

Hearing John in the Season of Lent

David J. Schlafer
Bethesda, Maryland

The Second through Fifth Sundays in Lent, Year A, provide a brief, unusual, yet seminal opportunity for preachers and congregations to focus on the unfolding narrative trajectory in the Gospel of John. The lectionary grants expansive space for exploring signature features and styles in the writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the full half-year Season of Pentecost in the liturgical years devoted to each, respectively.¹ Apart from appearing during these four Year A weeks in Lent, however, Johannine passages are sprinkled—while liberally, yet largely intermittently—across a wide sweep of Sundays in the three-year lectionary cycle. All those other appointed Gospel lessons, however, are without regard to John’s own story-telling sequence, and usually in service of a theological theme connected to the liturgical season into which they have been individually inserted.²

In the four encounter stories of Jesus—with Nicodemus (3:1-17), the Samaritan woman (4:5-42), the man born blind (9:1-41), and with Mary and Martha at the grave of Lazarus (11:1-45)—preachers have a chance to “let John be John” as a narrative artist, better put: to learn from and work with John in seeking to share a sense of the gospel through the shape of a sermon.

At first glance, these four dialogue-driven dramas might appear easier for preachers to engage than the Socrates-sounding monologues of Jesus in John’s Gospel (long speeches more abstractly designated as “discourses”). It *is* a challenge to wend one’s way (to say nothing of to lead one’s listeners) through the circuitous language of John’s Jesus as He holds forth on The Bread of Life, The Good Shepherd, or The New Commandment. Yet just because the encounter stories vividly recount spirited conversations and high-stakes confrontations, it does not follow that sermons on these texts will practically “write themselves.” Except for the first (in John 3),³ each requires a lengthy read-aloud in worship settings and is proclaimed (in most orders of service) just before the sermon. Attention spans are often limited (particularly in listeners who stand to hear the Gospel). Extended spoken words can “go in one ear and out the other.” The narrative threads of these stories, if not lost altogether, may well at least be frayed in the short-term memories of many. A Catch-22 for preachers could well be that reprising a long story which has just been heard is, while *needed*, yet *ill-advised*. Narrative recapitulations can lead to wandering attentions, even though a measure of story recall may be crucial for tracking the sermon. Evoking the kind of recollection that fosters understanding and insight requires preachers to find ways with each of these accounts (in poet Emily Dickinson’s fine phrase) to “tell it slant.”

How can we give John a hearing that brings his distinctive ear and eye to the spiritual journeys of those who (as in the hymn) are “walking once more the Pilgrim way of Lent”? A simple-sounding but serviceable strategy may be to compare and contrast five paired sets of stories about confrontations Jesus has with different individuals and groups—sets of stories John unfolds in sequence over the first twelve chapters in his Gospel.⁴ Some of these are the ones constituting the four Gospel Lessons appointed for Lent A, Sundays 2-5. Each of *these* stories appears as a “stand alone” in

the liturgies on those days. (It would *never* do to extend the reading by including the story with which it can be paired!) But rich reflections can be generated by seeing each in the setting of the stories that precede and follow. It can be helpful as well to consider the four lectionary-designated stories in the wider narrative progression of the first half of the Fourth Gospel.⁵ The five pairs of stories are:

- 1) The Wedding Feast of Cana (2:1-12) and The “Cleansing” of the Temple (2:13-22)
- 2) The Visit with Nicodemus (3:1-17) and The Visit with a Woman of Samaria (4:4-42)
- 3) The Healing of an Official’s Son (4:46-54) and The Healing of a Paralytic (5:1-18)
- 4) The Woman Caught in Adultery (8:1-11) and The Man Born Blind (9:1-41)
- 5) The Raising of Lazarus (11:1-44) and The Pre-burial Anointing of Jesus (12:1-11)

We will shortly reflect on how John employs similarities and differences within each story pairing as a means of unfolding his larger narrative. First, however, this question: how might these stories serve as helpful Lenten guides? Spoiler alert: They ring the changes on the idea of *judgment*.

