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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/3/2011, The Fourth Sunday in Lent
1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash’; so I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” ¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. (John 9:11-13, RSV)

It occurs to me that as it was with Jesus following his baptism, so it is with this man after he received his sight: With both men, an initial moment of grace is followed by tough going in the desert.

We heard about the Baptism of Jesus early in the Epiphany Season. If ever a baptism strengthened a soul, I should think that the baptism of Jesus was such a one. Listen again to St. Matthew’s description of that:

¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; ¹⁷and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16-17, RSV)

Jesus had journeyed from heaven above to the muddy waters of the Jordan River. His baptism was the official start of his public ministry. It will not be long hence before his ministry is complete, culminating with his death on a Cross. Quite a path lay ahead of Jesus that day, the day of his baptism, but on that good day, it was as if his heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit followed him to earth. A holy congregation they formed: the Son being baptized, the Father speaking his approval of the Son, and the Holy Spirit alighting on him.

Then, Jesus goes out into the desert, where he fasts and endures temptations from the devil. St. Mark stresses both the promptness of the desert journey, using the word “immediately,” and the divine necessity of that journey, pointing to the Holy Spirit:

¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; ¹¹and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.” ¹²The *Spirit immediately drove him* out into the wilderness. (Mark 1:10-12, RSV)

A similar thing happens here. The man born blind receives his sight. It is a wonder, a miracle, and he knows it:

³²Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. (John 9:32, RSV)

Before, he was blind. Now he sees. What joy must have filled his heart to gaze upon this earth, to see the sun light and the things of this earth that before he had known only by touch. What he does not seem to grasp at first is that he has met his Maker, who has created sight for him. Just as Genesis reports that God made Adam from the dust of the earth, so again, God, in the form of Jesus, fiddles with the dust and creates sight.

So, the man has experienced a divine miracle and enjoys sight for the first time in his life. But as with Jesus, so with this man: he immediately journeys from this grace into trouble. And it must have looked to him that he had to make his way through this trouble alone:

¹²They [his puzzled neighbors] said to him, “Where is he [Jesus]?” He said, “I do not know.” (John 9: 12, RSV)

Then, the trouble intensifies, because they take him to the Pharisees:

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. (John 9:13, RSV)

This is an ominous thing, this mention of the Pharisees. The story will show that the man’s parents are so worried about the Pharisees’ power to expel people from the synagogue that they are very careful in how they give answer to them:

²²His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if any one should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. (John 9:22, RSV)

Now, the man must face the Pharisees. Jesus is not with him now. He cannot deflect the conversation toward Jesus. He must hang in there and do the best he can.

You too might be familiar with this sequence. Indeed, you might be in such a straight even today. For the blind man, a moment of surpassing joy is quickly replaced with a time of trial, when he stands there as if alone. I say “as if alone,” for I do not believe he was truly alone. The testimony of this morning’s beloved Twenty-third Psalm echoes forth in the life of every believer:

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art *with me*; (Psalm 23:4, KJV)

So it was with this man born blind. When he worked his way through the ominous interview with the Pharisees, he must have known that he risked expulsion from the synagogue. What a heartbreak that would be for any Israelite. I imagine it being akin to excommunication from the Church. God help us that no such terrible thing ever happen to us. So, the man born blind travels through his desert, through his valley of the shadow of death, knowing that he faces catastrophe at the end. And indeed, it befalls him. By the end of his interview, he has so infuriated the Pharisees that they cast him out of the synagogue. All this he faces as if alone, for Jesus is nowhere in sight.

Yet, he is not alone. His Maker, the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, beholds him with keen interest and hope. Underneath him are the everlasting arms¹, though it might not have felt like it to him at the time. This is the apostolic testimony meant to encourage us in time of trouble:

... [the Lord] has said, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." ⁶Hence we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5-6, RSV)

What lies at hand for the man born blind is to endure his time in the desert with as much honest and integrity as possible, and to commend the outcome to God. So he does. At the start of his interrogation by the Pharisees, he speaks of ordinary things, of a man named Jesus who mixed mud, applied it to his poor blind eyes, sent him to a pool to wash, and he received his sight.

The conversation proceeds. The Pharisees ask the man his opinion concerning Jesus:

"What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" (John 9:17, RSV)

He gives his answer, his best present notion about Jesus:

He said, "He is a prophet."

The Pharisees become annoyed with him:

"Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner."

