

# FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

## LECTIONARY #31

READING I 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6–7, 10–13a

### A reading from the first Book of Samuel

The LORD said to Samuel:

“Fill your **horn** with **oil**, and **be** on your way.  
I am **sending** you to **Jesse** of **Bethlehem**,  
for I have **chosen** my king from among his **sons**.”

As Jesse and his sons **came** to the **sacrifice**,  
Samuel looked at **Eliab** and thought,  
“**Surely** the LORD’s anointed is **here before** him.”

But the LORD said to Samuel:

“**Do not judge** from his **appearance** or from his **lofty** stature,  
because I have **rejected** him.

Not as **man sees** does **God see**,  
because **man** sees the **appearance**  
but the LORD looks into the **heart**.”

In the same way **Jesse** presented seven **sons** before **Samuel**,  
but **Samuel** said to **Jesse**,

“The LORD has not chosen any **one** of these.”

Then Samuel asked Jesse,

“Are **these** all the **sons** you **have**?”

Jesse replied,

“There is still the **youngest**, who is **tending** the **sheep**.” >>

Samuel = SAM-yoo-uhl  
Jesse = JES-ee

A reading with a dramatic conclusion, in which Samuel, sent by the Lord and endowed with power, is sent among the sons of Jesse to find and anoint a new king. Samuel’s power is the ability to recognize this king, whose appearance, when he sees him at last, thrills him. The words themselves convey the drama of this reading compellingly.

Eliab = ee-Li-uhb

Emphasize the parallel: not as man sees does God see.

Samuel cannot see the chosen king among the sons. Subtle emphasis on “one.”

### READING I

On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, the lectionary readings invite us to reflect on the nature of God’s revelatory activity and our journey of faith.

The First Book of Samuel tells the story of Samuel’s emergence as a prophet and spokesperson for God in the period leading up to Israel’s transition to leadership under a king. Early on, Israel depended on charismatic leaders, called judges, whom God would raise up in times of trouble to rescue the people. Samuel is the last of these judges. When the people push him

to give them a king like their neighbors had, Samuel delivers God’s warning about what that could mean, and the picture is quite terrifying (see 1 Samuel 8:10–18). But on God’s directive, Samuel relents and appoints Saul as the first king of Israel. However, almost immediately God rejects Saul, because he failed to obey God’s word. Therefore, even as Saul continued to serve as king, God directs Samuel to anoint David as its second king, which he did secretly.

In today’s first reading, we pick up with the story of David’s anointing. God orders Samuel to fill his oil flask and ready

himself for his journey to Bethlehem. Samuel purportedly comes to this town to offer sacrifice to God, and he asks both the elders and Jesse and his sons to come to the sacrifice. In actuality, he wanted God to point out the next king and have witnesses to testify to the selection. Saul examines seven of Jesse’s sons, one by one, hoping for a sign. But God says no. Finally, Samuel asks, “Are these all the sons you have?” When Jesse produces David, his youngest and presumably least valued son, immediately Samuel knows that he is God’s anointed. It is noteworthy that David came

ruddy = RUHD-ee =  
having a reddish complexion

Samuel can see the chosen king at last.  
Equal emphases on "There," "anoint,"  
"this," and "one."

For meditation and context:

**TO KEEP IN MIND**

On the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, these readings from Year A are connected with the celebration of the scrutinies—prayers for purification and strength—for the elect, those who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

Ephesians = ee-FEE-zhuhnz

A reading in which Paul tries to convince the Ephesians to live as children of the light.

from shepherding his father's sheep, because shepherding was also symbolic of a king's pastoral leadership toward his subjects. The narrator ends the story by saying, "and from that day on, the spirit of the LORD rushed upon David." The Hebrew word for "spirit" is *ruach*, which also means "breath or wind." Thus, in his anointing, the breath of God guided David's leadership.

**READING II** Our second reading comes from the Letter to the Ephesians and is attributed to Paul but was probably written by one of his disciples.

Samuel said to Jesse,  
"Send for him;  
we will not **begin** the sacrificial **banquet** until he **arrives** here."  
Jesse **sent** and had the young man **brought** to them.  
He was **ruddy**, a youth **handsome** to behold  
and making a **splendid** appearance.  
The LORD said,  
"**There**—anoint **him**, for **this** is the **one!**"  
Then **Samuel**, with the **horn** of oil in hand,  
anointed **David** in the presence of his **brothers**;  
and from that day on, the **spirit** of the LORD **rushed**  
upon David.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6 (1)

**R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
In verdant pastures he gives me repose;  
beside restful waters he leads me;  
he refreshes my soul.

