

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 19, 2023

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

A few weeks ago, we celebrated a baptism. And whenever we do that, I have to make sure we have all the necessary materials ready to go. Make sure the font has fresh water in it. Make sure we have the baptismal candle ready to go. Make sure we have a baptismal napkin. And I also have to go grab this. This is called a stock. It was given to me by one of my mentors. It's a little metal container with a ring on the side so that you can wear it on your hand. And if you open it up, it has a cotton ball that's been soaked in oil. And this is what we use toward the end of the baptism when we do the anointing.¹

Anointing is a recurring action in the Hebrew Bible. It's a way of designating people for particular roles.² Today, you heard a reading from 1 Samuel where Samuel anoints David as a sign that David will be the king of Israel. Here, it functions like a coronation that designates the king who shapes public life. It's also used in the ordination of priests in Exodus.³ These are the people who repair the relationship between God and the people. And it's also how the prophet Isaiah describes his identity when he says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me / because the Lord has anointed me."⁴ Anointed by God, he can engage his prophetic task of calling people back to the covenant.

And you see those same ideas get picked up the New Testament. These ideas are so built into our language that we take them for granted. When people call Jesus "the Christ" or "the messiah," both of those titles just mean "the anointed one."⁵ It's a way of saying that Jesus has a royal vocation as he shapes the society we live in. He has a prophetic vocation as he calls us back to our covenants with God.⁶ And he has a priestly role as he restores our relationship with God.

This has an obvious connection to today's first reading which is explicitly about anointing, but it has a more subtle relationship to today's gospel reading. This is, of course, a story of healing. But pay attention to how Jesus heals. He doesn't simply stand back and shout some magic words from a distance. He spits in some dirt, makes mud, and rubs it in the man's eyes. In a rather strange way, Jesus anoints him.⁷

And if we understand this story not just as a healing but also as an anointing, a couple of different things come into clearer view. The first is we understand why the disciples' question is misguided. What's the question the disciples ask? "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They view this man as an outcome, a problem that needs to be solved. We would say they view him as a statistic. This man is someone they talk *about* but not *to*.

But Jesus sees him differently. "He was born blind," Jesus says, "so that God's works might be revealed in him." The point isn't that God makes people's lives difficult just to prove a point. (Sorry, Job!) It's that instead of his life being the result of someone else's shortcomings, this man's life is the means by which God's glory enters the world. So he has integrity as a person. And that's why instead of just talking *about* this man like the disciples do, Jesus actually talks *to* him. So for

¹ *The Use and Means of Grace*, Principle 28: "The use of oil is a sign of anointing with the Spirit and of union with Jesus Christ, the anointed one of God."

² Good discussion of this in Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 12.

³ Exodus 29

⁴ Isaiah 61

⁵ Walter Kasper's *Jesus the Christ*: "Jesus is the Christ inasmuch as he is anointed with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Jesus borrows Isaiah's words when explaining his mission in Luke's gospel.

⁷ Augustine makes the "anointed" connection here. *John: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2018).

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Jesus, healing is never simply about managing problems or mitigating symptoms or any other technocratic solution. It comes from recognition. By anointing him, Jesus recognizes his humanity.

And this recognition is transformative. This healing is not simply about a restoration of the status quo. So often when we talk about healing, we imagine it as simply going back to what was. As if it never even happened. And when we seek healing in our personal lives, our relationships, or in our public life, there's always a temptation to just go back to what's familiar or what's known or the old ways of doing things.

But by anointing him, Jesus is inviting him into a new reality, a new way of living in the world. This blind man isn't going *back* to anything. After all, he was born blind. For him, healing is about entering a new reality, one that he had no prior conception of. So whenever we seek healing in our own relationships and communities, we can always leave some space for God's creative work. Sure, maybe there's an outcome or an end result that we'd prefer. But Jesus opens us up to new possibilities, too.

And those new possibilities are transformative for us. When Jesus heals people, he doesn't just "fix" them—an idea that rightfully makes many of us uneasy—but he invites them into his mission. So they aren't just recipients of healing but agents of healing in their own communities. If this sounds similar to how Jesus transformed the woman at the well last week, it's not because I was feeling lazy and decided to mail it in. It's because Jesus keeps doing it.

And that's exactly why we anoint people when we they're baptized into Christ. Jesus may be the light of the world, but when we are anointed with his Spirit, when we are given his vocation of shaping public life, reminding each other of God's promises, and working to repair our relationships, we become points of that light. People who are able to speak *to* other people instead of just *about* them. People who are opened up to God's promised future. And people whose lives are signs of God's healing.

Like the man born blind, we too, are not simply healed. We are anointed with God's Spirit so that God's works might be revealed in us.

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