

“Emerald Sunglasses and Jesus-type Healing”  
 Proper 8B (July 1, 2018)  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on someone’s shoulder, and let it matter. Amen.<<

At The British Library in London there’s a sixteenth century picture of Mark, the gospel writer, sitting at a table, wearing royal red and blue with a golden halo around his head, reading a book. What’s interesting about the picture is that Mark is wearing reading glasses - glasses which don’t seem to fit very well, since he’s adjusting them with his hand. I came across the picture in a 2016 blog post by Sarah Bond, Professor of Classics at the University of Iowa.<sup>1</sup> In that post, she traces the history of reading glasses and sunglasses, beginning with a reference to the first century Roman emperor Nero who was said to view the gladiatorial contests through emerald spectacles to shield his eyes from the relentless Italian sun. Peasants, like a fisherman depicted in a second century mosaic from Tunisia, couldn’t afford such luxuries as emerald sunglasses, and opted instead for straw hats to protect themselves from the sun’s glare. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, tinted quartz sunglasses were used by the Chinese. The western world didn’t get sunglasses until the eighteenth century; and in the nineteenth century, green lenses were all the rage. An 1807 painting from Colonial Williamsburg depicts one of our revolutionary forebears wearing John Lennon-esque circular sunglasses with green lenses.

Reading glasses are much more ancient than sunglasses, writes Sarah Bond in her blog. Since at least 2500 BCE, ancients would fill glass bowls with water and hold them over texts to magnify tiny letters. Engravers in ancient Pompeii used such lenses to magnify the objects they were engraving; medieval monks translating texts also used lenses to ease the strain on their eyes. But it was an Islamic scientist from the eleventh century named Ibn al-Haytham who discovered optical theory; and the first spectacles to correct vision were used two centuries later in the 1200s; and a few centuries after that, Mark the gospel writer appears in art struggling to get his reading glasses to fit right.

Glasses, lenses, spectacles, sunglasses to dim glare - implements through which we see the world. This is not just an interesting history detailed in a blog post by a classics scholar from the University of Iowa; and it’s not just an interesting history to ponder as we enter a heat wave in Ithaca, and many of us may find ourselves wearing sunglasses more this week; and it’s not just an interesting history to ponder as most of us are fated to wear reading glasses at some point in our lives; it’s an interesting history because glasses, lenses, spectacles are also metaphorical. Many of us can’t understand how some of our fellow Americans can see the same things we see going on in our country and world so differently. Our country - the country we share, whose independence we celebrate this week as a nation - is a divided one, with fissures and cracks along many lines. Fellow Americans who wave the same flag seem to see what’s going on through completely different lenses. It’s like we’re not seeing the same world.

Seeing the world through different lenses is as old as America itself. In his book *American Gospel*, Jon Meacham writes that our Founding Fathers first bickered *not* over whether to break with the British crown - though, of course, they did argue about that; they first bickered

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sarahemilybond.com/2016/05/22/i-wear-my-sunglasses-at-the-fight-the-emperor-nero-and-the-history-of-sunglasses/>

over faith. In the “inaugural session of the Continental Congress on Tuesday, September 6, 1774, ... in Philadelphia ...,” writes Meacham, “Thomas Cushing, a lawyer from Boston, moved that the delegates begin [the meeting] with a prayer. [But] both John Jay of New York and John Rutledge ... [of] South Carolina, objected.” The Continental Congress was comprised of Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and many others; and they couldn’t agree on *how* to pray. John Adams commented on the furor of that first meeting in a letter to his wife Abigail where he said “we were so divided in religious sentiments [that] we could not join in the same act of worship.”<sup>2</sup> Bickering over prayer almost ended the meeting. Eventually they reached a compromise, and brought in a local Episcopalian priest to read a Psalm. Once the prayer issue was cleared up, they proceeded to found our nation.

