

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourth Sunday of Lent: March 19, 2023

“The Story of Janie Bess”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. Do you, like me, picture the scene explained in today’s Gospel as something from a movie? We have the whole desert-like background scene; we have the righteous religious questioning the blind man about sin; we have Jesus healing in the name of God being doubted? It’s a movie in our mind, but is it in our reality? Is that a story that is fun to study but, of course, doesn’t happen today? Well, I will share this Gospel with you from the perspective of today: right here and now. And I mean right here and now. Let us open our eyes.

In light of today’s Gospel, I would like to share a wonderful, true and inspiring story of a family I met several years ago in Fairfield. I dedicate today’s sermon to Mrs. Janie Bess, who helped me understand the love of God through adversity, and show me that the Gospel, with all its references, is a true and living document. It continues to teach us about the human journey for a relationship with God. If you want to hear more of today’s story, Janie Bess has written her memoir called “Visions: A Faith Inspired Journey of The Human Spirit.”

I met Mrs. Bess because her husband David was at that time a hospice patient. David Bess, a career veteran, not only served his country through some of the roughest times for African-Americans to be in the military, but his daughter had followed in his footsteps and was also serving overseas when I met him. So, pretty impressive on a social status, an African-American family in the suburbs with

respectable grown children, after serving their country, what could possibly be an issue? Where could there possibly be sin? Or did they sin? Or were they sinned against?

As is typical, there were family meetings with members of the hospice staff and the various generations that cared for our patient. My team: the nurse, social worker and myself were going to meet the Bess family to discuss the goals of care and address any other concerns the family might have at that time.

As our team entered the spacious ranch house, we were ushered into the kitchen where a gregarious young man was standing and fist bumping, touching and tapping people on the face and shoulders, clucking and clicking in a very animated way. Just a bit intimidating. Janie explained, "That is my son David. He is deaf and blind. Don't worry, he will introduce himself to you shortly."

A moment later David Jr. had touched certain areas on our faces, tapped across our shoulders, and I could feel that I was being acknowledged, welcomed, and known in a much deeper way than words could say. Janie explained that he could now recognize everyone. Through a system of tapping, his way of communication completed the information, as he was an integral part of the family and their decisions.

The team and family had a wonderful meeting and I learned that Janie had come from a very hard background and a long line of preachers. Her story spanned from her uprooted childhood in the 1940's and took her from Mississippi to Oakland, California. Through domestic violence, poverty, and racial prejudices, Janie let God lead the way for her and her children to where they are now.

But needless to say, through almost every step of Janie's journey to a comfortable home with successful grown children, many people posed the question, "who has sinned, you or your parents". Others did not believe the worth of someone who was in their eyes "less than" due to both the disability and the color of their skin. Unfortunately, this is a point of view that is often considered the respected opinion. David Jr. journeyed into blindness as an infant, then came to the realization that after a crippling illness in childhood, he would become deaf.

Mrs. Bess' story involves an unexpected pregnancy, the struggle of living as a military spouse, raising children in a very racist and judgmental time, and eventually retiring into where they were when I met them. Janie described doctor visits during her pregnancy where (not unlike the society in our Gospel) there were judgments and remarks from doctors, society's professionals: "if only those colored girls could keep their legs closed." There are many descriptions of the question as to who had sinned, dressed up in modern day situations and language.

Time and time again, Janie faced doctors and even lawyers who told her that her blind and deaf son should just be locked away. His life really wasn't going to amount to much. He was just another disabled black boy. She told of going to healing meetings, Gospel prayer groups, and of the support from her friends and family. She described the prejudices put upon her while trying to get medical care for herself and her family. And yet she never doubted that God was in that messed up journey with her.

But she did admit, she herself wondered if she had sinned? Wondered if she had any worth? Wondered if the color of her skin was a sin.

In the end, David Jr. is now a prestigious professor who teaches alternate communications and has reinvented some of the way things are done for those with hearing and sight challenges. Janie never stopped praying, and God never stopped using this family through the good and the bad, to glorify a God who did not see the disabilities as a judgment of sin, but as an opportunity for those involved in the story to be blessed in ways that truly only a soul can understand.

As you explore Janie's story you realize (much like the situation in our Gospel) that the greater sin was coming from the society and those who thought they were more righteous than others by position, power and financial means. We see those speaking for a God, that as Jesus shows them, they know little about.

In an interview, "He's grown up to be a fabulous young man," says Mrs. Bess. "Nobody told David he had any limitations. We only told him he was deaf-blind. So, for that reason he swims, he fishes, he rides horses. He travels alone on planes and buses. He does everything. If you saw him walking on the streets in Oakland today you wouldn't know he was blind."

Today, David and his wife Shirley (who is also deaf and blind) work for **Strategies To Empower People**, beating the odds and living life to its fullest!

The Gospel for today: let us not blame or look for sin. Let us work together to find solutions, through the love of God. **Amen.**