

“Making the Critical Choice”

(John 9.1-41)

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Wake Up

The apostle Paulⁱ concludes his letter to the Ephesian Church with the rallying call,

“Wake up from your sleep!

Climb out of your coffins;

the bright light of Christ will make your way plain.” (5.14b)ⁱⁱ

Most of us would have someone in our circle – a friend or family member – that we’d just love to give a damn good shake and say, ‘*Wake up to yourself. Can’t you see the mess you’re making? Do something with your life!*’ And that’s not very far from what Paul is saying... But of course, it’s quite easy to see procrastination, avoidance, denial... and sheer stupidity... in others, but much harder to see it in our selves!

A big problem with affluence is that it can mask what’s *really* happening. It’s too easy to be lured uncritically into self-indulgence, and to get lost in the trivial and the unimportant, without ever stopping to ask... if the path we are on leads to life or not. But as the poet Adrienne Rich says,

“...there come times - perhaps this is one of them –

when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;

when we have to pull back from the incantations,

rhythms we’ve moved to thoughtlessly,

and disentrall ourselves, bestow

ourselves to silence, or a severer listening...” (“*Transcendental Etude*”)

It’s the urgent call of the Lenten gospels... *“Wake up! This is important! It’s time to get moving.”*

The Lenten Lectionary

Our gospels this season have all been about *making the critical choice...*

Week One: Jesus faces his own moment of decision in his temptation in the wilderness. Which way will he choose? Faithfulness... or the path of power and control? His answer is Yes to God.

Week Two: Nicodemus comes to Christ in the dead of night, and is offered the gift of re-birth... but walks away unwilling to commit. His answer is No.

Week Three: The Woman at the Well is challenged by Christ to look at her life – all those men she’s had – and to receive the gift of living water. She joyfully and enthusiastically accepts. Make that a Yes!

Week Five (next week): The dead-man Lazarus is called out of the tomb, out of his ‘coffin’ we could say... and he responds to the voice of Christ, choosing life instead of the certainty of death. Make that another Yes

They are all stories of critical turning points in people’s lives, as they face the invitation to new life presented in Jesus... as they decide whether to say Yes or No. Lent is ‘*one of those times*’... when we have to take our selves more seriously... when we have to look at our lives more critically, pulling back from the thoughtless unconscious patterns we’ve slipped into... a time when we’re called to choose.

Today, *Week Four*, it’s a man who has been blind from birth, knowing nothing but darkness... but on this day, he feels the touch of Christ and responds to the invitation of his voice... he’s healed and receives Jesus as the light. That will be another Yes!

The Man Born Blind (John 9.1-41)

But today is actually *not* that simple. It’s a long story – 41 verses of it – much bigger than the small slice we read today. It’s a story with two levels... and two very different responses to what Christ offers.

At the first level, the action we read today, Jesus heals a blind man... but not only does he receive his healing, this unnamed man also embraces the deeper invitation. He accepts Jesus as the *Light of the World* (5) and despite the pressure put on him, chooses to become a

disciple. (38) We celebrate with a man who has *woken up* and chosen to walk according to new *light*. It's an unequivocal Yes!

But the full story has another level. Lumped together (probably unfairly) under the name *The Pharisees*, the *religious* people hear about the healing... but they will not celebrate. Even with the evidence before their eyes, they will not accept. In their desperate need to condemn Jesus as a sinner, they harass the healed-man *and* his parents. They go to extraordinary lengths to protect themselves from the challenge of new life... all manner of theological and political gymnastics... They allege the man wasn't ever blind in the first place; they say he's not a reliable witness; they say it was an act of God that Jesus played no part in... all this... because their answer to God is *No*. '*No we will not change... no we do not want new life... no we insist that everything must stay the same.*' In response to the *wake up* call, they slam the door shut and pull the covers over their heads. And we know that if Jesus persists in knocking on their door, they will eventually resort to violence to restore their equilibrium.

In a poignant end to the story, a few Pharisees linger behind after the dust has settled. Perhaps like Nicodemus, they want to be *secret disciples*. Jesus has been explaining that the problem is that some people are so certain they *can* see... *everything*... that it masks the reality that they're blind as bats. These men approach Jesus tentatively... and you can hear the worry in their voices, "*Surely we are not blind, are we?*" (40)

Today's gospel is a story of *one* man who chooses to say Yes... and a whole bunch of people, religious people who you'd expect more of.... who shut their eyes tight and say No!

The Crisis Comes

Poet, Adrienne Rich says,

*"...there come times - perhaps this is one of them –
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;
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ourselves to silence, or a severer listening..."* ("Transcendental Etude")

In my life *the times*, the critical moments of choice, come over and over again. I certainly can't complain that God is impatient... I am given many many chances to say *Yes*. I do, however, feel that with each passing year the urgency grows and the choice becomes more critical.

I see it in my life; I see it in the lives of other people... and I also think it's true for the church. It really *is* time that we took this business of Jesus' invitation seriously... time we shook off the covers, leapt out of bed and said *Yes... I have indeed been blind, but now I want to see*.

ⁱ Scholarly consensus is that Ephesians is a Deutero-Pauline epistle, i.e. not written by Paul, but by a later disciple.

ⁱⁱ Scholars think this was probably an excerpt from an ancient baptism hymn.