Yes, we Americans, since our earliest days, have been bickering - looking out onto our world through many different lenses, and then arguing with each other over what we see. An insight hammered home over the past few weeks as recent Supreme Court decisions and family separation at the border and Justice Anthony Kennedy’s retirement are viewed so differently in our country through different lenses that have been carved and shaped by our different life experiences. Some have celebrated recent policies, and view the changing Supreme Court as an answer to prayer; others are terrified that we’re heading toward Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*. I read one op-ed that said the red-blue political divide in our country is like a series of new Mason-Dixon lines, splitting households and counties, and separating cities from rural country sides. In his documentary on the Vietnam War, Ken Burns depicts the United States as a nation at war with itself in the 1960s - a time in our history, according to the narrator of the film, when “the United States appeared to be more divided than at any time since the Civil War ... , pitting classes and generations against each other. ...” A time when battle-hardened Marines back from Vietnam were ordered onto American streets to quell protests. A time, said one person interviewed, when “I thought the country was coming apart at the seams. We were devolving into madness. And I couldn’t tell whether it was the protesters or the police, or was everyone insane?” American soldiers on leave in Australia during Vietnam remember wondering “whose side they would be on” when seeing on TV someone who “looked like [their] dad” hitting “someone who looked like [them]” with a billy club on Chicago’s streets. “The world [in the 1960s] seemed to be coming apart,” said the narrator.

Sociologist Karl Mannheim once observed that “We belong to a group not only because we are born into it, not merely because we profess to belong to it, nor finally because we give it our loyalty and allegiance, but [we belong to a group, he says,] primarily because we *see* the world and certain things in the world the way it does ... .” We see the world through different lenses - to paraphrase Mannheim - and we identify with the groups who see the same things we see.

The Bible is filled with different lenses, different angles, different perspectives on timeless issues that have always been part and parcel of the human condition. On the Bible’s pages we find writers groping for some theological clarity to help frame and correct vision. In today’s reading from Lamentations, the writer turns to poetic verse to address an ancient Israelite society at war with itself in the wake of its destruction at the hands of the Babylonian army. Lamentations is a conflicted poem, filled with conflicting perspectives, as the writer anguishes over how to explain and make sense of *the* political issue of the day - the social crisis of failed policies by Israel’s leaders that opened the door for a foreign power to take

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2007), 64-65.

control. In some places in this ancient text, the writer tries on one set of lenses - determinist lenses, “take it on the chin” lenses, the lenses that see Israel’s suffering as part of God’s plan, seeing God through this lens as the perpetrator of wanton cruelty against the people - a God who, in the writer’s words, can “in anger, humiliate the people of Israel.” God, writes the lamenter, can “cut Israel down” and become like a “flaming fire” that consumes the people, squashing and crushing them as if they were grapes in a “winepress.” It’s a theological lens that many biblical writers try on: Job, Isaiah, even Jesus wonders about it in his tortured prayer in Gethsemane. Suffering is God’s will, according to this perspective - this lens - so, grit your teeth and “take it on the chin.”

But there are signs in this ancient text of Lamentations that the poet is not satisfied with this explanation, that perhaps a different theological lens would better correct how he sees the world. Through his tears, through his laments - in one place the writer says “My eyes are spent with weeping” - through another lens, the writer sees a God who, he writes, “does not willingly afflict anyone”; a God whose steadfast love and everlasting mercy - God’s merciful presence - never ceases even in the midst of tragedy. The lens of God as healing presence instead of as tyrannical afflicter. The lens Jesus wears in today’s gospel reading from Mark.

Today’s reading from Mark sandwiches two separate healing stories. In the first, a leader of the local synagogue falls on his face and begs Jesus to come to his house and lay healing hands on his dying daughter. The Greek grammar in this story is filled with emotion: this father is desperate, begging on his daughter’s behalf over and over. Mark’s Jesus doesn’t hesitate; he immediately goes with the man, writes Mark. And as he heads for the man’s house to heal the little girl, and as a crowd presses in on him, a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for years, and who’d spent all her money on doctor’s bills to no avail, snakes her way through the crowd, and touches the hem of Jesus’ cloak, thinking to herself, “if I but touch his clothes, I will be healed.” Mark skates over the social implications of this touching. Her condition would have rendered her unclean, according to biblical law; and anyone she touched would’ve also been considered unclean - unfit to enter the temple. Jesus could have rebuked her for touching him. He could have judged and condemned her. Instead, filled with compassion, he simply says, “your faith has made you well, go in peace.” He then makes his way to the man’s house, takes his daughter by the hand, and raises her up.

