

“Keep Bright In Us The Vision”
Psalm 23 Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41
Year A Fourth Sunday of Lent March 30, 2014
Pastor Andy Kennaly Sandpoint ID

This wonderful story from the Gospel of John is filled with movement and drama, lots of action. Much like last week’s story about the Samaritan woman by the well, in today’s story about the man born blind, healed by Jesus, we see him and others gradually comprehending that Jesus is God’s Son. But why would John, writing after the Temple had been destroyed, decades after the public ministry of Jesus; why would John include this story in his gospel?

The first people to ever read John were facing situations that may have made them feel like this blind man. They were first generation converts to the Christian faith, many of them not actually seeing Jesus, but suffering the consequences of believing in Jesus, so in a sense, they are like that blind man. Their first encounters with Jesus, without actually seeing him, lifts their blindness through faith. As they were baptized, they too were thrown out of the Jewish temple and had to learn to live with that strange mix of freedom and joy with fear and rejection from others mixed in. So for those first readers this story really hits home.

There are many aspects to this story that stand out, but a couple of them stand out for us today. One involves the ancient belief that God punishes people for sin. The Pharisees thought that if you were righteous, if you kept the law, then God would bless you. The Christian "Prosperity Doctrine" promotes this kind of idea even today; that if you have a lot money, it's because God is blessing your life as someone considered 'righteous.' If this is true, then of course the opposite has to be true, that if you are cursed by God, like this man in John being blind, it is because you are unrighteous, somehow flawed, basically you're sinful and don't have enough faith. And if you are a sinner, then you are not as good as those Pharisees in the temple. They believed that God blessed the righteous and the unrighteous were cursed, and it was possible to determine the difference based on external observations. And no one liked to be around sinners. It was considered un-godly. That’s why after he was healed, the blind man was recognized and described as the one who used to sit and beg, and the more the Pharisees learn about his healing, the more they want to keep him in his place as a sinner rejected by God, ultimately they expel him from the Temple. Today we are being called away from this doctrine, shown new ways to see this text.

The second aspect that really stands out, which is related to the first, is the dilemma the healing caused for the entire community. The lightning rod issue seems to be that Jesus heals on the Sabbath, the most high and holy day of the week; that day we’re commanded to keep holy. The Pharisees' law also said you were to rest on that day because God rested after six days of creating all there is. Keeping the Sabbath holy is a command by God.

Jesus did heal on the Sabbath, but deeper than the issue of whether to work or not, Jesus’ action points to him being the Messiah and the Pharisees already reject that thought as it says in verse 22 “the Jews [in this case, the Pharisees, the religious leaders,] had already

agreed that anyone who acknowledged or confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, would be put out of the synagogue." So the issue is Sabbath, but also Messiah. And the Pharisees have a dilemma on their hands.

If punishment came from God, then only God could undo it, but why would God break God's own rules? Maybe they weren't God's rules, but that would mean that the Pharisees were blasphemers, but NO they couldn't accept that! Could it be? Only the blind man was able to see it. That's why Jesus says, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." And its because the Pharisees were exposed as the blasphemers, their guilt remained, even though they claimed to be the ones who could see. When the healed man got in their face and pointed out how astonishing it is that they of all people couldn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah, their ego and pride gets defensive and they kick him out, they create schism, they divide.

That's how the scene ends. The man is ejected from the temple, driven out, separated, divided from his people. But God doesn't leave him there. "Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus Christ seeks him out, that language having to do with an active pursuit, not just a casual searching, but a relentless quest to find. Jesus Christ *heard*, and Jesus *goes* to him and said, "Do you believe IN the Son of Man?" He answers with a question, "Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him." And Jesus tells the man who is healed from a blindness he's had since birth that "You have now seen him." The blind man, even though he's been healed, he hadn't allowed himself to see Jesus for who Jesus is. Like Mary Magdalene at the tomb on that first Easter morning, seeing the risen Christ and not recognizing him. It took the man healed from blindness a little while to have the courage to allow himself to recognize Jesus as God's Son, that Jesus is the power of God, that Jesus brings good news that we aren't condemned by God, but that our sin is forgiven and we can claim God's blessings. Jesus doesn't come to condemn, he comes to save; that's one of John's main points throughout the gospel. After seeing the Pharisees for what they were and being thrown out of the only place he'd ever known that you could connect with God, the healed blind man whose name we do not know hears those words of comfort as Jesus says, "in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

Someone I know shared with me this past week about their experience following a recent cataract surgery. She commented that she was amazed at the vibrancy of colors. She had no idea that colors were as vivid as they are, and it pointed out how small, incremental change over time had blinded her to the fact that she was missing out on experiencing color; she had forgotten what colors were like, and it was only after her eyes got so bad that she couldn't see other things as well, like trying to read labels and such, that a drastic change had to take place through surgery. Colors, bright and vivid, came shining through.

