I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. **12**Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **13**You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. **14**I will be found by you.”

Woof. Those are some long Scripture readings! In case you’re wondering how we choose these, we don’t just randomly pick them by opening a Bible and pointing. We get them from something called the Lectionary, which used to be just a book but is now online, which is a collection of Scriptural readings that complement the liturgical season we’re in. It’s almost like a Holy Road Map that gives us stopping points in the form of Bible verses, on our journey through the year. So, if it’s Christmastime, the Lectionary will walk us through the story of Christ’s birth in such a way that on Christmas Eve, we arrive at the manger, and not, say, when the Wise Men are still bumbling around the desert. Then as Easter comes, the Lectionary guides us in Lenten themes, up to Palm Sunday when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, keeping the Scripture readings more or less linear and leading up to the theme of whatever time of year it is. The reason it’s not the same verse every Christmas or Easter is that the Lectionary goes through three-year cycles, so that we don’t get bored. (We’re never bored in church, right?)

So these readings today, they’re not arbitrary. They’re meant to show us something about Lent, and about *this day* during Lent, a week before Christ was welcomed in Jerusalem on a donkey. We don’t *have* to use the Lectionary—we’re allowed to pick whatever Scripture we like for a given week—but I’m a big believer in allowing the cycle of the year to influence us spiritually. (This may go back to my affection for neopaganism, which honors the Wheel of the Year as a mainstay of its practice.)

Now, by this point in Lent, we’ve been at it for weeks. We’re deep in the “desert” of leaving something old, even if it’s just leaving our pasts behind (I say “just” like it’s easy, huh?) into the new thing God is doing through Jesus when He’s resurrected on Easter. So what are we supposed to be learning here, through these verses? Well, rather than go through them line-by-line, if it’s OK with you I’d like to review them in plain English, tell the stories in ways that are easier to digest—because these are stories, meant to teach us something about God, and if we can’t understand them then we’re losing a method of getting closer to God. (Or if they’re too long for us to pay attention to and we don’t translate them, same problem.)

The Hebrew Bible reading for today tells the story of the anointing of King David, who was the wisest, most powerful king in Israelite history. It starts with God saying to Samuel, a seer, “How long will you grieve over Saul? He’s not going to be king, and that’s that.” Now, the story of Saul, because we need to know it in order to understand the verse this week, is one of the most tragic in the Bible, to me. The story is that the Israelites want a flesh-and-blood king to rule over them—it’s too strange for them to just have YHWH as their ruler, they want an actual person to rule them. They beg and beg, and finally God says, “OK, OK!” and sends Samuel out with instructions about whom to look for.

Samuel finds Saul, who is said to be “head and shoulders above everyone else”—he’s tall, and apparently even back then tallness mattered in a ruler, at least for a man. He’s also handsome, and Samuel explains to Saul that he will be king over the Israelites, and in at least one account anoints him with oil, which was like a coronation.

But over the course of his kingship, Saul disobeys YHWH. A lot. During this time God gives very specific commands to Saul through Samuel, and Saul does not always listen. Finally Saul is supposed to wipe out an entire people and their livestock, and instead, he yields to what his people want and allows them to take the best sheep and the best cattle, along with the king of the conquered people. The people want to sacrifice the livestock to God, but this is the final straw for YHWH: He says that Saul is no longer the chosen king of Israel, and that’s that. Saul has blown it, and he spends the rest of his life suffering with emotional issues, most of which are due to his inability to accept and let go of his mistakes. It’s really, really sad.

But back to our story from today. God tells Samuel to quit grieving that Saul’s ship has sailed, because there’s a new thing coming. When Samuel arrives in Bethlehem he meets Jesse’s sons, one by one. First there’s Eliab, who is also tall, and Samuel thinks, “Surely this is the guy!” But no, says God, what matters is the heart and not the body, and God knows Eliab’s heart and he is not to be king over Israel. The same thing happens with Abinadab, and Shammah, and Jesse parades his seven sons in front of Samuel but none of them are the right one. And Samuel goes, “Is there no one else?” And Jesse says, “Yeah, I have one other son, but there’s no *way* it’s him.” See, Jesse’s sons were all soldiers, big guys who *looked* like kings. It says so much about how much faith Jesse had in his youngest son that he didn’t even bother to bring him in from the fields when Samuel came calling. Jesse might not have known why Samuel was there, but it seems strange that Jesse was so proud of his other seven boys, but not David.

