

St James United Church



Message for March 15, 2026

Fourth Sunday in Lent

“Called by Light” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Samuel 16:1-13; and John 9:1-41

“I am the light of the world,” says Jesus. What might this mean as we reflect on his identity in this season and what bearing this has on who we are called to be? To begin with, light is a source of energy, suggesting that he empowers us as his followers. Light makes life possible, suggesting too that we find life in him. But most importantly in the context of today’s readings, light is needed for us to see, bringing us clarity and understanding. Without light, the result is the opposite as what is around us is obscured and we easily mistake what we see.

This is the main point of 1 Samuel 16, with Jesse bringing his sons to Samuel and each one is rejected as the next king because God looks not at their appearance but their heart. That David is then described as handsome with beautiful eyes, likely added by later writers to affirm his status, underlines just how much we get caught by appearances, or more to the point by the assumptions that we make based on them.

Which is the dynamic at play in the gospel story even as the opening issue is physical sight. The man who was born without sight is given it by Jesus, and yet the people around him fail to see, their opinion of him obscured by their assumption that his disability must have been the result of someone’s sin. That he and others were quizzed multiple times because no one believed he was who he said he was, or Jesus was who he said he was, points to just how much they clung to their assumptions. Ironically, we see the pull of assumptions when a reversal happens in later interpretations of this story. The gospel writer was influenced by current circumstances, he and other Jewish Christians barred from the synagogue by the Pharisees. This hurt shapes how he tells the story, highlighting the conflict with “the Jews,” the Judeans as we rendered it for our liturgy, especially at the end when the Pharisees ask Jesus if they’re blind and he says no so their sin remains. This text has been used over centuries as cover for people’s anti-Semitism. The shootings of synagogues in Toronto reveal just where that can lead.

I use this not only to highlight the need to challenge anti-Semitism, but also to underline how much perception can influence action. In our stories, perception shaped how David was treated, how the man who had been blind was treated, how Jesus was treated too. In those cases, vision, what people saw or assumed they saw, shaped the identity that we projected onto each of them.

But identity also shapes vision, that is shapes our response to God's call. Let's consider that based on our first reading. What if David believed he'd been left to tend the sheep not because he was capable but because his father felt that he was unfit to meet Samuel? Would he have accepted the kingship? Would he have come when summoned? The story goes on to say that God was with him, suggesting that he believed himself blessed, which helped him to be a great and righteous king. He also sinned greatly when he began feeling entitled. David's story points to how we live out what we believe about ourselves. The same is true of the man who was healed. He stood up for himself against the bias of others because he knew his self-worth even if others didn't. This in turn helped him accept Jesus' love and also to appreciate who Jesus was.

Identity shapes us collectively and so shapes our shared call. In our MAP a couple of years ago, we named a vision that is summarized in the tagline on our bulletin – Belong, Grow, Serve. We said that we want to build a welcoming, safe and affirming community space where everyone can explore faith, be supported to discover and develop their ministry, as they realize their potential and make a difference. This is how we want to see ourselves and as such should shape how we are as a church. For the most part it does. And yet as we have seen in our readings, we can get caught up in patterns of thinking that may impede our identity and the vision that flows out of it. For example, do we have habits that we developed from when we were a lot bigger that now leave some people feeling disconnected, or other habits which make it difficult for new people to get involved and so feel like they belong? Building a place for everyone includes connecting with our neighbours, but are there assumptions we make about our neighbours that block us from making connections? I don't want to assume what those assumptions may be. It is good for all of us to pause and reflect so we can live out the vision God placed on our hearts. Some strategies to help us break through our assumptions include prayerfully reflecting on the day to be more conscious of where stereotypes were at play, slowing down decision-making to be aware of the same, imagining a situation from another perspective to cultivate empathy, and actively engaging with people outside of our circle, in other words, doing what Jesus did. In faith, we share his life and prayerfully ask for guidance. As we do this honestly, he brings clarity, helps us see how past experience holds us back, and gives us confidence to try new things.

Jesus is there as a light in this season of reflection and beyond it, including as we reflect together on our future as a faith community. Through grace, he brings insight, touching not just our eyes but our hearts. May his love illuminate all that we do as we seek to live into God's call for us.

Amen.