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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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4 Lent, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)

[Psalm 23](#)

[Ephesians 5:8-14](#)

[John 9:1-41](#)

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Maybe you remember back in 2015 when the internet lost its mind over The Dress. It was a sensation: this dress that viewers saw either as blue and black, or white and gold, and whichever they thought it was, they were absolutely convinced that whoever saw it the other way was off their rocker. Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber both saw it as blue and black, Kim Kardashian and Katy Perry as white and gold. Within 24 hours, 4.4 million people had tweeted about this mysterious dress. Now it turned out that there was a right answer. It was blue and black, but photographed in ambiguous lighting, and how you saw its color depended on how your eyes chose to compensate.

It seems almost quaint now, the internet blowing up over something with such low stakes. Eleven years later we tend to find ourselves living in different realities in ways that feel less funny. We can watch the same incident, the same footage, and tell two completely different stories.

Glancing at the headlines on Fox News and the New York Times could make you think you're in two parallel universes. It's upsetting. It's disorienting. It can make you wonder whether a shared reality is even possible anymore.

This morning's gospel story feels something like that. One event happens: a man born blind receives his sight. But that one event is interpreted in two opposite ways.

The Pharisees start out knowing pretty much everything they need to know already. They know the law. They know what they believe it requires. They know who's a sinner and who isn't. And with each round of interrogating the man who once was blind, they dig in harder. They intimidate his parents. They expel the man from the community. There's nothing for them to learn from this wondrous healing; only something to condemn.

The man born blind starts not knowing much besides his own direct experience. "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and now I see." With nothing to protect, no system to defend, no position to maintain, all he has is his experience and he won't be talked out of it. Yet with each round of questioning, he makes more meaning out of his experience. He calls Jesus "a prophet." Then he says this man must be "from God." Finally he encounters Jesus again and comes to full faith: "Lord, I believe."

Jesus the healer, setting a man free on the sabbath. Jesus the lawbreaker, doing work on the sabbath. One event. Two completely different interpretations.

Now like the story of the black and blue dress, there is actually a right answer to this story. Jesus doesn't say, "Oh well, you have your interpretation and I have mine." He says, "Since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." From the Pharisees' time right up to today, there is such a thing as looking at something good and calling it evil. There is such a thing as willful refusal to see. Especially when the truth threatens someone's authority, or certainty, or self-image. And Jesus calls that sin. As Jesus puts it elsewhere, "Take care that the light within you is not darkness."

"Surely we are not blind, are we?" ask the Pharisees, a question that hangs in the air, full of irony for us as the readers who know the answer is yes. We prefer to identify with the man born blind in this story, the one who gets it. And yet in this season of Lent maybe we shouldn't rush there too quickly. Instead we might ask ourselves: how is our own sight partial and distorted in ways we ourselves can't see? Each of us has our own positions to protect, our own stake in our identities, our own self-righteousness, our own participation in different kinds of injustice. As our reading from First Samuel reminded us, "The Lord does not see as mortals see." So the question is not, "How can we get others to see the world the way we do?" so much as "How can we let Jesus keep healing us so that little by little we see it more the way it is?" How can we keep letting him put mud on our eyes, and then send us to the pool to wash and be healed?

That image of washing in the pool of Siloam takes us again to the destination of our Lenten journey, which is baptism. Three weeks from now we will gather on a dark night for the Great Vigil of Easter. We will light a new fire, and from it the Easter Candle that will light our vigil. And from the flame of that candle each of us will light our own small candle. And we'll stand there in the dark, holding our own little flickering light to see by: to see a little, but not much. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it, but it's not the bright light of day: just a little light to get by with. That's the baptismal life: true sight, but partial sight. As St. Paul puts it, "Now I see dimly, then I will see face to face."

But then the light spreads from person to person, candle to candle—and eventually it fills the room. We need each other. No one's light is enough to see by alone. We see more truly in community, which is one way to talk about the church: a community of people born blind, each granted some partial light by Christ. We need each other—and our differences—to see more clearly.

When Jesus found the man who'd been driven out and asked, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" the man said, "Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe." That's an honest prayer for Lent — for people who see partially, who hold a flickering candle, who know they don't yet see the whole picture. Not "I already see clearly" but "tell me, so that I may believe."