

Fresh Eyes
1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

March 2, 2008
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Being born again is the same as saying that the world and all of creation has been redeemed – the old is still here, but there is a new quality about it. We are made new but our bodies are still corruptible and we still find sin in our lives. The world is changed and being changed, but we still find air pollution, thorns and bacteria, pesky mosquitoes, diseases and viruses. What makes the difference is the new, fresh eyes that God gives to us to see the world, other people, and ourselves in a new and better way – through God’s own eyes and heart.

I just returned from a week in Guyana, worshipping, praying, and studying with sisters and brothers from 13 different denominations in the Caribbean and North American region. We were housed in a hotel that was a 4-star hotel in Guyana, but was for us like a 2-star hotel. The water in the bathtub and bathroom faucet was brown, that one day, I couldn’t stand it I had to get 7

bottles of bottled water and use it to bathe. Thankfully the water cleared up and I was able to shower as normal.

Guyana, like other Caribbean countries, is not as industrialized as the United States. Many roads are not paved. There are open ditches for the sewer line. Cattle and livestock roam around the streets.

We visited a squatter town. This was a farming community where people just set up their tin roof shanties, which looked like shacks, about 4 times as large as the cat shack that Merkie set up in the parking lot here. Such a shack houses an average family of six. Most of the children are illiterate. They run barefeet in the mud, the same mud that cows, horses and donkeys walk. We came to a small building bearing the words, "Sophia Presbyterian Church." A simple concrete and steel structure. There are three doorways, two on the side and one entrance. None of the doorways have doors. There are about 10 rows of wooden pews, with no holders for hymns or Bibles; there are no hymns or Bibles. They are facing

forward, looking at a raised platform that has a pulpit with a large wooden cross on it, and a bench for the pastor and the liturgist.

The pastor who was called here, Pastor Prasaud, came to this congregation about 4 years ago, and serves without any stipend.

His congregation is full of life even though their denomination, the Presbyterian Church of Guyana, does not support them financially because their denomination is cash-strapped as it is.

But there is passion and determination. They don't even celebrate the Lord's Supper because this destitute community cannot afford a communion set. They have nothing. What they do have is God's love and faith. A few of the congregation members are present to greet our group. A young lady who lives next door to the church building is introduced as the children's teacher. Her classes are large. She is excited to be in the church because it is in that community that people learn about God and Jesus Christ in the midst of their labor.

A pastor friend of mine from Queens, New York, was with us and he suggested that we lay hands on the pastor and the members

present, and take a spontaneous offering for them. We do so, and then lay hands, pray, and sing, “Sanctuary” and “We’re Standing on Holy Ground.”

Such is the story of many in Guyana and in the Caribbean. They don’t have much, but they have been given much by God. This was a reminder for me about the work of God in places and people who have little or nothing, but which God displays His powerful love and loving power.

When I flew to Guyana, I stopped over Trinidad and stayed for the night, but were met by friends whom I met last October when I was in Trinidad. These were five young adults who belong to the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad and Tobago. Their denomination has little leadership in youth and young adult ministry. They look to two young people to provide leadership for the whole island as they are receiving training in youth ministry and theological studies. Yet, these young people are alive for God and are determined to serve God even when they find the

bureaucracy of their Church gets in the way. No money, little support, a few leaders.

I find that story over and over again. When I traveled to the Philippines seven years ago, that is the story I found. A people with so little, who literally fight for their survival, they are alive for God and are determined to serve God and to work for His justice even if their lives depended on it, which it does.

So I remember Sophia Presbyterian Church in Sophia, Guyana. No Bibles. No hymnals. No Lord's Supper set. No praise band. Not even doors!

It takes the eyes of faith to see that God is carrying out His work of redemption and witness through His people there in Sophia. With so little, God displays His power.

That's what happened with David when He was called by God through the prophet Samuel. David was the lowly shepherd boy, the eighth son of Jesse. Just when Jesse was willing to disregard his shepherd son in preference for the others, God had other plans for David. He would establish a ruling monarchy, make

him one of the greatest kings of Israel, and with him, establish a covenant that assured the eternal reign of God on earth. From a lowly, little shepherd boy, God's awesome power is displayed.

So it is with the blind man healed at the Siloam Pool. He is disregarded by society, ignored by the Pharisees, cast off to languish for he was seen as sinful – the popular belief that spread was that like the three friends of Job in the Old Testament – the belief that if you were sick or had some major trials and tribulations – that you must have done something wrong as a child or that you sinned in a terrible way. Because this man was permanently blind, people, like the Pharisees, thought that this man not only sinned, but he SINNED in a major way. He was bad news and people just stayed away to keep it safe. Why be associated with someone like that?