And of course, David, the youngest, the shepherd boy, turns out to be it. Not only is he the one God is looking for, but he’s literally the king of Israel by which all other kings are judged. He’s It with a capital I.

This story starts out with a kind of tough sentiment from God: She says to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul?” Well, let’s consider what Samuel invested in Saul. He found him, anointed him, prophesied for him, told him what God wanted. He groomed Saul and helped him and presumably cared about him. He invested all this time and energy into him, and then Saul blew it. No wonder Samuel’s having trouble letting go.

Have you ever put a ton of energy into something, and it just didn’t work out? Have you ever noticed that the more energy you’ve put into something, the harder it is to walk away when it’s over, even if you know for sure it’s over?

It’s not for nothing that we’re stubborn, and we don’t give up even when something is obviously done with, a relationship, a career path, even a car or a home improvement project. We all hang onto things, especially when we had high hopes for them. But here’s what God has to say about that, according to this story: You need to let go, because I’ve got something better in store for you. In fact, not only is it better, it’s something you would never have expected. It’s going to come from left field—or left pasture, maybe—but God says, “Something old in your life is done with, and I’ve got a new thing waiting for you. Why don’t you come with me, and I’ll show you what it is?”

Now, think about your journey through Lent so far. What is God calling you to finally, really, truly let go of? You may have quit something for Lent, but is there something that stopping that habit has exposed in you that God is pointing at and going, “This, this is the thing you don’t need anymore. Let it go and come with me.” If so, you’re lucky: you’ve come upon a growth point in your life of faith, even if it seems small. This is the point of Lent. Well done. I know it’s not fun, but it is brave.

Our other story was also kind of long. Let’s see if we can shorten and translate it so we can understand what it is we’re supposed to learn from it.

The New Testament is from John, one of the most frequently-quoted books in the Bible. It’s a bit of a gross story, about a blind man whom Jesus made see by making a paste out of mud and saliva, rubbing it on the man’s eyes, and asking the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The blind man goes out among the people, and they say, “That can’t be the blind beggar we’ve known his whole life—how can he see?” The man says, “No, it’s me. This man made mud with his spit and told me to wash in the pool, and I did, and now I see.”

The people bring the man to the Pharisees, who were a Jewish sect known for their strict adherence to Jewish law, and he tells the story again. The Pharisees argue over whether someone who has performed a miracle on the Sabbath can be from God. They send for the man’s parents, who confirm that yes, this is indeed their son who’s been blind since birth. Then the religious authorities ask to hear the story again. Basically, they don’t believe him, and then when they do they essentially claim that the man, and Jesus, are heretics, not from God.

The man goes and finds Jesus and worships him, and the Pharisees overhear Jesus’ statement that, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." The Pharisees ask, “"Surely we are not blind, are we?" And Jesus replies, “Because you think you know what you’re talking about, you are indeed blind.”

OK. This is one of those verses of the Bible that’s what we used to call “problematic” in seminary, mostly because it paints Jewish people as ignorant, unbelieving, and worthy of condemnation. It makes Judaism into Christianity’s foil, when in fact we know that as Christians we owe a great debt to the Jewish faith. I remember when I first heard someone say, “Jesus was a Jew,” and I thought, “Oooo, you can’t say that!” I was shocked.

But he was. Jesus was a Jew. Not only was he a Jew, but many of his teachings only make sense if you understand the framework from which he spoke, that of a devout and highly learned Jewish person. It’s absurd to try to divorce Christianity from Judaism. But the book of John, though it’s rich with narratives and quotable lines like “I am the light of the world,” and that bumper-sticker favorite John 3:16, contains a lot of anti-semitism. It claims “the Jews” killed Jesus, and its comparatively brief account of Jesus’ trial and death is still being used, even today, to justify bigotry against Jewish people. (Remember *The Passion of the Christ*? And then how it turned out that, surprise, Mel Gibson really was a raging anti-Semite?)

