

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia**  
**2 March 2008**

*Lent 4: Ps 23; 1 Sam 16:1-13; Eph 5:8-14; Jn 9:1-41*

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*Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.*

Our long gospel reading is obviously more than a simple account of a healing miracle. Biblical scholarship tells us it is about conflict between Jewish authorities and Jewish followers of Jesus in the gospel writer's own day, several generations after Jesus' life. Scholars see in this story a reflection of the trauma suffered by the community that first heard John's gospel, the trauma of being thrown out of the synagogue to which they belonged. When John says "Jews" he actually means "the Jewish authorities." But, as he does so many places throughout the gospel, he uses the word "Jews" as opposed to Christians, even though Jesus and his followers were Jewish. This has given rise to ugly anti-Semitic misreadings that have been part of our Christian heritage almost from the very beginning.

Part of me thought the sectarian controversy between Jewish people who followed Jesus and the Jewish power elite represented by the Pharisees seemed so yesterday, so far removed from our concerns today. Part of me thought that we all know that bitter sectarianism is a bad thing, so why bother going over it again.

And besides, I thought, perhaps the conflict between the earliest Christians and their Jewish brothers and sisters was helpful to both sides. One of the things we know about controversies is that they often help us to know ourselves better. During the life of Jesus, there was clearly a struggle for the soul of Judaism, and the followers of John the Baptist and the followers of Jesus were taking part in that struggle. We know that after the death of Jesus there was in fact a renewal of the Jewish tradition, the development of what we call "rabbinic Judaism"—a flourishing of new teaching, new interpretations to take the faith of the Israelites into the contemporary world of Roman imperial power. I'm speculating here, but perhaps this happened in part because of the struggle with this new and weird sect led by the obscure man from Nazareth, the man who challenged the ideas of the Pharisees and proposed a different path that was eventually rejected by the learned leaders of orthodox Judaism. I'm wondering if perhaps both Christian and Jew eventually understood themselves better for having to understand themselves in relation to the other.

But this is all speculation, as I said, and so instead I thought I wanted to talk about various kinds of blindness, the moral and spiritual blindness that are clearly a focus of the story of the man born blind. What kinds of forces blind us to the moral vision that the word of God calls us to? We can identify our selfishness, our complacency, our fear as blinding us to all the misery in the world and to our own responsibility as the richest most powerful country in creating much of that misery.

What kinds of forces blind us to the spiritual grace, the life-giving reality of Jesus Christ in our lives? Again, we can point to our complacency and our fear, and also to our intellectual arrogance in thinking we know how the world works and how we can through our own efforts save ourselves from the worst of ourselves. But as we look around, it seems like the more we think we know, the more it feels like we're stumbling around in the darkness, blind to the really important things, blind to the way we really should live

our lives, blind to the ways of hope and justice, compassion and love, blind to the important ways we need to tend to the life of the spirit.

I wanted to talk about blindness, but my mind kept returning to the problems of sectarian controversy, especially to the divisions that plague our Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion around the world. I wondered whether anything in this fight between one party of Jewish people and another could teach us something about what we are facing today. I wondered whether we could ever find a way just to move on, resign ourselves to the departure of the dioceses of San Joaquin, Pittsburgh, and Quincy, and individual churches around the country, and find a way, any way, to make those of us who remain stronger and more hopeful.

Then I read a disturbing article in the current *Atlantic Monthly* about Nigeria, written by Eliza Griswold, daughter of Frank Griswold, the immediate past Presiding Bishop. She details the ongoing violence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa. She tells a story of barbarity and lawlessness that is difficult for us to imagine. In 2004, in an obscure town, Muslims massacred 70 Christians in their church. In retaliation, Christians organized a massacre throughout the entire town where the first massacre took place and slaughtered 700 Muslims. The Christians wore signs identifying themselves as members of a group called the Christian Association of Nigeria, whose president at the time was Peter Akinola, the Anglican archbishop of Nigeria, and one of the primary forces promoting division in our American Episcopal church.

The article makes it clear that our American controversy over a gay bishop is only part of a larger and impossibly complicated picture of power, corruption, oil, tribalism. . . It's a ferocious continuous struggle between Christian and Muslim in a huge, poor, African country where they fight over the limited resources that are left to them after corruption has skimmed off the riches to the power elite.

For the first time I realized how profoundly ignorant and naive I've been about the complexity of the issues in our church. I admit to thinking that if only people could get to know Gene Robinson, they would see that he is just as good a bishop as any other. I admit to hoping that if gay and lesbian clergy could be more visibly active in issues of justice that have nothing to do with gay and lesbian oppression, the world could see that we were just as deeply moved by the Holy Spirit as any other clergy. All my simple-minded thoughts and insights into the situation were completely overwhelmed by learning about something so massive, so far away, and so unrelated to anything I think I can do something about.

Then I looked back at our gospel story and wondered—are we always to be doomed to blindness? Are we never going to see with what one of my seminary professors called “gospel eyes?” Are we always going to fail so miserably to live up to our baptismal promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being? Are the secular atheists right after all when they laugh at us and point out that our attempts to be faithful to the God of love and peace are doomed to fail much more often than they manage to succeed? Where is there hope in all this, where is the light, where is the possibility that Christ's healing power can bring us out of our blindness, out of our darkness?

We cannot give in to the darkness. No matter how overwhelmed we might be by the evil in the world, by the sin that blinds us all, we must persist. It is all the more urgent in the midst of such evil that we acknowledge that Christ is in us, that Christ is working through us to bring the light into world by which we can peer into the darkness and not be afraid. Individually, each of us can do something; but more importantly, I pray, we as a community of faith can focus our light on one particular facet of the darkness that surrounds us. We cannot huddle in this building and simply live by the light that is here. We must take the light outside and make a difference in the world. Every day another flicker of light; every day another flicker of hope. Every day one more determined effort to see, to banish the darkness from a single small corner of the sinful world.

In fact, may we pray to understand ourselves better because of the struggle with darkness. May we pray to understand ourselves as people who absolutely do not wish to lock ourselves in an eternal struggle with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or anyone else. May we pray in fact to find a way to work with people of all faith and no faith to banish the darkness together—the darkness of evil, intolerance, greed, selfishness, injustice, and hatred.

Our hope is in Christ. Our hope is in the amazing grace that allows us to see where once we were blind. Our hope is in our individual and collective experience of God's reconciling and redeeming love. Through whatever means we can, through persistent spiritual practice we can deepen that experience and then allow it to transform and energize our lives to show that reconciling and redeeming love to those who are hurting outside these walls, as many of them as we can touch.

*Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.*