

"Spiritual Blindness"

The twenty-third psalm is arguably one of the best known psalms. Even people who never go to church know this psalm as it is used at many funerals. It paints a rather pastoral picture – a beautiful meadow, a gurgling stream, invoking serene images of a shepherd and her flock of sheep.

The middle verses are a tad troubling – as we are being led through the valley of the shadow of death, and yet we do not fear, for God remains with us. We are protected on this frightening journey. THEN God lays out a feast for us in front of our enemies, or those who would wish to harm us, I honestly don't know how much of an appetite I would have for that kind of repast.

The psalm wraps up with an image of being anointed, something which is done to set something or someone apart and make them holy. It has been my practice to anoint at baptism with holy oil called chrism, and also to anoint when someone is ill with extreme unction. In fact, a person can be anointed after death, to again be set apart and made holy.

When my mother was reaching the end of her earthly journey, I brought my oil stock to the hospital. In fact, it was in my jacket pocket as I flew to Ontario. I asked permission to anoint her and was told I could do so, as long as I wore appropriate protection i.e. gloves. I anointed her once when she was aware of what I was doing and again about an hour before I left the hospital, when her life journey was coming to an end.

I anointed her because she had struggled greatly with life in the last three years of her life. She had told me often that she was sick of living and yet, when I saw her close to death in June, she was terrified to die. I cannot imagine the fear she felt, and so, knowing she was a woman of faith who understood the sacrament of anointing, I anointed her, hoping she would feel the oil and the touch as symbols of the divine being with her.

When a person is anointed at baptism or ordination, it is a joyous celebration of abundance. In some cases a large jar of oil is poured over a person's head. My practice is a little more restrained, with a generous amount of oil on my thumb...similar to how much ash I use when imposing ashes on Ash Wednesday.

When a person is anointed when sick, the prayers generally, are not for cure, but for comfort. For some people, such as my brother, the idea of anointing is somewhere between fantasy and idiocy. When I anointed our mother, with her permission he looked at me like I was absolutely mad.

When she had lapsed into unconsciousness I told him I was going to anoint her and he said "What? Again??" I was surprised and hurt by his response. I tried to explain why I was going to anoint her, but he didn't want to know. And so I decided to wait until I was alone with my mother to do that, as it would be something I could offer to her, that I knew would be a comfort – to her and to myself.

I inherited my faith from my Mother. My Dad started going to Church once I was born because he knew it was important to my Mam. He attended the High Holy Days such as Christmas and Easter and whenever I was in a play with the Church Choir. I don't think he understood a lot of what was going on, but he went to show his support.

My brother was a sickly baby and as such, my Mam stopped going to Church, and I went with a neighbour. At the age when I should have been preparing for Confirmation, we were preparing to move across the province of Ontario to follow my Dad in his first teaching gig in Sudbury, Ontario. Church stopped completely for me, and I didn't pick it up again until I was an undergraduate.

In the gospel story for today we hear the story of a man born blind. A question is asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9.2, NRSV) This is a shocking question to us in the twenty-first century. Nobody would ever imagine that a child could be born with a deformity or disability as punishment from God, right? Right?

In Jesus' day it was commonly believed that if a child was born "less than physically perfect" it was the result of their parents' sins. Perhaps the mother didn't eat properly or the father had an illness he passed on to the child, or more likely, one or both of the parents had sinned against God and their child was born with a deformity or disability as punishment for their sin.

There are places in the world where this is still thought to be the case. If a child is born with a strawberry birthmark, their mother must have eaten an excessive amount of strawberries while pregnant. If a child is born with a cleft lip and palate, their parents must have spoken against God.

When thalidomide was prescribed it was hailed as a miracle drug in helping thousands of women function with what would have been otherwise debilitating morning sickness. Unfortunately the drug caused severe deformities and death in babies and was banned in Canada in 1962. My Auntie Edna was prescribed the drug in 1961 to help her with horrible morning sickness. She gave birth to twin boys, both severely deformed. One lived six hours, the other six days. Was it her fault that the boys were deformed? Of course not, it was the drug that caused the defects.

