

“Seeing Real” The Rev. Dr. Russell C. Sullivan, Jr., Pastor  
March 15, 2026

I remember the first day I began to wear glasses. I was in the fourth grade. Put aside the question of why my parents waited so long before my vision was tested. Having those glasses was a joyful occasion. I saw leaves on trees, planes flying through the sky, faces on people. I was seeing real for the first time.

Having physical sight restored is one challenge; acquiring spiritual insight is another, or the ability to see reality truly, is an even greater challenge.

The question that the texts pose for this morning is: Can we see real, dare I say, see as God sees?

It appears that Samuel the prophet had not seen clearly when he anointed Saul king over Israel. Samuel had the audacity to call himself a seer, one who sees (1 Samuel 9:19) In truth, Samuel does not see as God sees. Samuel sees the tall, strapping Saul as the king whom Israel is demanding and needing, but Saul proves to be a divine disappointment. He arrogates to himself the priestly role of performing a sacrifice because he is impatient. In other actions he disobeys God’s commandments. He is in short a mess as a leader. The Lord tells Samuel of his profound disappointment and orders Samuel to Bethlehem to choose a new king.

And so to Bethlehem he goes. The villagers are nervous at the approach of the prophet. “Why is the pastor coming to see us? Samuel wants to chew us out about something.”

What the villagers of Bethlehem didn’t know was what we know, that Samuel and the Lord have been ruminating together in holy counsel about their flawed decision to anoint Saul as king over Israel. To quell the fears of the townspeople, Samuel tells the people he is coming to worship with them, and after they worshipped they would make a sacrifice, which would become a good ol’fashioned barbecue. The plan is that during the celebration Samuel would have his eye on one particular family, the Jesse family. God has told Samuel that from Jesse’s sons God will choose a new king.

What becomes evident is that Samuel, the great seer and prophet, a man of faith, still cannot see as God sees.

The sons of Jesse are paraded before Samuel. Who is to get the grand prize, the anointing of the Lord? First out is Eliab, and he immediately catches Samuel’s attention. Tall, good-looking, the sun gleamed on his bronze, muscle-clad skin. A powerful athlete, Eliab is on the first string of the sheep shearing team. “Wow,” thinks Samuel, “wouldn’t he cut a striking pose as King over Israel?” “Psst!” whispers the Lord to Samuel, “I could care less about his appearance or whether you’d find his picture in Sports Illustrated. I don’t look at outward appearance. I do not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

“Well, whatever,” thinks Samuel, “Next!” Out rolls Abinadab. Abinadab was one of those MBA corporate CEO’s, a graduate of Wharton, who was the brains behind the firm of Jesse and Sons. He certainly could have kept the kingdom’s accounts in order. But who knows? Some suspected he was cooking the books a little, but boy, did he cut the corporate image. Cuff links, Giorgio Armani suits, well manicured. Slick. He never touched sheep manure. But the Lord said to Samuel, “Take a pass!”

Paraded next before Samuel was Shammah. All of his family and friends called him Shammah the Serious! Shammah was the quiet intellectual of the family. Shammah the Brain! Shammah the Super Smart! He knew words and languages no one else knew, but he was the kind who let everyone else know it too. “The heart, Sam! Look at the heart!” God tells our visually impaired prophet

All the predictable winners, those who rate in the world’s eyes, are dismissed. After previewing seven of Jesse’s sons, Samuel begins to think: “The Lord said it would be one of these boys. What’s up here?” And it begins to dawn upon Samuel that there must be another son, perhaps one not taken so seriously by his father and kin. “Do you have any other sons?”

“Well, yes. I have another son. He’s the youngest, #8, but he’s out in the pasture, taking care of the sheep.” You can hear the slur of condescension in Jesse’s voice. In Hebrew the word for youngest is haqqaton “which carries undertones of insignificance, of not counting for very much.”(1) “Oh, yea, there’s the haqqaton,” mutters Jesse. Jesse doesn’t even mention his son’s name. In short, this son was viewed as the family runt, for to be the youngest was not to count for much in ancient Israel. And the job his family gave him – shepherding sheep – was the least demanding! The haqqaton!

“Well, bring him here!” Samuel shouts. And in walks David. The Lord’s heart melted. And it didn’t hurt that David was good looking either!!! “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.”(16:13) The runt. The youngest. The lowly shepherd. The haqqaton. Voile! The Anointed of God!!

Jesse was vision-impaired. He had a log in his eye. He never saw the potential in his youngest son. He couldn’t see what God could see in this ruddy shepherd boy. Just what then did God see in David? Well, now I tread on speculative grounds, but here goes.