But this is the gift we have as modern Christians: we can, and we have a responsibility to, consider the context of the sacred books we read. We have no excuse not to. John, for example, was written almost a century after Jesus’ death, by a Christian community which was undergoing a painful separation from the Jewish society to which its members had belonged. The folks who wrote the Gospel of John were in pain, and they were trying to differentiate themselves from where they came from.

Remember when you were a teenager, and you, for some reason unknown even to you, sometimes hated your parents? I’m not trying to say that the book of John was written by teenagers or that it shouldn’t be taken seriously, but think about times in your life when you have had to make a painful break. The experts call it “self-differentiation.” What was necessary to make that initial leap away from someone or something you’d outgrown? Anger? Frustration? Sadness? Most of all, in that initial stage, were you perhaps more condemnatory, even a little dramatic, in your account of the “badness” of the person or place you’d left?

So when we read the book of John we need to read it with our brains and our hearts on, remembering that at no point does Jesus ever condone the kind of hatred and bigotry perpetrated against Jews and other marginalized folks throughout history, especially in his name. But what about the lesson about the blind man? What are we meant to learn there?

Well, you may have your own interpretation—in fact, I hope you do, because I think God speaks to our hearts in ways so specific to us that sometimes even those closest to us don’t understand, and if you’re not thinking through your faith yourself, you’re missing something vital. But my interpretation is that when something is amazing—when something is truly a miracle—it can be even harder to accept than a tragedy.

Think about it. The man is born blind, and someone comes along and heals him, and the people respond with, “That cannot possibly be him.” And the religious authorities *call his parents to confirm that it’s him*, and then they deny the holiness of what they’re witnessing. They come up with reasons to condemn it, to be afraid of it, to reject it, they kick him out and simply refuse to do the one thing he’s probably doing: rejoicing in a miracle.

I don’t know about you, but I grew up around Midwestern Irish Catholics and sometimes, we would rather create a tragedy than believe in a miracle. It can be so hard for me to trust a good thing happening to me, and the better it is and the most miraculous it seems, the more I’m like, “Naaahhh. The other shoe is going to drop. I’ll have to pay for this later. Any minute now, it’s going to turn out badly.” It’s like I have trouble with happiness. It’s not because I’ve had a terrible life or anything, but I’m just sort of… mistrustful of blessings, let’s say.

So let’s think about this in the context of Lent, and in the context of the story about letting go of something so you can get what God’s got in store. Is there something happening in your life that might actually be good for you, but you’ve never seen anything like it so you think it can’t be true? Have you let go of an old thing, but the new thing is too bright to look at right now? Is it something that maybe you feel like you “don’t deserve?” Is there a miracle that’s being birthed in your life, but you’re kind of going, “Oh, I don’t know… that could never happen to *me*!” The thing is, if we don’t make room in our thinking for the new, amazing thing God’s doing in us, we won’t be able to let it blossom. We need to make the space for it, so it can make its home in our lives.

After all, something amazing is coming. That’s the whole point of Lent, and Easter: Jesus was executed—brutally—and that was not the end of the story. In fact, it was the beginning of an entire religious movement. Is it possible that God is preparing to open your eyes? Is it possible that a miracle is coming for you?

If so, be ready for people not to believe in the new you. Be ready to be surprised, and surprising. Be ready for some folks not to *like* the new part of you, because change is scary and we like it when others are constant.

But know, too, that God continues to walk with you through the desert, as you seek a new blessing in a strange place. Know that Jesus stands ready to show you something new, whether His presence or action in your life obeys the established rules or not. Know that the good things coming your way do not depend on your goodness, but on God’s.

Know that your story, like those today, is still unfolding, and that if you pay attention, you can see God at work in your life too.