Some years ago, Robert Farrar Capon wrote a book not widely circulated, *The Youngest Day: Shelter Island’s Seasons in the Light of Grace*.⁶ He compares “The Four Last Things”—Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven—to the four seasons—Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn. Two of the metaphorical connections—*Winter* with *Death* and *Summer* with *Hell*—are obvious. Upon reflection, *Autumn* and *Heaven* evoke a certain sense of fit: in *Heaven*, as in *Autumn* “all is safely gathered in” (as we sing at Thanksgiving). At first appearance, however, *Judgment* and *Spring* seem a total disconnect. (What do black robed magistrates have to do with green shoots rising?) We fail to see the connection, says Capon, because we are predisposed to equate “judgment” with “condemnation.” Yet judgment, Capon asserts, is not so much about condemnation as about discernment. Spring is the season of discernment, when, after the dead of winter, that which is alive and growing is revealed. Spring is also when, through budding and flowering, differences are disclosed between one kind of life and another—differences not easily evident in Winter.

In John’s Gospel, by word and deed, Jesus keeps saying: “Listen again—more closely! Take another look—more deeply! Things are more—and other—than they sound like or appear to be. There is birth and *New Birth*, water and *Living Water*, bread and The Bread of *Life*; there are shepherds and a *Good Shepherd*, vines and a *True Vine*.” Surface-level hearing can be limited and limiting. Getting stuck at the level of sensory perception (and conventional wisdom) can foster *spiritual* perception that is seriously misfocused and misdirected. The “second looks and listens” that Jesus proposes invite “double takes” on the part of those whom he engages. He challenges his conversation partners to shift their attention from a fixation on physical phenomena to an insightful beholding of the deeper spiritual source toward which those phenomena gesture. (Though his challenges tend to trigger defensive, resistive “second guessing” instead.)

Lent (coinciding with the season of Spring for those who live in the northern hemisphere) is not a season for breast-beating, self-condemning, sackcloth and ashes. Confession of sin, fasting from various kinds of consumption, almsgiving acts of mercy and justice—all these are both derived from and evocative of a commitment to the fundamental spiritual practice of judgment as discernment—a continual process of discovery regarding what truly is, can be, and should be—seen in light of/heard in conjunction with our growing awareness of how God engages us.

How does this discernment play out across the unfolding narrative sweep of the first half of John's Gospel? Following the progression may generate fresh soundings and illuminations that emerge as the four Lenten Gospel pericopes are allowed to enter into a more extended story conversation—one through which we may hear Jesus say: *Signs and Ceremonies, Birthing and Worshiping, Curing and Healing, Mercy and Justice, Death and Resurrection—Listen to/Look at These Another Way!*

1) *What concern is that to you and me? / Take these things out of here!* Signs and Ceremonies

After the Prologue, the Testimony of John the Baptist, and the Calling of the First Disciples, John the Evangelist begins his account of the narrative trajectory in Jesus's ministry with back-to-back stories about how Jesus intervenes in two social settings where signs and ceremonies have high significance. Animal sacrifices are essential in temple worship, and a wedding without wine would be a total disaster. At the wedding, Jesus first declines his mother's urge to get involved. His retort can be read as rhetorical ("Not my time, so not my problem!"). The question might, however, also be heard as an impetus to discernment (if not for himself or his mother, then an invitation to discernment for John's audience).

When what is understood to be a clear sign of God's abundant blessing on an important communal celebration is lacking, that sign should be provided. So, without public self-disclosure (and truth be told, much helped by the heft of servants who also operate unrecognized), Jesus supplies what is wanting—thus validating both sign and ceremony—and becoming thereby a sign to his disciples.

