

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
John 9:1-41

Letting in the Joy^{*}

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If you've ever tried to lose a few pounds or train intensively for a sports event, you know all about "cheat day." Cheat day is a day, usually once a week, when you are allowed to take a break from your diet and eat that Magnolia Bakery cupcake with cream cheese frosting that you've been longing for. In fact, cheat day is not only allowed, but it's essential. Cheat day helps you in the long run because it eases the severity of your routine, and it prevents your body from plateauing or stalling because your body no longer thinks it's being starved.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. There are a number of names for this Sunday: Laetare Sunday, Rose Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, and Mothering Sunday. I like to think of today, however, as "cheat day" for Lent. On this Sunday, we are encouraged to take a break from the fasting and rigors of Lent. This break allows us to anticipate the joys of Easter that are quickly approaching. (Laetare means "rejoice" in the Latin, and today is a day on which we rejoice.) Laetare Sunday also prevents us from plateauing or stalling, spiritually speaking.

In the medieval church, the rigors of Lent were relaxed on this Sunday. Flowers were allowed on the altar, and weddings could be celebrated on this day. Both parishioners and clergy were reminded that our Lenten discipline is never done for its own sake, but always in anticipation of the joys of Easter. This year, Laetare Sunday is particularly meaningful for our parish, as we anticipate with joy the arrival of our new rector, Fr. John David van Dooren, at the start of Holy Week.

Another tradition associated with Laetare Sunday is the change of liturgical color. Just like the Third Sunday in Advent, or Gaudete Sunday, the liturgical color for today can be rose and not violet. (You may recall that one of the Advent candles is rose and not violet.) Here at Transfiguration, we do have a rose chasuble and stole in the sacristy, and it is worn at the 8:30 mass on Laetare Sunday.

Unlike some of our neighboring Anglo-Catholic parishes, however, Transfiguration actually doesn't have a complete set of rose vestments for solemn high mass. The fussy Anglo-Catholic in me – or is it the fussy gay man? – secretly wishes that someday we might get an entire set of rose vestments. A boy can dream, can't he? But the point of Laetare Sunday is not, of course, rose vestments. It is about letting in the joy.

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Today's gospel lesson from John about the man who gains his sight is about letting in the joy. As you probably noticed, it's a very long reading. It's actually quite important that we hear the entire chapter because the lesson is not just about Jesus' miraculous cure of the man who was born blind. The lesson is also about all the other people who aren't able to let in the joy about the healing, despite this amazing news.

First you have the man's neighbors, who don't believe that it's him. They insist on finding Jesus before they will even acknowledge that the man standing before them is their neighbor. Next you have the Pharisees, or the religious leaders, who are upset that Jesus healed the man on the sabbath. They are concerned, first and foremost, with following the right rules. Then you have the man's parents, who are afraid that the religious leaders might expel them from the synagogue. They refer all questions to the man himself.

Disbelief. Criticism. Fear. These are the responses to the man's healing by his neighbors, religious leaders, and family. Instead of being overjoyed by this event, these people have a hard time seeing God's works and letting in the joy. They are, frankly, unable to see things as God does. Does this sound familiar to you? Have you – or perhaps others in your life – ever responded in this way when the amazing works of God are revealed around you?

Only the man who gains his sight is able to let in the joy. He's the only one who sees things as God does. He can't wait to tell others about the miraculous healing. He testifies that Jesus must be from God – and not a sinner – because Jesus would not have otherwise been able to perform the act of healing. In fact, the man is so insistent about this point that the Pharisees end up driving him out of the synagogue.

It's not surprising that most of the people in today's gospel reading aren't able to let in the joy. It can be hard for us, in our finitude as human beings, to see things as God does. God has been telling us this for a very long time, as we hear in today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the passage from the First Book of Samuel, God looks to the sons of Jesse in order to choose a worthy king to succeed Saul.

God goes through Jesse's sons one by one and rejects all of them with the exception of the youngest, David. Nobody else sees David as worthy of being the king. In fact, David's family doesn't even bother to bring him in from the field until Samuel asks whether all of Jesse's sons are present. Human beings simply do not see things as God does. In fact, we are expressly told in the reading that "the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Today's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians also speaks to the idea that we mortals often don't see things as God does. The epistle contrasts those people who see God's light with those who don't. This fits perfectly, of course, with today's gospel reading about the man who gains his sight. Not only is the man able to see the literal light because of Jesus' healing, but he is also able to let in the spiritual light of Christ – something that the others around him are unable to do.

Sometimes we're like the man who obtains his sight, and we are able to let in the joy. Other times, however, we're more like the people around him – his neighbors, the religious leaders, and his family. Liturgically speaking, we're so stuck in Lent that we can't let in the joy. Frankly, sometimes it *is* easier to be penitential than it is to be joyful. There's a reason why Episcopalians are called the "Frozen Chosen" by some. We can be so pious and focused on the penitential aspects of the season that we lose sight of the fact that these forty days are ultimately pointing us to the joyous lighting of the new fire at the beginning of the Easter Vigil service.

I've heard of a great phrase to describe the feeling of Laetare Sunday, this Fourth Sunday in Lent. The phrase is "bright sadness." Yes, we are still in the midst of a penitential season, during which we reflect upon the human condition. We remember our mortality and how we inevitably come up short in terms of who we're truly called to be. So things are sad. But we are also reminded to have hope – to let in the joys of Easter that await us at the end of this Lenten journey, even if it's just a little bit. So things are also bright.

Bright sadness. May your Lent continue to be an interior journey of reflection and repentance. But may today also be a time for letting in the joy, no matter how insignificant or small – a spiritual cheat day. For even in Lent, we live in the knowledge and love of our savior Jesus Christ, who opens our eyes to the Good News all around us. All we have to do is to look.