

“Called to the light”

John 9:1-41 (March 19, 2023)

We’re just over halfway through the season of Lent. And for these next two Sundays we have scripture readings from the Gospel of John: Two *long*, rambling tales of life-changing encounters with Jesus. Will your life be changed?

I invite you to come along as we follow the meandering string of events in these stories. You may need some patience along the way. This morning’s reading runs up to 41 verses! But the day is young and, if you’re not going anywhere for the next little bit, why not enter in?



Today we follow a man who came out of darkness. A man who had his eyes opened to see the light. A man who became a *witness* to the light. And that is exactly what we are invited to be: Witnesses to the light of the world, the light of God that has come to us in Jesus.



One day Jesus and his disciples came across a man born with blindness. And that sparked a theological question. “Rabbi, who sinned, was it this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”



We always want to know “why,” don’t we, as we try to make sense of our world. Why this, why that? Why is there blindness in this man? I imagine the blind man himself may have asked this question. “Why did this have to happen to me?”

And maybe *you’ve* asked it, when something bad has come your way. There must be a reason for it – if only I could know. Why Lord? Why this? Why me? Why now?

And the disciples are quick to connect it all with sin. That seems to be the lens through which they see things. Surely he must have done something to deserve it. This assumes a God who looks for all kinds of ways to punish us. A God who’s always seeking to give us our just deserts.

But notice that Jesus’ paradigm is different. He does not assume a God who’s out to punish. But rather a God who gives us far *better* than what we deserve! “It’s *not* that this man sinned,” said Jesus. Please don’t make that connection. The world is more complex than you think. Things happen sometimes, and we don’t always know the reason why.

But look, instead, at what God is about to do. Watch and see how the wondrous work of God will soon be revealed. Do you have eyes for this? I’m talking to you, beloved disciples! Can you see the work of God? The healing, life-giving, world-restoring work of God? Can you see God’s kingdom come, *here* in our very midst? Can you give glory to the One who makes us whole?



This story begs the question of who is *blind* and who can *see*. Jesus has come into the world as God’s true light. That light pushes back the darkness and opens our eyes to reveal the presence of God’s love and grace.

Can you see the light of God? Where in the world is it? What is it accomplishing? Or is the darkness around us (and maybe also within us) so overwhelming, that that tiny glimmer of light can’t break through?



This man was blind. I guess we all are, in some way. Even those of us who are fully sighted – physically speaking. We don't see everything. We have limits, we have blind spots. There are all kinds of things that we miss. Our human sight is flawed.



Jesus is about to work a new creation. He tells the disciples that he's the light of the world, and that he's come to do the works of God who sent him. Then he spits on the ground and makes some mud with his saliva and puts it on the man's eyes. You may think – that's strange!



The Garden of Eden,
by Thomas Cole (1801-1848)

When I hear it, I think back to the story of creation, to the God who picked up a handful of earth and breathed into it, and made our humanity. And I say to myself, "Is that what Jesus is doing?" Is that how our blindness is being cured? By an act of new creation?

"Now, go wash in the pool of Siloam," says Jesus. Which means "*sent*." It's what Jesus does for all of us disciples. He *re*-makes our humanity. Then he washes us clean in the waters of our baptism. Then he sends us to be his witnesses, to share the good news of God's reign.

All through this season of Lent we've been thinking of our broken humanity, so flawed, so *not* what God intends us to be.

But God isn't finished with us. God is working a new world. Like a potter re-shaping the clay. Moulding it in new ways until it becomes just right.

This image of the potter has been on the front of our bulletin cover all through this season of Lent. Jesus mixes up some clay and puts it on the blind man's eyes. And see what happens? His blindness is healed, his sight is restored.



But we're getting a head of ourselves now. Because sight doesn't happen immediately. Oh, he gains his *physical* sight right away. But this story's about more than that. Jesus does so much better than your friendly, neighbourhood optometrist, who fits us with a new pair of glasses. Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus gives us *spiritual* sight, a new-found ability to see with the eyes of faith.

We can have 20/20 vision and yet be spiritually blind. And conversely, we can be blind as a proverbial bat, and yet have tremendous insight into the reign of God. There's a whole new world available to us, if we can see with the inner eyes of faith. Faith gives us sight. It enables us to see a new world, God's world. And it enables us to see the old world, the one we've been living in all these years, in brand new ways.



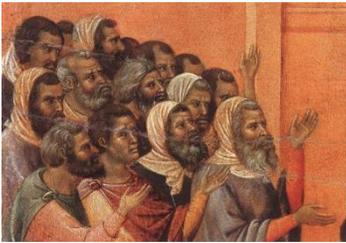
What comes next in this healing story are a slew of questions. People have trouble believing it's the same man at all! "Is *this* the fellow who used to sit and beg?" they ask.