The scene suddenly shifts; the contrasts are stark: Jesus stands not in the more intimate space of a family or village, but in national sacred assembly space, the liturgical meeting place of God's Covenant Community. Here, Jesus is anything but shy about attracting attention. Rather than validating the structural web of temple signs and ceremonies, he assails what seems to be integral to the former and thus critical to the latter. Sign, ceremony, and liturgical logistics, alas, have become intertwined over extended unreflective practice by the wedding of concerns economic, political, and religious. Jesus proclaims A Great Divorce: "Take these things out of here!" They don't help the community pray; they make prayer far more difficult. This appropriation of the sign of sacrifice is not just distracting, but totally mistaken; it renders the ensuing ceremony a kind of blasphemy.

From the outset of his ministry, Jesus sends a clear signal: things are more and other than they seem—listen/look again—discernment is essential.

2) *The wind blows where it chooses. / If you knew the gift of God. . .* Birthing and Worshiping

Gender, ethnicity, social status, formal education, moral standing in their com-

munities—Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman could hardly be less alike. They are, therefore, curiously, different in yet one more respect. It's not just that Nicodemus is respectful and taciturn while the woman is loquacious—indeed, she is all but “in your face” assertive. For all his training and experience, Nicodemus seems theologically clueless, while the Samaritan woman is theologically street savvy.

From the perspective of the Johannine Jesus, however, each needs serious reorientation in terms of spiritual geography and spiritual biology. What does it mean to be born from *above*? Which mountain *is* the “right” mountain on which to worship? Adjusting his images to the readily understandable incomprehension of both, Jesus tries to meet each where he finds it, while seeking at the same time to disengage them from their respective constricting theological preconceptions. By virtue of their religious backgrounds (with less good reason for Nicodemus than for the woman), neither is able to perceive the operation of God's Spirit, which “blows where it chooses,” and which can show up and be worshipped appropriately on anyone's mountain (or anywhere else, for that matter).

Each of these two people—so different, yet so similar—based on their own frames of reference, has a religious system of belief and practice that is well worked out and that works well for each. Each is an adult, in the everyday sense of that word. Yet Jesus suggests that, spiritually, each is still *in utero*. Both require radical openness to a Gift from a deeper Reality Dimension—one that can neither be earned or inherited, but only received with gratitude. Not entertained and accepted as a helpful “add on” to “business as usual,” rather, embraced, not even as “a game changer,” but as the utter loss of a prior way of living and a total disorienting/reorienting transposition into a Life that is Eternal.

Discernment regarding *Signs and Ceremonies* fosters further, deeper discernment about what is entailed in “From Above” birthing and “Living Water” gifting—each of which has profound implications for what it means to worship God “in spirit and truth.”

3) *Go, your son will live! / Stand up, take your bed and walk!* Curing and Healing

Once again, back-to-back stories of two individuals—both of whom, this time, are ill, but under circumstances strikingly different. The malady of one is acute; he is “at the point of death.” The other may well have wished he *could* die, having suffered a chronic illness for thirty-eight years. One may be a foreigner (His father is named as “a royal official.”); the other seems likely “a local boy” who has long lain just beyond reach of occasionally “stirred” waters at a pool by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem.

A request comes to Jesus from the sick son's father—a request Jesus grants with a long-distance cure. With the paralyzed invalid, on the other hand, Jesus himself does the asking: “Do you want to be made well?” (Silly-sounding question! But maybe not so much.) This curing is done “on the spot.” In both encounters the curing is effected through a verbal order from Jesus—to the entreating father, “Go!”—to the paralytic, as he describes his hopeless situation: “Stand up! Take your mat! Walk!”

Perhaps the most significant similarity is that the royal official and the man on the mat both do just as they are told, and these “doings” play a role in what ensues for each. Gospel Story Teller John makes a point of saying more than once that the “signs” Jesus does are intended to evoke belief—not in the “signs and wonders” for their own sake, or in Jesus as a wonder worker, but in Jesus as God's Word Made

Flesh—God’s embodied sacramental presence tent-pitched in the world so that those who believe in him are empowered to become “children of God.”

Viewed in that light, the question of Jesus to the paralytic “Do you want to be made well?” is not simply “Do you want to get better, or don’t you?” It is an initial bridge to cross for one who is set upon an extended pathway toward belief (a journey that the next story episode about the man born blind will depict in far greater detail). John makes the point explicitly with regard to the response of the royal official whose participating trust in the healing power of Jesus has been decisively validated: “So he himself believed, along with his whole household” (4:53b).