But this does not ring true for the man, and he says so. He could have held his tongue. It would have been politic to do so. But it seems that he cannot bring himself to turn his back on the grace he has experienced. Here he is, all alone

¹ Deuteronomy 33:27: The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms...

before formidable authorities. But his integrity leads him to stand up, stand up for Jesus:

³⁰The man answered, “Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

So, he takes his stand, with the result that he is cast out:

³⁴They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

Only, he is not really “cast out.” It is more along the lines that he is cast into the arms of Jesus:

³⁵Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe”; and he worshiped him.

This is the outcome of the man’s journey through the valley of the shadow of death. He started off that morning seeing nothing. He ended up seeing not only the sky and the trees and the flowers, but something even higher: he saw God, and he worshiped him. What a good day for that man. He had his time of trial and loneliness. But he ended up seeing God face to face and worshiping him.

As I mentioned in my worship folder notes, to me it has felt like providence that this reading from John 9 was the assigned reading for today, the day when my heart is heavy with thoughts of our former pastor Raymond Schulze. Many of you do not know Pastor Schulze, for he finished his twenty-year ministry here at Immanuel quite a while ago. But for those of you who knew him, I think you will agree with me in three things about him -- three ways in which he was akin to the hero in today’s Gospel story, the man born blind: First, Raymond knew God’s grace. He experienced it, he proclaimed it, he lived it, and he sang it. He adored Margaret and he adored the Lord. These graces were constants in his life. Second, he knew times of trial. Of course he did! All Christians do. From time to time, he walked in the desert, as Jesus walked in the wilderness and as the blind man had to endure his examination by the Pharisees and his being cast out. And third, like the man born blind, not only did Raymond enjoy physical sight, but also he enjoyed spiritual sight. He beheld the beauty of the Lord, and was transfixed ever

afterwards. To know Raymond Schulze was to have met a man who kept his eye on Christ and his people.

My friend Pastor Dan Biles long ago told me a story about Raymond Schulze. Dan was a young pastor back then. He had written a book called *Pursing Excellence in Ministry* and had been invited to travel up from Central Pennsylvania to share some of his book with the Manhattan Conference Clergy. Afterwards Dan told me about this slender, ascetic-looking pastor named Raymond Schulze who had especially made an impression on him. The striking thing about Pastor Schulze for Dan was his spiritual vision. Many of us look around, and our fancy is captured by local things, by current opinions, popular ideas, the current politically correct convictions. But Raymond had a vision of Christ and all his saints. It was as if Ray's eyes were focused elsewhere, transfixed above, listening and searching for the mind of Christ and of his people "in every time and in every place." Ray cared not simply for the local opinions, but even more for the opinion of St. Paul, and St. Francis, and St. Augustine, and St. Bernard, and blessed Martin Luther, and Pope John XXIII, and Mother Teresa, as if they were not dead and lost to the past, but were his present brothers and sisters in the Lord, to whom he wanted and meant to be loyal.

I do not hesitate to share my opinion with you about our dear congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church: I believe that this congregation has been blessed to an extraordinary degree with clergy like Ray. If you knew them, bring them to your mind. They form quite a collection of clergy: I mean, Pastor David Lotz, who serves as our Presiding Minister for this liturgy and for this evening's memorial service. Fr. Leonard Klein, who was Assistant Pastor here at Immanuel, back when Raymond Schulze was Senior Pastor, and who preaches for us this evening. Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, who along with Rev. Dr. David Lotz, was Pastoral Associate with Raymond. Also, theologian Robert Wilken, the pride and joy of patristic studies in the Lutheran Church, who taught at Fordham University and sometimes worshiped here at Immanuel in Raymond's day. These clergy are spiritual giants. Our congregation has been extraordinarily blessed to have known them. They all shared with Raymond Schulze the kind of vision the blind man in our story had. Many people in that story had physical sight, but by the end of that story, that man had spiritual sight as well. That man born blind at last beheld Someone who brought him to his knees in grateful adoration. So it is with these clergy gathered around Former Pastor Raymond Schulze: they all have a vision of Christ and his whole Church. And it has been my ambition throughout my ministry to somehow stand with them.

What a beautiful and simple ending there is to today's Gospel story. After all the ups and downs of that day, the man speaks three little words, but they are words that transform his life:

³⁷Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you." ³⁸He said, "*Lord, I believe*"; and he worshiped him.

And well he should have. He worshiped Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.