What’s so powerful about these two, sandwiched healing stories, is that in neither story does Jesus blame the afflicted, or say to the afflicted that they deserve their affliction or that their affliction is part of God’s plan - that they should “take it on the chin.” He doesn’t judge the bleeding woman; he doesn’t dismiss the desperate man. Jesus embodies *not* the lens of God-as-tyrannical-afflicter, but rather, as Lamentations says, the lens of God-as-healing-presence. Compassion just pours out of him.

...In his book *The Orthodox Heretic*, Peter Rollins tells a story that illustrates this kind of compassion - this lens through which we can see our world.<sup>3</sup> “There was once an old man named Benoni,” writes Rollins. He “had known great misfortune through life, having lost his wife and children to poverty, disease, and war. The many lines on his face betrayed his pain, and his heart was filled with sorrow and regret. Indeed he barely had the strength to carry on. But there was one who had drawn alongside him in his sorrow. His comforter was the village blacksmith, a strong but caring man who exhibited a gentle, humble, and charitable way of life. People knew very little about this blacksmith, as he was a quiet man who had moved

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic, and Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015), 36ff.

into the town only a few years before. Yet he was well liked by the community, and would often be found sitting on the porch of his workshop, enjoying the midday sun and passing the time by engaging strangers in conversation. His face was strong and full of character, betraying both a depth of spirit and a breadth of experience. But it was also a kindly face that was set alight by his compassionate smile. When Benoni lost his first child, the blacksmith called round to his home, put his hand on Benoni's shoulder and with great affection said, 'I am so sorry that you have suffered this grave misfortune. If you will allow me, I would like to stand with you at this time of hardship.' Ever since this first encounter the blacksmith had called round to Benoni's house most evenings, sometimes to sit and chat, sometimes to listen, and sometimes simply to leave food and other provisions. As each new calamity befell Benoni, the blacksmith would be there to speak and cry with. One day when Benoni was particularly depressed he went to visit a pastor who lived in the heart of the city, so as to talk through what had taken place over the traumatic years and try to make sense of it. The pastor listened to what Benoni had to say and then, after little thought, replied, 'Well, my son, in order for great fortune to take place one must first suffer great misfortune. The suffering you have faced is the price that has had to be extracted for strength of character . . . .' So Benoni returned home alone, lit a fire in an attempt to take away the evening's chill, and contemplated the words of the minister. *Perhaps he is right, thought Benoni, maybe I should take some comfort from these words. But it is cold, I am alone, and words can offer no shoulder to rest on.* Just then the blacksmith knocked on the door and Benoni, as always, welcomed him in. As they sat together they drank whiskey and talked long into the night. That evening Benoni shared the words of the pastor with his friend, adding, 'Perhaps now that I have been given these words to comfort me, you no longer need to visit as you have done this last year.' The blacksmith simply looked at the floor for a few moments, and then replied, 'My dear friend, if what the elder has said is true, then I am needed all the more, for if you had to suffer such great misfortune in order to find strength of character and wealth of spirit, then this is in itself a great misfortune.'" Peter Rollins concludes with these words, "When we are facing difficult situations is it not true that the pastoral act is not one that offers some explanation [of] suffering . . . , but rather . . . the act of one who offers presence to the other . . . ? [I]t is not an explanation that brings healing and comfort, but rather the fact that someone is interacting with us, the fact that someone loves us and stands with us."

...*Being* the church is as complicated today as it has been during any of the most difficult times in our nation's history. There are so many lenses through which our siblings in faith see the world; and some folks seems like they live on a different planet. But there are hurting people in our community and country, and on our nation's borders. The progressive church offers activism - a chance to make a difference. But it also offers the lens of God-as-healing-presence. And that's something we all need. Amen.