To state the obvious, these are not so much stories of people being cured as stories of people who are in the process of being healed. Curing of a physical malady is a sign and an occasion for discerning God’s full healing power manifested in Jesus—a power that does not preclude, prevent, or forestall death, but rather *conquers* death’s impact here and now, now and forever. But that is getting, is it not, just a bit ahead of John’s own developing story line—a narrative technique that employs building a trajectory of anticipation—a rhetorical strategy that preachers like John are able to deploy with consummate skill.

Returning to where we are at this point in the narrative flow, John presents Jesus as performing two different cures as a means of fostering for Gospel listeners a dawning realization that physical curing can be, to the eye of faith, a discerning sign of spiritual healing. And so, to us the question is, “Do we want not just to be cured, but ‘to be made well’?”

4) *Neither do I condemn you. / I came into the world for judgment.* Mercy and Justice

Like the paralytic, the man born blind does not ask for curing, let alone for healing. Each man has curing “imposed” on him (as it were) as an important sign in a necessary journey of discerning judgment through a process that leads toward healing. The woman taken in adultery is similarly “intervened upon” by Jesus with curt, blunt orders: first, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone!” then, “Go and sin no more!”

The man born blind is analogously commanded, “Go wash in the Pool of Siloam.” Note further that after his encounters with the religious authorities, the now newly physically sighted blind man evidences emerging spiritual in-sight by “believing,” not unlike the royal official does after the cure of his son and the former paralytic does who obeys the imperative of Jesus to stand and walk.

As with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, this new set of stories pairs persons of different genders. Both are presumed guilty by their fellow citizens and deserving of punishment. Execution is imminent for the woman caught in adultery; a life sentence without parole is being served by the man born blind. Jesus shows “mercy” on each, and in so doing calls into sharp question the culturally operative understanding of “justice” in both cases. This mercy of Jesus is not so much a setting aside of the claims of justice as it is a challenge to short-sighted understandings of justice itself—understandings that precipitate condemnation which brings deadly consequences in its wake. The mercy of Jesus is a sign pointing toward a deeper, richer, more multidimensional understanding of justice—justice as God sees it, and as we are beckoned to embody it.

The everyday views of “justice” that Jesus calls into question can turn out in practice to be all but indistinguishable from expressions of mob rule. Would-be stone throwers, disciples with seriously mistaken moral preconceptions, neighbors with severely short-sighted perceptions, parents who are fearful and self-protecting, religious leaders who already “know it all”—all these are sharply required to confront the prospect that mercy at the hands of Jesus (who gets his hands dirty on behalf of both the woman and the man)—is a sign of God’s own judgment about the nature of true justice into which all of us need to journey, a journey that has “life and death” ramifications.

5) *Unbind him and let him go! / Let her alone!* Death and Resurrection

Gospel Story Teller John seems at first to trip over his own authorial feet in his recounting of the final story pairing. At the beginning of his “Raising of Lazarus” episode, having told us that this “certain man” was ill, he refers to Mary, a sister of Lazarus, by noting that she “was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair” (11:2). John then returns to his opening line: “Lazarus was ill.” It’s just that John appears to have gotten ahead of himself. He will not actually tell the story about Mary anointing the feet of Jesus until the following chapter, after Jesus has brought Lazarus back to life from “having been dead four days.”

This is no slip up, of course; as a storyteller, John is no slouch. He intends these two stories to be interwoven—but in a fashion counterintuitive to conventional understanding of how narratives should unfold: from conflict and complication toward resolution—from “Once Upon a Time” to “Happily Ever After.” Rather than moving “from death to life,” this story pairing moves in the opposite direction—from the raising of Lazarus to the impending death of Jesus—the latter precipitated by the former.