The David story tells us that God sees in people qualities and opportunities we are blind to. Instead of building a resume, David was alone in the pasture. How does one learn leadership skills in the pasture? Leaders must have a spiritual life, or they cannot lead. Leaders are formed in solitude where the Spirit can work. Jesus himself withdrew to pray, to think, to listen. Gethsemane was his quiet spot where he could hear the voice of God and get in touch with his calling. David’s own pasture experience was also enriching. Only in solitude could he have discovered the nature of God described in those two great metaphors of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. There he found that God was a shepherd who would be with him in valleys of delight or

despair and that God was a host who would prepare banquets of mercy and goodness. A theological revolution discovered in a pasture of solitude! A heart for God shaped in the quiet of the wilderness!

I think David learned something else out there in the pasture. I think he learned that leaders are first and foremost servants. David took upon himself a menial job, tended to a vulnerable flock, and did what he was told. In the humblest of circumstances and jobs God created a heart primed for service.

God could see all of this, but no one else could. Samuel was used to the world's standards of competence, strength, bravado, and posturing. Ignored were the personality and character that God was forming in David.

Let me go even further. What would it be like if we could see – at least partially, here and there, now and then – as God sees? Imagine, yes imagine, because faith is about stoking a sacred imagination. Imagine how our world would be different if we see with the eyes of God.

Could we see for example our own children as persons with potential, as bundles of joy and delight rather than burdens or problems? And let's extend that to other categories, shall we, dare we?

Could we discern, see, whether candidates for leadership, in the church and in society, were truly servants, with a heart for God's concerns, with character full of humanity and goodness?

And the need for seeing real goes further. What would it be like if we could see people that God sees as beloved children rather than see them as problematic? What would it be like to see many undocumented workers in our society as people seeking justice and work and peace, rather than describing them all as lawless criminals and then choosing the harshest of means to deal with the problems of immigration? Could we see them with God's eyes, as children of God? Could we begin as Jesus commands us "to love our enemies"? In our deeply divided society, we have come to see political opponents as political enemies, rather than see them as fellow citizens with differences. Could we practice the biblical commandment, "come let us reason together."

Why is that so hard? Because we are so blind, captive to our prejudices, and prisoners of the stories we have told about people who are different from us. Bound to our fears, we separate ourselves from those whose life experiences and backgrounds are different from us. We have blind spots within us, and we stay stuck within a comfortable and limited field of vision.

In our gospel reading today, the disciples see a man born blind, but they reveal themselves as the ones with limited sight. They want to "other" him, make him into something they could shun or dismiss, or feel superior to. They do that by asking the question: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was blind?" Who's the sinner here? If we know who the sinner is, then we know whom to blame and whom to avoid and to hate. There's not one ounce of compassion in how they see this man! But Jesus says, "You aren't seeing clearly. The issue is not figuring out the sinner, because that's not the reason behind his suffering. This is an opportunity for God's light of healing and grace to shine upon this man. We must work the works of God who sent me." Jesus saw the man as an opportunity for mission, not as a person to be dismissed, or categorized, or shunned. Jesus then healed with a simple salve of mud on his eyes and sent him to a pool of water to wash and his sight was restored.

Jesus saw him real, through the lens of the love of God. It is possible for us to see this way.

For Lent is that season when we die to the blindness of self and rise to the newness of God's light that shines in the darkness. We are empowered by the grace of the one who truly sees and who wants to touch the eyes of our hearts that we might see new possibilities within our world and people.

There's an old tale of those shepherds around Bethlehem, how they loved to sit debating in the long night watches out on the Judean hills. One night toward dawn, their spiritual guide, an older shepherd, posed a probing question. "How can we know when the night has ended, and the day has begun?" "Could it be, ..." one of the young ones blurted eagerly, "might we know the night is ended when we can look out to the flock and distinguish between the sheepdog and the sheep?" "That is a good answer," said the Teacher: "But not the answer I would give."

Another raised his voice: "Perhaps we know daylight has begun when we can look at the trees around us and distinguish the olive leaf from the fig." Again, the Teacher shook his head: "A fine answer, but not the one I seek."

At last, they begged him to share the answer he had in mind. He looked at each of them intently for a moment and then said: "When you look into the eyes of a human being and see a sister or a brother, you know that it is morning. If you cannot see a sister or brother, you will know it is still night." (2) By God's amazing grace this Lent and always, we can see in new ways and live into the light of God's bright day. May it be so.

- 1) I am indebted to Eugene Peterson for his perspective on this word in his book Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians, San Francisco: Harper, 1997, p.16.
- 2) Told by J. Barrie Shepherd in his sermon, "Did the Fundamentalists Win?", in A Preaching Ministry: Twenty-one Sermons Preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick, published by the First Presbyterian Church in New York City, 2000, pp.383-384,