

March 22, Lent 4A (John 9:1-41)

Keep going, says John.

by [Liz Goodman](#) in the [March 11, 2020](#) issue

I saw Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* last summer, a production that the *New York Times* claimed burned "with new fire." Under the direction of Robert O'Hara, it certainly did. Just remembering some of the most powerful moments raises bumps on my skin and brings tears to my eyes. Although, as it is a favorite play of mine, I'd have been satisfied with the same old burning.

One thing I love about it is its look to the future, its focus on the coming generations. The family at the center of the play is even named the Youngers, three generations all living together in a cramped, worn apartment that they keep dignified against increasing odds. As a family of Youngers, they are literally concerned with the younger ones to come, each generation of racial progress one step further along a path that offers little cause for optimism but that is imperative to travel, fueled by outrageous hope (equal parts outrage and hope). Those of the oldest generation aren't living for themselves; they're living for the grandson who sleeps on the couch, or even for the generations yet unborn.

These Youngers were a heartbreaking thrill to spend time among once again, especially because we as a larger society seem crippled by future shock. We are, by and large, terribly loosed from any sense of responsibility for the generations to come. We are enticed by nostalgia—a stoking of desire for a past that never was, or at least not something many people among us would have any interest in returning to.

This lurch to a bygone time pulls from surprising places. Not long ago I was involved in a spirituality discussion group made up mostly of people who settled in the rural region where I live in the 1970s and '80s as part of a "back to the land" movement. One participant gestured to me, knowing I'm a pastor, and said, "Isn't that what we're supposed to do? Get back to the garden?" Using the language of Joni Mitchell, he'd adopted the common assumption that the project of the faithful—given our

sinful, “broken,” “fallen” state—is to return to where once we were perfect.

“Not me,” I said, maybe too quickly. “I’m not trying to get back anywhere.” My tone was sharp, because I feel strongly about this: the Gospel of John has long had me looking ahead rather than behind, and this story of the man born blind has long had me concerned not with return but with continuing on.

John begins in the beginning, recalling Genesis 1. But it lets off there, inviting a comparison. Whereas the earlier creation story counts down to completion, John doesn’t get much past the beginning, certainly doesn’t imagine completion, and therefore never imagines God at rest. Instead, God as Word-become-flesh and now living among us speaks often of continuing in the Father’s work. It’s as if this is why he has come. (The cross can be understood as completion, then, for from it, Jesus declares, “It is finished.”) This explains why Jesus, according to John, has little regard for the sabbath, something not yet warranted.

Jesus uses mud—*adamah*, the stuff of God’s earliest creative acts—to bring the man born blind into a fullness of being. This now-seeing man demonstrates God’s will for Christ in the world. Christ’s work isn’t to restore the creation to some prior state but to complete the creation, to labor toward its perfected end.

Nor is our work to lurch backward to some mythic state of perfection—be it the 1950s or the 1850s or the 1750s or some otherwise precorrupted, precomplicated, prefallen time. Ours is to continue on in the faith that God is yet with us, at work in all things for good.

Martin Luther King Jr. is remembered for having supposed the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice. I wonder if he’d regret the prominence this line has in his legacy. At face value it hardly reflects King’s radical, prophetic tendencies. The success of the bus boycotts was not inevitable. The passage of the Civil Rights Act was not predestined. Such things have always required people of conviction willing to sacrifice comfort and safety and even life itself.

But it is also true that God is yet at work amidst the creation and will bring all that is and was and ever shall be to God’s good and glorious end. This is an assurance of our faith, one I imagine King knew well. His confidence about the arc of the moral universe was Christian conviction grounded, again, in outrageous hope. If only those who proclaimed this King quote as an article of progressive faith, making memes of it to circulate on social media, understood the Christian conviction that makes it

true, and remembered King as the soaring preacher and dangerous prophet he was.

But maybe that's where we come in, we preachers or people of faith. Lent is the perfect season to assure our congregations, "Keep going. Keep going." And John offers the perfect narrative to invite us once again to do the works of Jesus and even greater works than these. This story of the now-seeing man is ripe with cause to hope that our most joyful days are not behind us but are ahead, hard-won though they shall surely be—and that the grace we rely on doesn't call us to return to some distant past. It beckons to us from a glorious already-completed end, drawing us to it.

This man was born blind not as punishment for sin but so that God's works might be revealed in him—the working of God that persists among us and insists upon us. So let's keep going.