God had different ideas. The unnamed blind man is healed by Jesus with mud and some of Jesus's saliva and then washes at the Siloam Pool. Even though the man has a witness to share, the people are in shock. His own parents confirm his blindness since

birth, but the Pharisees will have nothing of that. They think that this blind man is a trickster, conspiring with Jesus to pretend he was blind and now he could see.

Both the blind man and Jesus have their final conversation outside the synagogue. Both are not welcomed in the synagogue. Both are seen as not worthy of being in the presence of God with what is perceived as their law-breaking and their dishonor of God. The Pharisees are with Moses, they declare; as for Jesus, they don't know where He comes from or what gives Him the authority to act.

We need fresh eyes, like this man. Fresh eyes to see ourselves and God differently. We need fresh eyes to see our guilt before God, the sins we have committed against God, so that all things will be clear. We need God desperately.

We need fresh eyes to see our need for God and the plight of millions around the world that we have ignored. What can we do as a Church of Jesus Christ to be a part of God's work of redemption in the world – in this community and beyond? We

have all been given Jesus Christ love. Do we see what we are to do with such immense blessing? We need fresh eyes to see what we have been blinded by the over-emphasis on ourselves and our suburban living. Perhaps we need a strong dose of trial and tribulation to wake us up. What would it be like if we were like Guyana or the Philippines, where our physical and economic survival were daily struggles? We would be brought to our knees as a community. We would come together as a community and find our life together. That's what Rob Cruver told recently in a sermon at Zarephath Community Chapel on the radio station the other week, of a conversation he had with a Chinese pastor, who said that the American church needs to be persecuted to feel what it means to struggle and have faith.

We may need a strong dose of such persecution and trouble to be awakened and see what we are missing out on because of the focus so much on our needs, our wants.

We need fresh eyes to see that in our circumstances, what is God doing in our midst that is redeeming and transforming. You

will recall that we've been asking you all to pray for our 36-year old friend, Ethon Chon, a father of three little children, who had stomach cancer two years ago, who had his stomach removed and his esophageal tract connected directly to his intestine. Last year, it was discovered that his cancer had metastasized in every bone of his body. He undergoes intense chemotherapy three weeks at a time, leaving his body completely emaciated and wasted.

I had the occasion to visit with him a few weeks ago. It was a good time to listen to him, to pray, and to hear of his fears and his hopes. He was frustrated that he had always wanted to study for the ministry, go to seminary, and serve full-time in the Church in order to build up the Church. He could not understand why God was putting so many road blocks in front of him and his family when what he wanted was to serve and build up the Church. I told him that in so many ways he is building up the Church. By his sharing his fears and writing his thoughts on the Internet blog sites, and allowing others to help him and his family, and allowing so many to pray for him, that he is stimulating the Church to pray,

evoking creative ways for the Church to help, whether it be dropping him off at the hospital for appointments, taking his sons for play dates, or cooking food for their family. By receiving, he was giving to the Church. Fresh eyes. Fresh eyes to see what God is doing.

All of us here can have spiritual myopia – where we become too short-sighted with present demands, momentary anxieties and stresses that feel like permanent hurdles. For some, such stresses and anxieties are permanent. Health conditions that are not getting better but worse each week. Areas of sin in our life that don't seem to go away no matter how much confessing and repenting we do. Loneliness that meets us when we get home, and which appear to not change day in and day out.

Yet, in the midst of all that we face – big or small—there are those pockets of grace, those niches of joy, where God rushes in with fresh, new perspective to see in our condition a shining ray of hope that we never saw before. It is in those areas that we find, perhaps, a new found word of forgiveness, a renewed sense of

knowing that we are sinful while having been redeemed completely. What is God showing you in the areas of your life that you find most challenging these days?

Sometimes, when our eyes are opened, it may not necessarily be hope and joy that we find, but a deep compassion for the sad state of affairs of the world, our family, our friends, and ourselves. We weep with those who weep. We mourn with those who mourn. Just as we rejoice with those who rejoice. Such can only be done when we are given new, fresh eyes to see what God sees.

The crowds could not see what God saw. All they saw was a young Jewish rebel who taught lies, a mere son of a carpenter, who now hung helplessly and powerless without any more following.

To God, this was His Son, who was given for the life of the world. From a little lowly hill that one fateful day, the power of God was displayed.

Fresh eyes, a new perspective, a brand new outlook – lift up your eyes and see what God sees.