You spread the table before me  
in the sight of my foes;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

He guides me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk in the dark valley  
I fear no evil; for you are at my side  
With your rod and your staff  
that give me courage.

Only goodness and kindness follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
for years to come.

READING II Ephesians 5:8-14

**A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians**

Brothers and sisters:

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

Most biblical scholars assign a date of composition of approximately AD 90-100. Today's reading is part of the paraenesis of this letter, that is, the section of the letter dedicated to advice about how the members of the Church at Ephesus ought to behave. In the verses immediately prior to this reading, the author is admonishing the community not to accept "empty arguments" nor to pay attention to people who promote them (Ephesians 5:6). We can assume that "empty arguments" refers to a way of life that is suggested by the catalog of vices found in Ephesians 5:3-5: behav-

iors like greed, various forms of idolatry, and "obscenity or silly or suggestive talk"—three words that are used nowhere else in the New Testament.

These are the unethical behaviors that the author of the Letter to the Ephesians is talking about, when he reminds his readers that they once lived in darkness, before they became followers of Jesus. The word *darkness* is used by this author to describe the personification of all that was evil in the world and of evil spirits that were always battling against the light, threatening to overcome it. Further, the letter writer

Take note of the parallels and shifts in these lines: from "everything" to "visible," and then "everything" to "light."

"Awake," "arise," and "light" are the focal points of these final lines. Don't rush through them.

Rabbi = RAB-ī

This is a complex reading with many characters, each with different motivations, as well as several scene changes. In this reading, Jesus upturns traditional rabbinic understanding of blindness as a punishment for immorality. It also relies on a defiant tone to make its point. Keep this in mind as you proclaim.

This line has an anticipatory, prophetic quality, characteristic of John's Gospel.

These details of Jesus' healing powers are interesting; don't rush through them.

Siloam = sih-LOH-uhm

encourages the community by saying "you are light in the Lord" and therefore they should "live as children of light." And what does the light of God produce? "Every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth." Clearly, this author is convinced that good will triumph over evil, because only good things come from God. Moreover, light has the ability to expose the darkness and has the potential even to transform it. This beautiful piece of poetic text that concludes today's second reading is most likely part of an early Christian hymn, perhaps

**Live as children of light,**  
for **light** produces every kind of **goodness**  
and **righteousness** and **truth**.

Try to **learn** what is **pleasing** to the **Lord**.

Take no **part** in the fruitless works of **darkness**;  
rather **expose** them, for it is **shameful** even to **mention**  
the things done by them in **secret**;  
but **everything** exposed by the light becomes **visible**,  
for **everything** that becomes visible is **light**.

Therefore, it says:

"**Awake**, O sleeper,  
and **arise** from the **dead**,  
and **Christ** will give you **light**."

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GOSPEL John 9:1-41

**A reading from the holy Gospel according to John**

[As Jesus passed by he saw a man **blind** from **birth**.]

His disciples asked him,

"**Rabbi**, who **sinned**, this **man** or his **parents**,  
that he was **born blind**?"

Jesus answered,

"Neither **he** nor his **parents** sinned;  
it is so that the **works** of God might be made **visible**  
**through** him.

We have to do the **works** of the one who sent me while it is **day**.

**Night** is coming when **no one** can **work**.

While I am in the **world**, I am the **light** of the **world**."

When he had **said** this, [he **spat** on the ground

and made **clay** with the **saliva**,

and **smear**ed the clay on his **eyes**, and said to him,

"**Go wash** in the **Pool** of **Siloam**"—which means **Sent**—

So he **went** and **washed**, and came back **able** to see. >>

one that was used in the celebration of baptism.

GOSPEL

This reading from the Gospel of John has as its central character an unnamed blind man whom Jesus heals, even without the man asking to be healed. Although the other Gospels also include stories about Jesus healing a blind man or blind men, this is the only Gospel that includes a series of scenes in which the formerly blind man gives witness to Jesus when confronted by his neighbors and the scribes and Pharisees.

