

The Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 22, 2020 - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

Joseph Campbell would describe himself as a mythologist. He was a professor at Sarah Lawrence College and spent his career studying myths in cultures around the world. One of the aphorisms for which he was famous was the admonition to “follow your bliss”. He taught that in doing so you would discover your true self, your deepest happiness. One of the stories told of Campbell occurred in Chicago where he was giving a lecture at the local YMCA. Following the talk, one of the young attendees approached Campbell to tell him that she was indeed about to embark on a journey to find and follow her bliss. She had it all mapped out, all tightly scheduled and arranged, with knowledgeable guides. Every moment was organized so that the best use of time was achieved. When the young woman finally took a breath and stopped talking, Campbell responded: “Dear lady I sincerely hope that all does not go as planned.” I’m sure the young woman was stunned and at least momentarily speechless. Later, Campbell explained his remark to friends. “Unless you leave room for serendipity how can the divine enter in?” Indeed.

This story speaks to me of the time in which we currently find ourselves. In a time of anxiety and the unknown, a time of many questions and few if any answers it is easy to fall into the habit of over thinking things. We fill up all the spaces with possessions we hope will protect us and keep us safe. Things like extra rolls of toilet paper, hand sanitizer and frozen food. We fill up all the spaces in our minds and hearts as well. Fill them with worry that there will not be enough and that the unthinkable might happen. Good planning and appropriate supplies are necessary in an unusual situation but to go to extreme helps no one and actually harms everyone. Not the least harm is that there is no room for the serendipitous, the happy accident that gives God a foothold into our busy lives.

There have been examples of those happy accidents that have occurred both in the world and right in our midst. Some weeks ago, the Caring Ministry set to work to divide the congregation into neighborhood groups and to develop a directory. Their thought was it would be useful to know where one another lived and to know who lived around us. There was thought that it would help me and a new Rector in making pastoral connections. And then the virus became news and this work was used to call people in the parish to make contact. One of the biggest risks beyond the virus itself is isolation. We human beings need each other. In the words of one of our parishioners, the calls were a chance to get to know people in the neighborhood or to know them better. A chance to build community in a time when community was at risk. Serendipitous, a happy accident. Another example occurred at Island Athletic. The club has been required to close as a result of the order of the Governor. With the closing, members were advised that dues would be suspended during the closure. Spontaneously, members offered to continue paying dues and the management of the club offered to put those funds toward their employee assistance program. An unavoidable hardship was turned into a generous sharing of resources by all to support those in most need. Serendipitous, unexpected, unplanned but a window for spontaneous good to happen. And good, spontaneous or otherwise is what God is all about.

Sometimes it is difficult to see the good that God is about. The Prophet Samuel was instructed by God to tell the powerful King Saul that God had rejected him. Not a happy circumstance. Samuel feared for his life. To make matters worse, God instructed Samuel to go the Bethlehem to Jesse and God would show him who was to be anointed as the next King in Israel. Samuel did not want to go. He protests that Saul will kill him. God has an answer, a way for Samuel to protect himself and yet Samuel still protested and inquired of God’s plan. Ultimately, because he was obedient Samuel went. So often in our lives, we are tempted to protest when God calls, or question whether that really is the right action, or even if it is really God calling at all.

Sometimes, God in God's graciousness gives us the information we seek, the clear path forward. At other times, God simply says Go, and expects that we will go.

God promised to show Samuel which of Jesse's sons would be the chosen one. But Samuel had preconceived notions about what made a king. Someone tall and strong, handsome and attractive. And so, arriving at the home of Jesse, Samuel met each of Jesse's six sons, one by one. Each seemed to fill Samuel's criteria. But none were chosen by God, not one of the six fit God's criteria. For God is not concerned with outward appearance, rather God looks at the heart of the person God calls to ministry and service. David was the youngest son, a shepherd almost forgotten in the excitement of Samuel and his mission. But God did not forget, nor did God do the expected, rather God called David because God saw into David's heart and found it good. God looks beyond our physical being as well. God looks into our hearts to see who we really are.

In the modern Western culture we think of heart as the seat of our emotions. The heart is associated with romantic love. Who among us has not experienced heartbreak at one time? For Samuel and the people of his day, the heart was far more than simply the basis of emotions. The heart was the core of a person, much more akin to what we think of as the soul. The contents of the heart that God saw included intelligence, discernment, wisdom, commitment and character. When God looks into our hearts God is looking for just those attributes. We are created in the likeness and image of God and as such we have the heart of God. This heart, our soul is what God searches for and recognizes in us.

The story of the anointing of David as Israel's king is the story of how God sees so very differently than how humans see. Sight or the lack of sight is what ties the story of Samuel and David to the story of the man born blind. Another happy accident. Jesus was walking along and he saw a blind man. There were countless people who were blind in Palestine but this specific man is the one who Jesus met on the road. It was not planned but was a serendipitous moment in the life of the man and the ministry of Jesus. The man's sight was miraculously restored. The neighbors and others could not believe that the miracle had happened. They, like the woman in Joseph Campbell's encounter, wanted life to be neat, prepackaged and not out of the ordinary. They did not want to make room for the divine or at least room for a God that did things they did not understand. And so the people sought religious verification, they brought the man to the Pharisees because they did not believe the evidence of their own eyes, they did not see. By now this is a large crowd of people who were blind to the miracle that had occurred had gathered. The man formerly blind, has told his story again and again, and the evidence was before them, yet they could not see because this was not the way they felt God would act. Eventually the authorities forced the formerly blind man out of the synagogue. And yet he was the only one in the story who was truly connected with God. He was the only one in the story willing to allow room for the divine to enter in and thus he was healed.

Having been distanced from his parents and forced out of the synagogue the man was truly isolated. In a culture where family and relationships were paramount, to be in this situation was truly frightening. When Jesus became aware of his situation, Jesus sought out the man. In this second encounter the man comes to believe. As we live through the next several weeks, complete with shortage, isolation and anxiety, we might feel a bit like the formerly blind man. We might feel cut off from much of what is normal in our life. Yet, like the man, Jesus has come to us in this situation if we are willing to believe. The word believe means at its center 'to give one's heart to'. So when we believe we are making far more than an intellectual assent, we are giving our heart, our soul to God. What the future holds is not for us to know. Like Samuel, we might be tempted to protest, to ask of God what might be coming, and like Samuel we are likely to be told to Go without a lot of explanation. Because we believe, because we have given our heart and soul to God we will go, whatever that may mean.