Jesus answers the disciples, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9.3, NRSV) Jesus then makes a mud pie with some soil and spit and rubs it on the blind man's eyes. The blind man is told to go wash in the River Siloam, which he does, and when he returns his sight is restored.

He then returns to the community from which he came and, as always happens, the community is divided. The leaders of the Pharisaical community examine the man and ask him what happened. He tells the story and is further grilled as to the whereabouts of Jesus. The community leaders debate if this Jesus dude is a gift from God, for his ability to restore the sight of a blind man, or if he's a sinner himself for committing such a parlour trick on the Sabbath.

The leaders approach the formerly blind man's parents and ask them to confirm that he was, in fact, born blind and that his vision has been restored. The parents are afraid to answer specifically because of the authorities. They are frightened that they will be held responsible for his blindness in the first place. In fact, after the authorities have questioned the formerly blind man, they deduce that he is, in fact, a sinner and he is driven out from the community.

We can sit back, thousands of years beyond this story and gasp in shock and horror at the audacity of it. And yet, we often are blinded with our own biases in small and large ways.

When he locates the recently ostracised man Jesus says, "I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.'" (John 9.39-41, NRSV)

Ah yes, Jesus the parabolic speaker – from a literal perspective it seems that Jesus is advocating for blindness, as through blindness there is no sin, yet by saying "I see", you have indeed committed a sin or sins.

Each of us have our own blindspots when it comes to faith. For some of us, a bad experience causes us to walk away from our faith as it is simply too painful or difficult to wrestle through the minutiae of the “law” and the interpretation of the law from the priests and ministers we have encountered.

For some people how the candles are lit on a Sunday morning is directly relational to whether or not the Holy Spirit will be present in the Worship. For other people, they believe that the wafers and wine used for Eucharist actually change into the body and blood of Christ. Some of you will understand these things; others will think they are ridiculous superstitions, and yet others will have no strong feelings one way or the other.

It is important for us to be aware of our blindness and biases. For many years I believed that candles, vestments, Eucharistic elements and excellence in preaching made for meaningful worship. I was focussed on earthly things much more than I should have been, and yet did not realise my spiritual blindness until we were thrust into a global pandemic which forced us to do things in a new, different and initially scary way.

I see spiritual blindness in my colleagues from the Anglican Church and from the United Church. And in doing so, I see my own biases creeping up. For some people, all readings are sacred and deserve the same weight in worship, while for others, the Gospel is meant to be set apart in its own right and should be treated as such.

For some, music is integral to a full Worship experience, while for others, the Sermon is the most important. One is not better than another, they are all individual interpretations of what that individual looks for and appreciates in worship. It has been very hurtful to hear that Worship has been too heavily weighted in one denomination or another. From the beginning of COVID until now, I have worked diligently and thoroughly in using resources provided to me by both governing bodies.

To say that a service is “not Anglican enough” because it uses an unfamiliar liturgy is inappropriate and feels mean-spirited. I know that you all have opinions about worship, and I want to hear those opinions. If you want to hear a particular hymn, speak to myself and/or your worship committee. For a long time we were not permitted to celebrate Communion, and when we were, protocols were developed, which continue to evolve.

Based on your feedback from the Workshops, I will be developing a series of “teaching times” or “lunch and learn” moments where we can gather after worship and discuss why things are done in a particular way. I encourage you to think of questions you would like answered, and bring them to me.

Our next two services will be services of Holy Communion; next Sunday is in the Anglican tradition, and the Sunday following is in the United Church tradition. At both services I will take some time to explain the reasoning behind why certain things are done a certain way.

I know that there is no single way to make everyone happy. I am doing my best, based on feedback received. Please, if you have feedback for me, tell me. I will not respond to unsigned notes otherwise known as conversations which begin "people are concerned".

