

Pastor Joe Polzin
 John 9:1-41
 “A Bright Light in the Darkness”
 Year A – Fourth Sunday in Lent
 March 22, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

John’s Gospel is unique in that he includes these longer narratives, where he takes up to a whole chapter at times and describes to us the way in which Jesus interacted with specific people during the course of his ministry. And we hear a few of these accounts in our Sunday worship during this season of Lent, one right after another. Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus and Nicodemus having their discussion that took place at night. Last Sunday, we heard Jesus’ long conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. And next Sunday, we’ll hear Jesus with Mary and Martha at the funeral of their brother, Lazarus.

Today, however, we heard the account of Jesus when he heals the man born blind. But what makes this narrative even more unique than the others is that Jesus hardly appears in John chapter 9. Now, don’t get me wrong, Jesus *is* the focal point of this story, as we’ll talk about today. But John focuses on the journey that the man who was healed takes, as he comes to grips with precisely who Jesus is, and what that means for him. And as we hear this man’s journey, we’ll be reminded who Jesus is for us, as well.

But first, we want to take note the things that happened. Notice it starts with Jesus, and it’s going to end with Jesus. But for the lengthy middle, Jesus fades into the background. At the beginning, though, it all starts with Jesus “seeing” the man born blind (9:1). Which reminds us right off the bat that, as with anything we truly need from God, it’s always God who first sees, God who first performs, God who first acts on our behalf. He moves, and we respond to that which he does for us. And so, it’s significant in this story about *sight* that Jesus first *sees* this man.

And the disciples’ question that they ask Jesus only reflects what would have been a common assumption of the day, which was, if someone was afflicted with something, like this man’s blindness, it must mean that either he or someone in his family did something to offend God. But Jesus says, no, that’s not how God works. He says, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (9:3). We’re going to talk more about what that means later.

But then, Jesus heals him. He spits on the ground, makes mud, and anoints the man’s eyes and then sends him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, which appropriately, means “Sent.” And this is where Jesus disappears for a while. We start to see how people begin reacting to this man and the miracle that occurred, while Jesus wasn’t around. And the first up are his neighbors.

Now, the important thing I want us to trace here is the progression of man’s responses as he refers to Jesus. With his neighbors, who were at first doubting it was even the same guy, but then eventually asked him how this happened, he responded, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight” (John 9:11). Pretty straightforward, no statement or confession yet on who the man thinks Jesus is.

Next, the man was brought to the Pharisees, who were less than pleased to hear that Jesus had been doing this kind of healing on a Sabbath. How dare he make mud, which was considered

work, on the day when you weren't supposed to work. Forget the fact that this was incredible, as the man says later, "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind!" (9:32) But even among the Pharisees, they were divided. They couldn't deny that something unusual was going on, because if Jesus were a sinner, like they were sure of, then how in the world could he heal like this?

So, they ask the man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" And the man said, "He is a prophet" (9:17). Notice, that now it's more than just a guy who healed him. The man started to realize that this more than some person named Jesus. A prophet was one who was sent by God himself to speak God's Word, to deliver God's message, and, as was often the case, he backed up what he was saying with signs and miracles from God. This is a progression from the man's perspective, as he now recognizes Jesus to be a prophet. And Jesus certainly was a prophet, *the* Prophet, in fact, but the man's still not fully to the point of seeing Jesus as Christ and Lord.

Next, we see the Pharisees drag the man's parents into the fray, but they were unwilling to say anything because they were afraid. They feared the religious leaders who said that if anyone confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, they would be cast out from the synagogue. So, in this ad hoc trial that's going on here, the Pharisees have no choice but to go back to the man. And they really put it to him: "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner" (9:25). In other words, "Agree with us, or pay the price."

And the man puts it right back to them. He doesn't necessarily deny their accusation that he seems to be becoming a disciple of Jesus, and he sarcastically asks if they'd like to be one, as well (9:27). And when they emphatically state they follow Moses, but have no idea where this Jesus comes from, the man responds by saying how interesting it is that they don't know where the man who can give sight to the blind comes from (9:30). That's a condemnation of the Pharisees, because the Scriptures are clear, just look at our Old Testament reading for today: it's only God who gives such sight. And this is what the man is saying. "If [Jesus] were not from God, he could do nothing" (9:33), and the Pharisees refused to admit it. But simply for saying such a thing, they cast him out.

Now, this is where Jesus finally steps back in to the picture, and finds the man for a second time. He asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus replied, "You have *seen* him..." note *seen him*, "and it is he who is speaking to you." And the culmination of this man's journey now arrives, as he sees Jesus for the first time with his own eyes, but more than, sees Jesus for who he truly is. The man says, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped Jesus (9:35-38).

Now, as I've said a few times, this man has been on a journey. A journey of gaining sight, a journey where light replaces the darkness. He had only known darkness his entire life. He had been born blind, and so he had never known what it was to see anything. But physical sight is only a small part of the story here. In fact, the gaining of the man's physical sight with his first encounter with Jesus only started him on the path of truly gaining his sight, which he finally does when he has his second encounter with Jesus.

The true miracle of this passage is *not* that the man born blind was given his sight. That was a miracle, a miracle that shows that Jesus is from God, and *is* God himself. Rather, the true miracle of the passage is that Jesus, by the end, grants this man the faith to be able to see and confess him as Lord, and to worship him. It's the miracle of the gaining of his spiritual vision, the miracle of faith.

Throughout this narrative, and emphasized at the very end, we see this man's sight juxtaposed with the utter blindness of the Pharisees and the other religious leaders. They flat out refused the light that was before them. They wanted nothing to do with Jesus. And so, they sat in darkness. They refused to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament and of Moses, or that Moses had pointed them forward to the Messiah who was to come. The Pharisees may not have been born physically blind, but they were certainly spiritually blind. And without faith, they can't see Jesus for who he truly is, the one who is able to forgive sins, the one who has come to atone for their sins. Therefore, as Jesus says, their guilt remains (9:41).

Now, as I said earlier, the assumption was that this man was born blind because of his sin or the sin of his parents. And on one hand, the effects of the Fall in this sin-darkened world did indeed cause his blindness. That's true for all the negative effects of mankind's Fall into sin. However, on the other hand, as Jesus said, he wasn't born blind as a Godly indictment of his own sin. He was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed through him.

Think about how Jesus is glorified throughout this man's journey. Think about the restoration of not only this man's physical well-being, but also this man's spiritual well-being, in what happened. Think about how God worked through this man to give witness to others about who Jesus is and what he had come to do. As Jesus said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (9:4). Jesus' mission was to bring light in a sinful world that knew only darkness. And in this man's case, this light comes both physically and spiritually.

This world is dark. We are in darkness because of our sin. God doesn't punish us for our individual sins, like some sense of Christian karma or something like that. But the whole world is under the righteous curse because of mankind's Fall. Death came about as our wages for sin, which was not in God's original design for us or for his creation. The effects of sin, like suffering and disease and death, spread out from that moment in the Garden of Eden, and like a veil of great darkness, it now covers the whole earth.

And we certainly know this to be true today, don't we? If there's one thing this coronavirus epidemic has shown us, it's that we're not as immune from these things as we often like to think we are. We're not immortal. We're not perfectly in control of our comfortable lives. We're not impermeable to the things that truly threaten our bodies and our lives in this world. This crisis may, by the end, bring everyone to their knees and cause many to wonder, "Where can we possibly turn if not to ourselves?"

And God knows the darkness we're in. He knows the sin we struggle with. He knows the isolation many of us feel right now. He knows all our fears and concerns. God knows that without him, we are completely vulnerable to both physical and spiritual death. And that's why God sent into this world his only Son, Jesus Christ.

And what's so beautiful about this account from John chapter 9 is that it's a microcosm for Jesus' whole mission. Jesus came to replace our spiritual blindness in sin with perfect sight. He came to replace our darkness with his light. