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Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 30, 2014

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Reading 1:

I Sam 16: -1-13

Reading 2:

Psalm 12

Reading 3:

Ephesians 5:8-14

Reading 4:

John 9:1-41

By Marjorie Suchocki

The texts deal with good versus evil, with I Samuel challenging assumptions concerning inward versus outward goodness, and the Psalm repeating the ever-present plaint: why do evil doers flourish while the righteous go unrewarded? The New Testament texts continue the theme of good versus bad actions, using imagery of moral light and darkness in Ephesians, and physical versus spiritual blindness in the gospel.

The focus is the passage concerning Jesus healing the blind man in John 9, with the consequent challenges to traditional notions of misfortune as the result of sin ("who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?") and the contrast between spiritual and physical seeing. The story is one of the culminating stories within what is called "the book of signs" in the gospel of John. The gospel is structured into two parallel sections--the "Book of Signs," beginning with John 1:19 and concluding with John 12, and the "Book of Glory" comprising the thirteenth through twentieth chapters. These two sections are "bookended" with the prologue of John 1:1-18, and the epilogue of John 21.

The point of the Book of Signs is to associate the work of Jesus with the work of God; typically each sign ("miracle") is followed by a discourse explicating the spiritual insight contained in the sign. The signs also prepare the way for the Book of Glory, in which our associations of glory with majesty and power are turned on their head: the cross of Christ is the glory of Christ and the glory of God. The cross, followed by the resurrection, is the greatest glory of all, and the deepest revelation of God's relation to sin.

Typically we associate God's relation to sin as one of punishment--witness the cry of the Psalmist, asking why the wicked are not punished. But if God is revealed in the glory of the cross, the revelation is that all sin is felt by God as well as by the world: it is God who feels every sin, every suffering, every evil. We are not alone in these harshest realities of our lives. The glory is that precisely by feeling the effects of evil, God is also the power of transformation. God experiences the world in order to enable us to move beyond evil into modes of redemptive life. God's answer to sin is not punishment, but transformation, resurrection.

The sign of this glory given in John 9:1-5 is twofold. First, the story opens by rejecting suffering as punishment for sin. Suffering is part and parcel of what it is to be human; it stems from our physical and moral fragility. Second, the power to see or not to see, and to distinguish light from darkness, leads to one of the great "I am" statements that John attributes to Jesus: "I am the light of the world." The details of the story in verses 6 through 34 are both humorous and instructive, suggesting that sometimes our theologies get in the way of seeing what is plainly in front of us. The end of the passage in verses 35-41 show the formerly blind man once again encountering Jesus. And once again the sign is given in the conundrum: the blind see; but those who think they see are blind to the spiritual truths so plainly given them in the Sign who is Jesus.

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