The resuscitation of Lazarus may be a sign which points toward the Resurrection, not just that *of* Jesus but of *who* Jesus *is*. But while Resurrection ultimately entails the death of Death, it is not—he does not make—a supernatural end run *around* or a soaring pole vault *over* death, either the physical fact of death or the spiritual forces that are bent on soul destruction. When Thomas says of the journey of Jesus to the tomb of Lazarus, “Let us also go that we may die with him” (11:16), the brave disciple, though he may have an intimation of what lies ahead, speaks far more truly than he has any possibility of knowing.

In his command “Come forth” to Lazarus (issued through his own tears), Jesus may be prefiguring emergence from his own tomb, but not before his own Death-defeating death. The upshot of his conversation with Mary, conducted before the still occupied grave of Lazarus, is that, slowly and partially but not inaccurately, Mary begins to “get” what Thomas has only an intimation of—that death and resurrection are connected at their core. So Mary comes to the meal she and Martha have laid for Jesus and his disciples—comes prepared with a sign of her own, a sign everyone but Jesus completely misunderstands, yet a sign that Jesus validates in still another terse command: “Let her alone.” It is, for him, as Mary knows, a pre-burial anointment of the One who *is* Resurrection and Life.

To summarize the trajectory of John’s narrative flow, various dimensions of spiritual discernment ultimately lead to the necessity of coming to grips with the countercultural realization that “the way of life and peace” is “the way of the cross”—that the way,

the *only* way to our incorporation into the life of Jesus is to die with and be raised by him. Such discernment discovery cannot be contained in a set of statements (or in the shaping of statements that constitute a sermon). But preaching that engages John as a senior preaching colleague, through this seasonally appointed set of story pairings, can be instrumental in illuminating and motivating the practice of spiritual discernment—the practice of spiritual judgment—a practice that the faithful seek to foster in the season of Lent.

Notes

1 One notable exception. Midway through the Season of Pentecost, Year B, when The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the next episode in Mark's narrative sequence, the Gospel lectionary takes a sudden six-week sidetrack into John's account, followed by the extended Bread of Life Discourse in John 6. The impact on listeners is akin to that of injecting pages from a musical score of Mahler into the performance of a symphony by Mozart.

2 Sometimes annually: e.g. John's Prologue on the First Sunday After Christmas (1:1-14), his Passion Narrative on Good Friday (18-19), and the resurrection appearances of Jesus to sequestered disciples (Thomas first absent, then present) on Easter 2 (21:19-29). Sometimes different portions of more extended Johannine passages appear on the same Sundays in each liturgical year: e.g. portions of John 10 on Easter 4, and from John 14-17 on Easter 5-7. There are several other occasional Johannine "drop-ins," such as The Wedding at Cana (2:1-11) on Epiphany 2C and Mary's anointing of Jesus's feet (12:1-8) on Lent 5C. There is a four-day succession of Gospel Lessons from John 12-13, but not on Sundays; they are the lessons appointed for Monday through Thursday in Holy Week each year.

3 The briefer John 3 account of the night-time meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus poses its own preaching challenge. Its narrative tensions are often treated as little more than a lead in to the supposed "point" of the story, John 3:16-17.

4 The strategy goes beyond an exercise in Freshman Writing. Relationships with others are formed, framed, and fostered through the mutual sharing of personal stories wherein points of identification are discovered by comparing similarities and differences in the experiences of all involved. Similarly, we learn a great deal about someone by hearing how she or he interacts with a range of different associates in a variety of settings. One of John's ways of introducing his listeners to Jesus, I think, is by inviting them to overhear conversations Jesus has with different people in different conditions—conversation partners who, nonetheless, manifest an interesting interplay of factors held in common. And John shows us a Jesus who engages all of these with salvation strategies that are "similar and different" as well.

5 I explore this broad approach in *The Shattering Sound of Amazing Grace: Disquieting Tales from St. John's Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2006); framing several of these Johannine encounter story pairings through the verses of John Newton's familiar hymn, and a line from C. S. Lewis, "Every idea of God we form, God must, in mercy, shatter."

6 It is now republished (Charlottesville, VA: Mockingbird Ministries, 2019).