You know, this person I mention didn't do anything to have issues with cataracts. They did not lead an immoral life, didn't kill anybody, isn't rude; the fact their eyes developed a cataract condition isn't their fault. In fact, her eyes got that way just because that happens. Like the disciples ask in this story about the man born blind, "Jesus, who sinned, him or his parents?" So often, even in today's world, we look for reasons things are

the way they are, cause and effect, a place or person or situation to place blame in when things go wrong. But Jesus says, "Neither sinned."

The NRSV, which is the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible like our pew Bible and pulpit Bible is sort of helpful here, but also not. In my NRSV Study Bible there is a footnote that talks about how this response of Jesus shows that God's presence in him will be glorified, revealed, made visible through healing this man of blindness. But it's also not helpful because it doesn't translate verse 3, Jesus' response, very well. It adds English words that are not there in the original Greek text. The NRSV puts these words in Jesus' mouth, "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." And it puts the period in a strange place.

One biblical scholar from Luther Seminary in St. Paul says a better translation and interpretation of what Jesus says, is "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. (period). (new sentence) So that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day, night is coming when no one can work." Or as The Message translation puts it when the disciples ask "Who sinned?" Jesus says, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's light."

I heard some commentary somewhere this week that talked about evil, diabolos, like diabolical, and how that word means to divide, devil, evil, creating a disconnect. In that sense, as the religious leaders in the established order drive out this man, they are living into the meaning of this word, actually blinded to the evil they are committing. They are so wrapped up in their own understanding of the law, their own interpretation of religious doctrine that they are unable to see the evil present in the schism they are creating. Jesus doesn't seem too interested in the arguing, the debates, the accusations and name calling. But he is interested in creating, in reconnecting, in sharing the light, in drawing out the vivid colors of life, in showing this man that he is not nor has ever been separated from the love of God, and that Messiah is sent to share this good news. Jesus, like the Psalm describes, is the Good Shepherd.

Although the 23rd Psalm was written long before John's gospel, centuries before Jesus heals this man, it's kind of fun to look the Psalm as if it were written by this man as a response to his coming to see Jesus as God's Messiah, to trust and believe that through Jesus, God is with us to save. And where it says, "goodness and mercy shall follow me" we don't read "follow" as a passive, after the fact kind of action. Rather it's more like pursuing, like God's goodness and mercy, God incarnate hunting us down, not letting us go, and this love is what helps us live without fear; "I will fear no evil for you are with me." "They drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Not "Believe" as an intellectual ascent term, but "To believe in Jesus is a relational term." (Podcast, Luther Seminary, workingpreacher.org, sermon brainwave # 345) Trusting God's living presence.

There's really a lot of aspects to these passages, and as hear Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminding us that once we were in darkness, but now in The Lord we are light, we also hear the invitation to "Live as children of light - for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." And it reminds us as we come alongside the Psalmist and the man Jesus heals from blindness of our questions from last week, "How do you arrive at truth, at recognizing Jesus? What does an encounter or conversation with Jesus look like for you?" (Podcast conversation, Working Preacher online resource through Luther Seminary, Minnesota).

For the blind man his conversation was gradual, but complete. His conversation was one in which Jesus comes to him, reaches out to touch him, to speak to him, and send him. The conversation invited them both to trust God all the more and have faith that God is with us no matter what those "valleys of the shadow of death" may look like.

As we continue to worship God, especially during Lent, may we find ways to invite recognition, and enlightenment. May God remove our blinders so we may see, through Christ, God's light shining, even as we add another couple of questions to our list, "What does it mean to say Jesus is the light of world? What does it mean for you?"

Paul would say Jesus is the light of the world to show us God and help us live as light as well, to live confessional lives that share what Jesus Christ has done for us. But what does that response look like for you? Or for us as a congregation? Good questions to sit with during Lent. Shall we pray?

Holy God, we ask you to remove our blinders, to help us live in the radiancy and vibrancy of your light, as connected in Christ with you and one another and all your creation seen and unseen. We give you thanks that Jesus faces the injustice of our world and through your love transforms people. We give you thanks that Christ is the Good Shepherd that seeks the lost, even us, pursuing us with an ever present reality of grace, mercy, and goodness. Keep bright in us the vision of living as children of light, sent to believe in relational terms that Jesus is Lord, and saves the world. Help us to love, learn, and live the joy of faith. In Christ we pray, Amen.