characters who animate the pages of Anthony Doerr's novel. One is a Nazi gemologist, Sergeant Major von Rumpel, who's been tasked with evaluating the worth of precious jewels confiscated by Germany's invading forces.

The other is the "Sea of Flames," an exquisite blue diamond of immeasurable value, with dancing "red flames" at its center. According to legend, whoever possesses the "Sea of Flames" is immune from death; but there's a catch: their loved ones will be stricken with unending misfortunes.

Von Rumpel, afflicted by a malignant tumor, is driven to find the diamond and will stop at nothing until he feels it in hand. Tracing the trail of the stone to Marie's father, who before his arrest had been charged with its protection, Von Rumpel becomes convinced of the diamond's location within the very village where Marie sought refuge.

I won't spoil the book for you, but I will say that each of the main characters in the book is compelled by the war to take risks beyond what they would normally have taken; and in the end it's the risk taken by the blind, 12 year old Marie, which end up mattering most.

What risks are you willing to take for faith's sake?

After all the hubbub his healing caused it's a marvel that the man born blind didn't just close his eyes, pick up his begging bowl and go back to the street corner!

Things might have gone much better for him if he did!

- His relationship with his parents would have stayed intact;
- his neighbors would have had their comfort level restored,
- he wouldn't be in trouble at church.

If only Jesus had warned him before healing him:

LOOK, THIS IS GOING TO COMPLICATE YOUR LIFE! ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO SEE?

If only the man had said, THANKS FOR THE OFFER JESUS, BUT I'D RATHER STAY BLIND!

But something deep within him longed for this healing, and isn't that true with us, too?

When Jesus comes into our lives, we may not recognize him immediately. We may not see him at first. But bit by bit, as he stands by us without judging, as he walks beside us without criticizing, our curiosity is aroused, and we draw closer, until, finally, we are ready to see.

⁴ Susan Briehl, *That You May Have Life* Scripture Study, p. 38. GIA 2005.

WHO ARE YOU, LORD? We ask.

And he tells us: I AM HE, THE ONE YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR.

Thomas Merton says, when we're baptized, we're not given a new world to live in, but new eyes with which to see this world.⁵

The gift of sight may be as stark and profound as the blind man's, or as inwardly rich as Marie Laure's. It may come suddenly, all at once; or it may be a gradual dawning over a lifetime.

In every case, Jesus invites us to trust his companionship on the Way, and to let his vision become our own.

Amen.

⁵ Susan Briehl, *That You May Have Life Scripture Study*, p. 38. GIA 2005.