

## March 26 2017 – Hidden Figures

**John 9:1-3, 6-17, 24-41**

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the fourth Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." Each week we are exploring a theological or spiritual theme that arises from an Oscar-nominated film. Today we will be talking about *Hidden Figures*, a movie that was nominated for three Academy awards, including Best Picture. This particular movie was here in Swift Current a few weeks ago so I'm hoping some of you were able to go and see it.

Hidden Figures is the story of a team of African-American women mathematicians who served a vital role in NASA during the early years of the United States space program. What makes this movie compelling is the fact the women portrayed were and are real people. Hidden Figures focusses on the lives of three of these mathematicians: Katherine Johnson also a physicist, Mary Jackson, who became an engineer and Dorothy Vaughan a computer specialist. The movie is based on a book of the same name that was written by Margot Lee Shetterly. In Shetterly's words, "the women at the center of the story were not so much hidden, as unseen." <https://www.nasa.gov/modernfigures/faq>

One of the reasons they were unseen was the fact that they lived and worked in a time when the Jim Crow laws were still in effect. These laws were enacted in the Southern states of the U.S. after the civil war and they legalized segregation

between African-Americans and whites. This applied to the armed forces, to schools, to movie theatres, restaurants, transportation systems and even to work places. For the African-American women represented in this movie it meant that they worked in a totally separate area from the white women who were doing the same job. They had separate washrooms and separate lunch rooms. They worked for NASA, a predominantly white, male organization and, in many ways, they were out of sight, and out of mind.

Dorothy Vaughan was the acting supervisor for this all-black group of mathematicians who were segregated to the "West Area Computing" unit. In fact, she did the work of a supervisor for several years with no additional pay or any recognition because there was no process for promoting an African-American woman in NASA.

When a group of engineers in another building were looking for a "human computer" to help them with their calculations for the first manned orbit of earth, Dorothy recommended Katherine Johnson, the best mathematician or "computer" in the room. Katherine's understanding of analytical geometry and her ability to calculate complicated trajectories was unmatched so the engineers that she worked with quickly came to appreciate her abilities. But Katherine even more quickly discovered that there were no other coloured women in her new building and therefore no coloured washrooms. It took her 45 minutes each time she had to leave her desk and run outside back to the "West Area Computing" unit to use the facilities.

Even though they appreciated what these women could offer, the people that Katherine and Dorothy worked with were often blind to who they were as human beings.

Today's scripture reading is also about blindness. It begins with Jesus healing the eyes of a man blind from birth. Once the man can see, his neighbours start asking, "How were your eyes opened?" So he tells them about Jesus putting mud in his eyes, and how when he washed it off, he was healed. His neighbours take him to the local Pharisees, the Jewish leaders in their town, and it is there that the interrogation begins. The Pharisees focus on the fact that Jesus performed this healing on the Sabbath and therefore may have become a sinner by breaking one of their laws.

But it is the man whose eyes have been opened that sees the truth and says, "It is unheard of that anyone ever gave sight to a person blind from birth. If this one were not from God, he could never have done such a thing!" After the Pharisees throw the man out of the synagogue, it is Jesus that goes looking for the one that he healed. When they meet, the healed man professes his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen one of God and Jesus says, "I came into this world to execute justice – to make the sightless see and the seeing blind." Jesus, of course, is not saying that he is going to make people physically blind. What he is saying is that his light, his message is of love and justice and peace. If you recognize that the source of his light, his power, is a God of love, then you will

have your eyes opened. Those who claim to see, but do not recognize the God of love, the source of Jesus' light, will experience only darkness in their lives.

The good news in this movie is that there many people at NASA whose eyes were opened and who see the light of love and justice. Dorothy Vaughan did eventually become a supervisor and also became one of the first people to learn how to program NASA's new IBM computer. When Katherine, in frustration and anger, finally told her boss about her 45 minute washroom breaks, he knocked the coloured washroom sign off the wall and declared, "Here at NASA, we all pee the same color." And John Glenn, before heading out on the first manned orbit of earth personally requested that Katherine Johnson check all the calculations that had been made by NASA's new computer. He trusted her more than the latest technology.

It would wonderful if we could say that racism, prejudice and discrimination ended with the repeal of the Jim Crow laws. But, in reality, it is still alive and well in the United States, here in Canada and around the world. It is my prayer that those of us who are white, will experience the healing power of God's love and have our eyes opened to the tremendous privilege that we experience in our western society. It is my prayer that those of us who are Canadian citizens will experience the healing power of God's love and have our eyes opened to the tremendous privilege that we experience just because of where we live. It is my prayer that we may all experience the healing power of God's love and have our

eyes opened so that we may recognize the human being that exists within the different skin, foreign language or the strange clothing of the people we meet.