

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent (*Laetare Sunday*), Year A

26 March 2017

[Reading I: 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a](#)

[Responsorial Psalm: 23: 1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6](#)

[Reading II: Ephesians 5:8-14](#)

[Gospel: John 9:1-41](#)

*Amazing Grace  
 How sweet the sound  
 That saved a wretch like me!  
 I once was lost, but now am found.  
 Was blind, but now I see.*

Our readings today speak of blindness and sight; of darkness and light.

My friend and fellow Jesuit, Pat Nolan, and I were candle bearers at Fr. Donald Monan's funeral earlier this week. The primary task of a candle bearer is to keep the candle lit. Pat told me the story of when he was an undergraduate at Loyola University in Baltimore. He was serving Mass with a young woman, and before Mass began, they stood holding candles in the entry of the school's chapel. When a student opened the door a breeze came in and blew Pat's candle out. She would re-light his candle with hers. It happened again. And she relit it. And again – and she relit it *again*.

Finally, the opening song began and just as they were about to process in, some latecomers opened both doors, and both candles blew out. Uh oh.

Suddenly, a long arm reached over their shoulders, relighting both lights. It was the priest, who had a lighter in hand. "Oh, you must have been an altar boy back in the day – always prepared!" "No," the priest replied, "**I'm a smoker!**"

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There are times in life when it feels like our candle keeps blowing out. Like certain forces are conspiring to bring not true light, but darkness masquerading as light. This may look different to different people, at different time. But I'll wager each of us can think of times when no good deed of ours has gone unpunished, or no amount of our trying to bring about good can keep our interior candle lit.

In our layered and lengthy Gospel from John, we hear the story of the man born blind. Jesus mixes dirt and his spit – an earthy elixir, that – to heal the man of his blindness. But the Pharisees cannot **see** their way to believing the healed man: “Yes, fine, you can see now, great. **But** – you don’t come from God *because...well...because you don't observe the Sabbath.*”

We can almost see the blind man’s joy drain from his face. *Like a rush of cold air, blowing out the light of faith.*

And then there is disagreement, discord. The word in Greek is *schisma*. The light of faith and good will flickers, even among the Pharisees. But they are still drawn, like moths to a flame:

*So they said to the blind man again,  
"What do you have to say about him,  
since he opened your eyes?"  
He said, "He is a prophet."*

This is too much for the Pharisees, who claim to have all the answers already. In this culture, to be born blind meant some moral deficiency – hence they ask, “are you blind because of *your* sins, or your *parents*”?

No matter his response. The gnostic Pharisees have their minds made up:

*"You were born totally in sin,  
and are you trying to teach us?" Then they threw him out.*

If you can’t blow out the light of faith and truth – banish it. Shun it. Mock it. We see how this happens in ways large and small. But how do we – you and I -- shun those who unsettle us? How do we banish those with whom we disagree? When we disagree with people, how easy is it to *ascribe to them bad intentions, ill will, and even culpable ignorance?*

The morale of the Gospel is to be *not spiritually blind* like the Pharisees. But the *risk* of reading this Gospel is that we then become Pharisees to the Pharisees – “Thank God you and I don’t act like those sanctimonious Pharisees... WE know better!” *The irony can be thick here.*

The risk for any believer – be they a follower of Jesus, or Yahweh, or Allah – is in presuming to bear that light of God perfectly – to feel, as if by some

gnostic connection or well-honed intuition – *just what the will of God is, in every instance, for everyone else.*

This holier-than-thou Gnosticism, left unchecked and unchallenged, leads to atrocities done in the name of God. To bearing the light falsely. The old standbys of the Inquisition and Crusades come to mind, yes. But also the ugly, indiscriminate attacks on the streets of London, or Brussels; Nice or Paris; San Bernardino or Orlando.

In the fiery name of God, true lights are snuffed out, all too soon.

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It is appropriate, from time to time, to consider *what lights our fires?* – are they the light of Christ, or the false light of lesser gods?

Lucifer, as we know, does not mean “bringer of darkness” but “bringer of light.” St. Ignatius reminds us in the *Spiritual Exercises*, that both God and the evil spirit can bring light and apparent consolation – but with different end goals. The consolation of God yields increase in ***faith, hope, and love for God and one another.*** The false-consolations of the evil spirit bring ***confusion, despair, and dread of one another.***

If this short life of ours on earth is where God and the evil spirit wage war for our souls, where do we find our attention and allegiance going these days? Where is there ***reliable, true light*** that helps us see the graces and gifts on offer to us? And how does that true light reveal the snares and discords and negative thinking that trips us up, and makes us doubt our honest encounters with the living God?

Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we are children of the light:

*You were once darkness,  
but now you are light in the Lord.  
Live as children of light,  
for light produces every kind of goodness  
and righteousness and truth.*

Where are we these days? Tempted to despair when the winds of life cause our candles to flicker? Where do we give people hope and joy, especially those here today who are on the way to joining our Catholic community of faith?

But hope is not the same thing as seeing the world with rose-tinted glasses – or vestments! No, friends -- hope is not a naive, pollyannaish optimism. Rather, hope engages ugly realities by exposing them to light, rather than settling for darkness. Hope, writes St. Augustine, “has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.” Each time we encounter forces of darkness, we have a choice in how to respond. Do we get angry? *Good* – that means we’re paying attention. But does our righteous anger lead to courageous action? Or to grumbling and snuffing out others’ hope and joy?

***St. Ignatius Loyola was big on consolation*** – that we should do everything in our power to help others grow in faith, hope, and love. It is helpful in Lent for us to consider how well we bear the light of Christ. Do my words and actions – or Facebook posts and re-tweets -- reach out to light another’s flickering faith? Or am I too busy blowing out others’ light? In other words, do we reach over to light another’s candle, or simply curse the dark?”

Paul is very clear about this:

*Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness;  
rather expose them; everything exposed by the light becomes  
visible, for everything that becomes visible is light.*

The healed blind man has every reason to believe in Jesus, but the discouragement and rejection of the candle-snuffing Pharisees threw even him into existential despair. Yet even in that darkness of doubt, Jesus reaches out to the healed man again:

*"Do you believe in the Son of Man?"  
He answered and said,  
"Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"*

*Jesus said to him,  
"You have seen him, and  
the one speaking with you is he."*

*He said,  
"I do believe, Lord," and he worshiped him.*

Let our prayer today be to ask God for true sight and true light. To find the good, as author Alex Haley wrote, and to praise it! To help others who are lost to see, by lighting their flame, rather than cursing our collective darkness. You don't have to be an altar boy, or a priest – or even a smoker! -- to light another's candle. But you probably should bring a lighter.

We do this as a people of faith. And we do so hoping that when we go home to meet our maker, as Fr. Monan did this week, that last verse of Amazing Grace can be our anthem:

*When we've been there ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Then when we first begun.*