

## Lent IV Year A 2026

Perhaps you've known this for a while; or maybe you have learned this having come to All Saints for a time... that none of the Gospels are first-hand accounts of Jesus's life and ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are a good two generations removed from the life of Jesus. The Gospel of John, the last of the canonical Gospels, was written at least three generations after Jesus's earthly life. I say canonical because there were, in fact, many more Gospels written in the first and second centuries that didn't make it into what we call the bible. Moreover, we don't have much historical corroboration as to the stories of Jesus contained in the Gospels. In fact, the only thing we know historically is that there was a man named Jesus from Nazareth, who was a Wisdom teacher and preacher in Galilee, who was executed in Jerusalem by the Romans.... That's it. By historical, I mean information we have recorded by a bona fide historian. In the case of Jesus, the historian's name is Josephus. So if that's true... how do we approach scripture with any integrity? If nothing is certain, how do we find meaning and purpose and truth in this ancient literature that we call sacred?

When I entered seminary, we were required to attend a two weeks' orientation course at the end of August just before the regular Fall term began. Right out of the gate we were taught the "hermeneutical circle." Hermeneutics simply means interpretation; and in our case, biblical interpretation... and the hermeneutical circle is simply this: that with all scripture we have to consider three contextual realities.... The writer's world, that is to say, the historical context within which he writes; then we must consider the writers thematic and rhetorical agenda; and then we have to acknowledge our own context, our own cultural

biases and predispositions; and experience. In short, we are obligated to interpret scripture with a critical eye, recognizing that meaning evolves and changes; that truth finds new expression.... In other words, biblical history is not a set of facts, nor is it a formulaic belief system, but rather, it is inspired speculation as to God's relationship with God's people. It is imaginative literature that invites us into an ongoing process of discovery. Lie faith itself. I've said it before: Scripture is not a set of historical facts, but inspired theological speculation. That, of course doesn't mean that scripture isn't true; quite the contrary. Scripture abounds with Truth. So, I would say that biblical interpretation is the art of seeing.... The art of seeing, just like the life of faith.

So with all that said, I want to look at today's Gospel reading taking into account the writer's context, and particularly the writer's agenda... and perhaps we may see something that applies to our own context, our own place in the sweep of history. The writer we call John lives in a world occupied by empire. It is a veritable police state, ruled by coercion and violence. In this world there is a vast injustice between the few powerful elite, and the rest of the population who live a relatively marginal existence. That is the context for all four Gospel writers. But, as you now know, John's Gospel is fundamentally and dramatically different from the ethos of the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Synoptic Gospels have Jesus firmly rooted in the traditions and history of Judaism. Jesus, and the movement, is the renewed way ahead for, not just a community of believers, but for a nation. For these writers Jesus, his teachings and ministry, represent the true interpretation of Torah. Jesus is the heir to the legacy of the long line of prophets whose vocation it was to

call out where the people, and particularly their leadership, have gone amiss, and to proclaim a new way forward according to the Laws of God. In the synoptic Gospels the claim is never made that Jesus is divine. For these writers he is the typological messianic figure, rooted in Israel's history, who will liberate God's people from their sins, and, ultimately, the sin of the world.

John's Gospel is a radical departure from the Rabbinic ethos of the Synoptic Gospels, owing its rhetoric to classical philosophy. In the prologue the writer says that Jesus is the Word, the Logos... and that the Word became flesh and lived among us as the light of the world. The Logos is the divine reasonableness of creation, the mythic mind of God, the mystic glue, if you will, that holds the created order together. I would call it the divine imagination of the universe; that which created and continues to create all things. In that regard, the Logos is process, which is to say that God is process. In the synoptic Gospels God rules as a king. In John's Gospel God participates in the world as Love.

Last week, in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, we were given an example of how such love operates in the world. Love crosses boundaries, shatters social custom and convention, in order to liberate a person from oppression and indignity. As I said last week, the writer is giving a first-hand account of what he has seen in the practice of his own community. The story of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman is a mere foil for the writer's agenda. So, whether or not the encounter actually happened... the writer is testifying to the truth that practicing the way of Love, the way of Jesus, indeed raises people

up from shame and marginalization to well-being and dignity... into freedom. He has seen such salvation with his own eyes. He knows the truth of it.

In our reading for today, Jesus encounters a man born blind. And right off the bat the writer overturns the very heart of the Judean Faith. It was not his sin, nor the sin of his ancestors that caused his blindness.... That of course is contrary to the central premise of the Covenant... that to follow God's laws brings blessing; and to stray from God's laws brings on calamity. Here the writer argues that the man was born blind, so that God may be glorified, a radical proposition; that all of our lives exist only for the glory of God. That God is not in the business of punishment, but that God is in the business of healing. No small paradigm shift.

And then the writer goes into something of a comedy routine concerning the healed blind man's encounter with the Judean leadership. A sort of a "who's on first" dialogue. Clearly here the writer is pointing a finger at the dysfunction of the religious institution, an institution so caught up in its rules and regulations for piety that it misses the miracle of the man's healing. The institution is blind, ironically. Jesus told the woman at the well that she will neither worship at the altar of Elijah, nor in Jerusalem, but she will worship in Spirit and in Truth. This freedom that the author relates, a freedom that he has experienced, can't be apprehended by institutional thinking, it can only be apprehended in imaginative practice... in the process of God, in the process of Love.

So much of this Gospel is about seeing and blindness... about a vision of light struggling against the dark. Institutions: government, education, healthcare... church... all serve a vital

purpose; but when such institutions become self-interested then they lose their vision. I want to name self-interest as the culprit here. Spirit and Truth demand that we humbly participate in the process of being, vulnerable and open to discovery and possibility.... And the practical means of that, I believe, is to empty ourselves of ego and to be open to the needs of our neighbor. The writer calls it befriending; befriending the means of Love in the world. It is in befriending that we are given sight, the vision to see God's action in the world. The great divide among the people, for John, not unlike our own time... the divide was between those who choose to see; and those who choose blindness.

It seems an obsession in our culture to "find God." Whatever God that may be, by whatever name... a profound truth, a secret to the way of things... the means to happiness. Books and books have been written about such a quest; there are silent retreats, revival weekends, meditative discipline... all seem to revolve around me; after all we are a culture of the self-made individual.... I want to say that God is as near as our neighbor who suffers. We will more fully see God when we more fully see, really see, our neighbor. I'm of a mind to take this writer at his word; that the way of Jesus, the way of befriending, leads us into a visionary life, a life full of possibility and meaning, and perhaps a lasting and sustainable perspective. And maybe a bit of happiness along the way.

We come to this place, this church, to interpret and name such a vision; to offer due praise for it, to nurture its life among us. And we continue to search... new revelation, a new twist to the Truth, an unexpected turn of the mystery. Keep awake, good people, to the

informing Spirit, and to the truth arriving at every moment. Our God is among us as glorious process. We only need the eyes, and the humility to see.