

The Impossible Possibility

*A sermon by the Rev. Daniel Simons
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT: MARCH 19, 2023

I SAMUEL 16:1-13 | PSALM 23 | EPHESIANS 5:8-14 | JOHN 9:1-41

In the name of God who opens our eyes to see and believe. Amen.

So what did you notice in the Gospel reading? First off, it's really long. *[Laughter]* All of the readings from the Gospel this Lent have been long, and next week's is even longer. It is the amazing resurrection (spoiler alert) of the story of the raising of Lazarus from the tomb. What else do you notice from the Gospel reading? There's a number of themes really from all the readings we've listened to in Lent.

They're all from the Gospel of John. That makes a big difference in how the story gets told: it's always going to be about God's glory, and the light, and our intimacy with God, and belief is always going to show up.

And the second thing that's a common theme through these weeks of Lent is that someone is always breaking the rules. And it's usually Jesus - transgressing, boundary-crossing.

Now, the third thing that has appeared in all these readings, and will again next week, is Jesus saying, "I am the One." And then, tagged to that "Do you believe?" And then, tagged to that: judgment for those who don't believe.

So, because it's Lent, I want to zero in on just that - the trigger points of belief and judgment. And I do this because most of us have had enough church experience, whether it's Roman Catholic or Protestant or just watching the church from the road, to know that the church can be a pretty judgmental place, and there can be lots of litmus test beliefs that you gotta check off before you belong. And most of us in our hearts, somewhere along the way, aren't sure we believe enough and wonder, who's gonna judge us next? And it doesn't help when we're told that God is the one who is going to judge us. So if we don't lean into this, when we hear it - Jesus saying "I'm the one. Do you believe?", "That I have come for judgment?" If you don't [understand], we're gonna be hijacked by anybody who wants to tell us what that means and how we need to believe and what will happen if we don't.

Because these are two such good stories of wisdom to miss the real intent. So let's look at today's story, the man born blind. I love this story because of all its heightened drama that Paul brought out so beautifully. You can't not listen to this and just say, "Wow, they were really telling a story that had a point." And in this ever long, dramatic series of arguments among the religious leaders and Jesus, and even Jesus' parents get involved, Jesus seeks the man out again and says, "Do you believe?" and then follows it with this enigmatic, "I have come here for judgment."

It's really important that we listen into what kind of belief Jesus is asking for, and what kind of judgment follows. So, look at all the characters of all these stories: Nicodemus first, the woman at the well last week, the man born blind this week, Lazarus and his sisters next week.

All of them encounter Jesus, who is inviting them into what we might call their "Impossible Possibility." What at first seems to them that "It can't work - it can't be true." But Jesus is inviting them to try it on, try it out. So Nicodemus is saying, "How can somebody be born again?" And the woman at the well is saying, "How can you give me 'living' water?" And today the argument is "By what power are you claiming to cure this person?" And next week it will be a dead man, his sisters saying, "This is impossible. No one can raise the dead." And Jesus is asking them to step into a frame that is larger than the one they know.

So, to encounter Jesus is to be forced to make this choice: Will I hold on to my certainty and control? My familiar categories? The way I know it is true to be or will I let go of that? Will I step into the unknown, the impossible possibility? And on the one hand, there are always the religious leaders or the disciples that are saying, "No, this isn't possible. It's not sanctioned. It's not appropriate. It's not possible." And on the other hand, there are these ragtag characters that make the bet and take the risk and step in: there's the scared and secretive Nicodemus; there's the scandalous woman at the well; there's the man born blind, the sinner by the road, and they jumped in. And really what they're doing is suspending their beliefs, and that is what belief is in Scripture - it's not the catechism, it's not doctrinal fine points, or the Creed. What Jesus is asking is for people to suspend their conventional beliefs so that they can change and be changed.

That's it. But *that's it*.

Meaning, it is impossible to follow Jesus into a larger space without doing that - without letting go, and that leads right into judgment.

So, when we think of God as God the Judge, I think what we do is take some biblical images and then overlay them with a sort of half Greek mythology. We see this angry man with a beard in heaven who's ready to do a lot of smiting, and that is a caricature. It completely misses the point of what's really going on when judgment happens. Jesus is pointing it out pretty clearly today: in his last act of the drama, Jesus actually goes back to the religious leaders and he engages them. And they're getting this sneaking idea that this whole thing is a setup to say something to them like, "Wait, you are not saying that *we* are blind?" And Jesus pretty pithily answers: "If you were blind, that would be fine. But it's because you say we are not blind that your sin remains."

There's the judgment right there. It's not God who is arbitrarily judging us - it's us- we do this to ourselves. We damn ourselves into this locked world where we are too arrogant to admit that we don't know. Or when we are too positioned to allow ourselves to change. Or when we need above all else to keep up appearances. It's not a fickle God who is judging us. It is the reality that evolution favors species that adapt. This is reality. Another way we could put it, Winston Churchill, who I think said this, "To improve is to change. To be perfect is to change often."

This is the way: to constantly be opening ourselves to those impossible possibilities of our lives. We don't know - often we don't need to know - as long as we step in. That is where God starts. And if we have to believe that we're right and that nothing changes - that will

ultimately judge us and we will fulfill that prophecy. Or we will follow Jesus in that simple but total way: that walks out beyond the edge of our knowing into this place of nothing more than the promise that "I am with you. You are not alone." Which is to take up this risk of waiting to see how God changes us in such a deep and profound and total way, that we call it resurrection.

So this week, if you're looking for a place to practice, just notice the places where you run up against that need to be right, noticing where you get stuck. It's really all that's needed is just to notice it and see if it starts to soften and change. And then try on the possibility that Jesus sees you the way he saw Nicodemus, and the woman at the well, and the man born blind, and Lazarus - in your wholeness. All the parts that you cannot see, that are part of God's possibility, as beloved. There's more to all of us than we know that is waiting to be born, washed clean, raised from the dead.

Easter is coming. Amen.