

**Sermon, Lent 4, 2008**  
**by Jan Hanson. Certified Lay Preacher**

The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; \* for you are with me  
Psalm 23:4

Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.  
Ephesians 5:14

One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.  
John 9:25

I once was lost and but now am found, was blind but now I see.  
*Amazing Grace*, John Newton 1725-1807

This is an early Lent and an early Easter. Since 1875 only on one other occasion did Easter come this early — 1913. The records for Easter continue into the future at least to 2124, but in all those years, Easter won't be so early again.

One consequence of this earliness is a darker Lent. Even the word "Lent" comes from the "lengthening" of days, as we awaken from winter's cold sleep. Today, the fourth Sunday of Lent, was known in England as Mothering Sunday. It was a day when Lenten austerities were softened, students and maids in service returned to visit their mothers, as well as their "Mother Church" where there were baptized. On this "Refreshment Sunday" it was traditional to bake a "Simnel cake", a fruit cake with two layers of almond paste, one on top and one in the middle.

This Sunday is also called "Rose Sunday" and "Laetare Sunday." "Laetare" is Latin for "Joy" and today's lessons (in other years) include readings beginning, "Laetare Jerusalem" that is, "Oh be Joyful, Jerusalem" and "Jerusalem which is above is free; which is Mother of us all." Like the third Sunday of Advent, with a pink candle for Mary, the mother of Jesus, rose colored vestments are worn in some places, rather than Lenten purple. Roses may have been included in the posies brought home to mum when "going a' mothering" in medieval times.

The Anglican custom I found most charming was the practice of 'church clipping', whereby the congregation form a ring around their church building and, holding hands, embrace it.

This week we remembered a very special mother, Ruth Mottet. Like the old joke, her love was so large, that if she sat around the house, her love went all around the house, the church, the community and the world. And now, in these early, dark days, we have "given her up" for Lent. She has "gone down to the dust ... where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting" and "light perpetual" shines on her.

Dust and roses ... death and life ... darkness and light ... blindness and sight ... rejection and anointing ... mud and oil ... the strands weaving through our readings today make a tapestry even richer when we view them from the hindsight of our point of view in this time, in this place.

Lent teaches us the need to stay grounded, connected with the earth and the dirt of our daily existence. As we unpack our stuff, (and some of us are doing a lot of that) we realize how ready we are for spring cleaning. It's time to listen to what our mothers have been telling us; "Put away your toys" "Clean up after yourself" "Don't blame your brothers and sisters!" "Share!" "Pay attention!" When we do these things, we can reach down into the dirt beneath our feet, give of ourselves, and make a miracle.

In John's Gospel the story of the cure of *The Man Formerly Known As Blind* takes just two verses; the controversy surrounding the cure takes 39 verses. "Who caused this to happen," we ask, "this man or his parents? Who is to blame here? Why is there blindness in the world? Why is there poverty, illness, or behavior which is not like mine? Who is to blame, nature or nurture-this man or his parents?" Is sin personal? (This one?) or generational? (The parents?) Is sin individual or social? Ours or our culture's? Controversy gets complicated very quickly.

Helping is usually something simple, something that starts with just a small step, like feeding hungry people in our community. The blind man asks nothing of Jesus. He does nothing to merit Jesus' notice and intervention. He didn't see Jesus, Jesus saw him, and healed an outcast, with ingredients as simple as clay and spit. Ruth saw a need and fed her family, fed the church, and when she became a FISHhead, she fed the community.

Like the man born blind in today's Gospel account, our eyes were opened to spiritual reality in the waters of our baptism. Like the runt of the litter, David, we were anointed for greater things. Ruth's granddaughter sang Amazing Grace, that most familiar of hymns by John Newton. Newton's mother died of tuberculosis when he was 6, and he eventually became a servant of slaves, a slave trader, a priest and died a man whose eyes were blind, but who had gained keen spiritual insight. The point is not to be able to see, but to believe that God sees us, not to claim a certain knowledge or experience of God, but to trust that God knows us.

In the words of Paul Tillich, "When we are tired of seeing the world in all its disorder, its facades, its hate and separation, its demonic destruction, its adoration of the false, then let us close our eyes.

Then we will see someone who looks at us with eyes of infinite human depth and power. And those eyes say to us "come and see".

"He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."

"He took the bread, broke it, said the blessing and gave it to his friends"

All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

I didn't use this, but I liked it so much, I had to include it here...

George Herbert's (1593–1633) poem [\*Affliction \(IV\)\*](#) is a masterful confession of one's own blindness and inner struggles. It's a perfect prayer for the Lenten season.

Broken in pieces all asunder,  
Lord, hunt me not,  
A thing forgot,  
Once a poor creature, now a wonder,  
A wonder tortur'd in the space  
Betwixt this world and that of grace.

My thoughts are all a case of knives,  
Wounding my heart  
With scatter'd smart,  
As wat'ring pots give flowers their lives.  
Nothing their fury can control,  
While they do wound and prick my soul.

All my attendants are at strife,  
Quitting their place  
Unto my face:  
Nothing performs the task of life:  
The elements are let loose to fight,  
And while I live, try out their right.

Oh help, my God! let not their plot  
Kill them and me,  
And also thee,  
Who art my life: dissolve the knot,  
As the sun scatters by his light  
All the rebellions of the night.

Then shall those powers, which work for grief,  
Enter thy pay,  
And day by day  
Labour thy praise, and my relief;  
With care and courage building me,  
Till I reach heav'n, and much more, thee.