This reading consists of a miracle story and six follow-up scenes. The miracle story has the basic elements that we would expect of any New Testament miracle story: (1) a description of need, in this case, a man who was blind from birth; (2) the miracle worker's word or deed, in this case, Jesus making and putting clay on the man's eyes; and (3) evidence that the miracle took place, in this case, the man washing and being able to see. But the way in which the miracle story is framed is most important. When Jesus' disciples notice the blind man, they ask about who is at fault. Today, theo-

Any expression of "I am" in John's Gospel is freighted with authority.

The (formerly) blind man's tone here is somewhat exasperated.

Once again, the man who had been blind has to explain his story, this time to the Pharisees. His exasperation mounts to defiance when he proclaims Jesus a prophet.

His neighbors and those who had seen him **earlier** as a **beggar** said,

"Isn't this the one who used to **sit and beg**?"

Some said, "It **is**,"

but others said, "**No**, he just **looks** like him."

He said, "I **am**."

So they said to him, "How were your **eyes** opened?"

He replied,

"The man called **Jesus** made **clay** and anointed my **eyes** and told me, 'Go to **Siloam** and **wash**.'

So I **went** there and washed and was able to **see**."

And they said to him, "Where **is** he?"

He said, "I don't **know**."

[They brought the one who was once blind to the **Pharisees**. Now Jesus had made **clay** and opened his eyes on a **sabbath**. So then the **Pharisees** also asked him **how** he was able to **see**. He **said** to them,

"He put **clay** on my eyes, and I **washed**, and now I can **see**."

So some of the Pharisees said,

"This man is **not** from God,

because he **does not keep** the **sabbath**."

But others said,

"How can a sinful man do such **signs**?"

And there was a **division** among them.

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**."

Now the Jews did not **believe**

that he had been **blind** and gained his **sight**

until they **summoned** the parents of the one who had **gained** his sight.

They asked them,

"Is this your **son**, who you say was born **blind**?"

logians would not espouse this view that physical ailments are caused by human sinfulness. Yet, we still hear people in crisis ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" Jesus makes clear that physical illness is not a platform for assigning blame but an opportunity to do the works of God. But there is an urgency to this work because, while Jesus is in the world, he tells us, he is the light of the world. When darkness comes, no one can work.

And what is the work of God? The man's blindness would have been viewed as an extremely serious condition. Ancients

believed that a person was able to see because of the light that was within them. If this person was blind from birth, it meant that he had no light in him, even from the moment that he was born. This is why the disciples ask about the parents' sin. At the end of the miracle story, we learn that the man did as Jesus directed; he went and washed in the pool of Siloam and was able to see. But in the symbolism of John's Gospel, seeing is believing, and believing is doing the work of God (John 6:26-29). Perhaps, then, the washing is an allusion to baptism, an action that Christ instituted as

the way of salvation and a way of commissioning us for our taking up of his mission.

The first scene to follow this miracle story describes the formerly blind man's neighbors who observe him being able to see and wonder whether the man they see is the one they knew when he was still blind or someone else. When the man confirms his identity and tells them how he was healed, he describes the healer as "the man called *Jesus*." In the second scene, we learn that the neighbors brought the man to the Pharisees, scholars of the Law, because the healing took place on the

Because the Pharisees don't believe the man who had been blind, they question his parents. Crucially, they repeat that he is of age and can speak for himself. Their tone is defiant. They believe their son.

How does he now **see**?"  
 His parents answered and said,  
 "We **know** that this is our son and that he was born **blind**.  
 We do not **know** how he sees **now**,  
 nor do we know who **opened** his eyes.  
**Ask him**, he is of age;  
 he can **speak** for **himself**."  
 His parents said this because they were **afraid** of the **Jews**,  
 for the **Jews** had already **agreed**  
 that if anyone **acknowledged** him as the **Christ**,  
 he would be **expelled** from the **synagogue**.  
 For this **reason** his parents said,  
 "He is of age; **question** him."