I'm thinking these neighbours paid very little attention to the man born blind. They recognized him as a beggar. But that's all they knew of him. No name. No conversation. No real community.

They'd probably walked by him a hundred times, but he was almost invisible. Just a part of his surroundings. "It can't be him," they said, "just somebody *like* him." What's a person have to do to be recognized?

Then we have the Pharisees. They complained about him being healed on the sabbath day. There are rules about this kind of thing. "How did this happen," they want to know.



"He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed. And now I see." To the person who was blind, it was all pretty straight forward.

But these religious leaders doubled down on their scepticism. "This man cannot be from God. How can a sinner perform such signs?"

And there's the *irony*. Those Pharisees are a hard nut to crack! These people, steeped in religious faith, are so reluctant to admit that Jesus bears the light and is the source of healing.

And I want to stop there and let that point sink in. Because religious people is who *we* are. And it may be important for us to figure out how and when even the *church* can be blind to the work of God in the world. How I can be blind.

And that's something that makes me shudder. Could *I* be the one standing in the way of God? Can *I* be as much a barrier to God's healing as a promoter of God's healing?

You see there's a prophetic edge, by which I mean a truth-telling edge, to this story that would challenge even those who claim to know Jesus. Because we too can have hardness of heart. And we too can be living in the darkness of our resistance, rather than in the light of God's bright new world.



But how, you ask? How is it that our faith might actually become a barrier?

I think when faith stops being genuinely curious and claims to know everything already, when we're quick to have answers and pronounce judgements on others, that becomes a problem.

Notice not *all* the Pharisees were like that. Scripture says the group was divided. There were some who declared "'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?'" How indeed!

This is one of those contested spaces we are all too familiar with. So many divisions in the community of faith. Can we slow the rush to judgement?

The Pharisees ask the man's parents what *they* think. But they're very non-committal, probably out of fear. The Pharisees had power to put them out of the synagogue and exclude them from their beloved

community of faith. All for having the wrong point of view. “Ask our son,” they say, “he’s old enough to answer for himself.”



Remember, I said this man is a witness to the power of God in Jesus? But there are some who will not receive that witness. First they call *Jesus* a sinner. Then they call the man *himself* a sinner: ““You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.” Oh my! The witness to God’s kingdom is driven out!

We are called to be witnesses. But sometimes, we should know, our testimony will not be received. If our Lord himself has been rejected, condemned and nailed to a cross, those who believe in his name may expect similar treatment.

And I hate to tell you that. Because I know that being rejected can be a very *painful* thing. But our journey through Lent is an important reminder that there is a *cost* to following Jesus. The Christian life is not always be sunshine and roses.

“We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” The *old* speaker from God they know well. The *new* speaker from God, not so much.



This man born blind is an example of what it means to be a faithful witness to the power of God in Jesus. As he moves forward from that first healing encounter, he grows ever more confident in his faith. He begins to see more clearly.

I’m talking about *spiritual* sight. About coming to know more and more of who this Jesus is. Of growing in faith and love and devotion to our Lord. So that when Jesus returns to the man at the end of this morning’s story, his eyes are finally opened to the truth of God standing right before him.

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” asks Jesus. The man wonders where to find this mysterious figure. “The one speaking with you is he,” Jesus answers. “Lord, I believe!” Says the man born blind. “And he worships him.” At the end of all things, he worshipped him.



Christ and the Pauper, by Andrey Mironov, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Christ_and_the_pauper.jpg



From darkness to light! What an amazing, round-about, challenging journey he’s been on. And it’s *our* journey too.

For him, the light becomes brighter and brighter. Yet for hard-hearted folks who refuse to see the work of God, the darkness swallows them entirely.

I think of it like a dimmer switch. Do you have one of these in your house? For some the light becomes brighter. For those who keep clinging to their own certainties and securities, the light becomes dimmer.



And the question is, which are we? Are we beggars who are healed by the astonishing light of Christ? Or are we experts who claim to see everything, yet bury ourselves in a shroud of darkness?



Well, it's taken a while to get here, hasn't it. I told you it was a long, meandering story! But I'm here to tell you that it's worth sticking with this journey of discipleship that we're on. This unfolding, surprising and often challenging journey, as we learn what it means to be a witness to the realm of God.

Through Lent we've been thinking about this God who is seeking to reshape our lives. The God who takes the clay of our humanity and remakes us. If anyone be in Christ, said the apostle Paul, "there is a new creation!"

From our old dusty selves emerges something fresh and wet and beautiful. Something's changing here. Many things are changing! And for that we say, "Thanks be to God!"

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- When and in what way has God's light been revealed to you?
- How has this enabled you to see in new ways?
- How is your life being changed as a result?
- Where does darkness continue to linger?
- What is your prayer?