I see Worship as a partnership between God, the Parish and myself. I take what I do in service to God very seriously, which is why I can poke fun at myself and, at times, with the liturgy itself. I am much more relaxed liturgically than I was when first ordained. And I believe that is a very good thing.

Observations of Spiritual Blindness will be making their way into my sermons over the next few weeks. We all have biases and we need to be aware of our biases. Not necessarily to "correct" them, but to be aware that there is always more than one way to do something, and because something is different, that does not make it wrong.

When Danna was first diagnosed she was angry. More than angry. She and I talked about what would happen as she approached death. Would it hurt? Would she know she was dying? Her main concerns, of course, were for her family. We had quite a conversation about sacraments, anointing, healing touch, etc. When Danna was allowed visitors in hospital, Andy sent me a text asking me to come. And so I tucked the oil stock into my pocket and off I went. Stopping to gown, glove and mask before going into her room.

She was in a lot of pain and the meds she was receiving were quite strong, yet the Danna spark was still in there. Between us we picked on Andy, laughed at ridiculously silly things, and then there was a moment of profound sacred silence. None of us felt the need to speak. We sat together in the quiet. When a fair few minutes had passed I asked Danna if I could anoint her. She nodded yes and I noticed Andy nodding as well.

I anointed Danna with sacred words, which will remain between the three of us (and God) in that room, and then we all joined hands and prayed together. Danna was not raised in a tradition of anointing, yet Andy was. Danna had attended Church regularly for many years. Andy did not. He and I agreed we could encounter the Divine as readily in Creation as in any house of Worship. To which Danna, of course, rolled her eyes.

The day Danna died, Andy called and asked me to come to the hospital. I arrived feeling woefully inadequate, yet with my trusty oil stock in my pocket.

I came into the room, greeted Andy and Sarah and then made the sign of the cross on Danna's forehead and prayed. About an hour later, Andy asked me if there was a "last rites" ritual in my tradition. And there is. It's not called the last rites, but rather prayers for the dead. Similar words that cover the same bases, if you will.

Even though he did not attend Church, there were rituals that were meaningful for him to ensure his beloved would find the path to the next life. After Ally arrived and spent some time with her family, the hospital called Cherished Memories and John and JJ arrived to take Danna's remains to the funeral home. Andy wanted to escort Danna to the van and it is my practice to do the same thing. As John and Andy led the stretcher towards the rear entrance of the Elk Valley Hospital, I sang the Song of Simeon, also known as the "Nunc Dimittis", an ancient song, which comes from Luke 2.29, that is chanted as a person reaches their final place of rest. I am uncertain why I was moved to do so, yet it felt the most natural thing in the world.

O Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared before the face of all people.
To be a light to lighten the gentiles,
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.
Glory be to the Father and to the Son,
and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be
world without end. A-men

As Andy and I walked back to Danna's room to collect her belongings, I asked if the chant was okay. With tears in his eyes he said, "It was perfect".

We may make choices to step away from our faith, yet the foundational stuff stays with us. The stuff that reminds us of the greater body to whom we belong and the ancient rituals which can be comforting while also confusing. I see our responsibility as twenty-first century followers of Jesus to recognise the divine in all whom we encounter. The days of marking a successful church by the size of the Sunday school or the number on the Parish Roll is gone.

We are called, as Church, to return to our roots, in being the hands and feet of Christ in the world, in our communities and in everyone we encounter. Sometimes that can be delivering a porch drop bag to a shut in, making a friend dinner or raking a neighbour's yard.

The next weeks and months will contain some of the most challenging decisions we need to make as a Shared Ministry community. There will be laughter, there will be tears, there will be expressions of faith, new as the green shoots we are starting to see in our gardens and along paths finally freed of winter's clutches.

We can do it, so long as we continue to trust, so long as we continue to talk and so long as we continue to follow the Golden Rule. With God, all things are possible.

Let the Church say, Amen

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Sermon for 19 March – Lent IV
Psalm 23 and John 9.1-41