So a second time they **called the man** who had been blind  
 and said to him, "**Give God** the praise!  
 We **know** that this man is a **sinner**."  
 He replied,  
 "If he is a **sinner**, I do not **know**.  
 One thing I **do know** is that I was **blind** and now I **see**."  
 So they said to him,  
 "What did he **do** to you?  
 How did he open your **eyes**?"  
 He answered them,  
 "I told you already and you did not **listen**.  
 Why do you want to hear it **again**?  
 Do you **want** to become his **disciples**, **too**?"  
 They **ridiculed** him and said,  
 "**You** are that man's disciple;  
 we are disciples of **Moses**!  
 We **know** that God **spoke** to **Moses**,  
 but we do not **know** where this one is **from**."  
 The man answered and said to them,  
 "This is what is so **amazing**,  
 that you do not **know** where he is **from**, yet he **opened**  
 my eyes. >>

Exasperation and defiance.

The Pharisees cannot believe his temerity. This disbelief intensifies to the point where they throw him out because he has the gall to try to teach them. Ridiculous as they are, don't ridicule the Pharisees with your tone of voice.

sabbath. Sabbath observance was one of the most important obligations of the Law, which could only be broken in life-or-death situations. But a man born blind could certainly wait another day for healing, and now the Pharisees are divided about Jesus and whether he was from God. When questioned further, the formerly blind man says of Jesus, "He is a *prophet*."

In the third scene that follows this miracle story, the Pharisees summon the formerly blind man's parents to ask about their son's blindness. Sadly, the parents sacrifice their son to save themselves,

because "the Jews" (i.e., religious authorities) had decided that anyone who recognized Jesus as *the Messiah* would be banned from the synagogue. Most likely, the parents are Jesus followers, though hidden ones, because they are not willing to endure the consequences of their belief.

In the fourth scene, the tone and direction of the story begins to change quite dramatically. The Jewish religious authorities call the man to stand before them again, as if in a court of law, and they announce their decision that Jesus is a sinner, presumably to get the man to

denounce Jesus, as well. But the formerly blind man turns the tables on them. They treat him as the accused in earlier scenes of this story, but now he becomes the accuser, launching a fierce argument against them for their failure to recognize Jesus as coming *from God*. The consequence of the man's witness is immediate: "Then they threw him out."

In the fifth scene, Jesus seeks out the formerly blind man to ask him whether he believed in the *Son of Man*. In the other Gospel accounts, this title is used only by Jesus and only to speak of himself, and that

We know that **God** does **not** listen to sinners,  
but if one is **devout** and does his **will**, he listens to **him**.  
It is **unheard** of that **anyone** ever opened the eyes of a person  
born **blind**.

If this man were **not** from God,  
he would **not** be able to do **anything**."

[They **answered** and said to him,  
"You were born **totally** in sin,  
and are **you** trying to teach **us**?"

Then they **threw** him out.

When Jesus heard that they had **thrown him out**,  
he found him and said, "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.]

Then Jesus said,  
"I **came** into this world for **judgment**,  
so that **those** who do not see might **see**,  
and **those** who do see might become **blind**."

Some of the Pharisees who were with him **heard** this  
and said to him, "Surely we are not also blind, **are we**?"

Jesus said to them,  
"If you were **blind**, you would have no **sin**;  
but now you are saying, 'We **see**,' so your **sin** remains."

[Shorter: John 9:1, 6–9, 13–17, 34–38 (see brackets)]

Jesus validates the belief of the man who  
had been blind.

The reading concludes with a crucial  
inversion: blindness to sight, sight to  
blindness. The sin tradition indicated in the  
blind man has been shifted to the Pharisees.  
When we believe something blindly, are we  
believing or are we blind?

appears to be the case here, as well. Earlier  
in the Gospel of John, when Jesus is calling  
his disciples, he uses the story of Jacob's  
ladder to speak about the "greater things"  
that Nathanael will see because of his  
belief, and he likens the Son of Man to the  
ladder that bridges earthly and heavenly  
realities (see John 1:43-51).

In the final scene of this story, Jesus  
condemns the religious authorities for  
being blind, even as they have eyes to see.  
Recall the comments that Jesus made to

the disciples in the first scene. As light of  
the world, Jesus' mission is one of judg-  
ment, not against people who are physi-  
cally blind, but against those who are  
spiritually blind and who refuse to recog-  
nize Jesus' true identity. Moreover, Jesus  
has the authority to judge, because he is  
the agent of God, who bridges the earthly  
and heavenly realities by doing only what  
the Father tells him to do.

And what about us? With whom do  
you most identify? Let us approach Jesus,

the light of the world, so that he can shed  
light on our blindness and enable us to do  
the works of God. C.C.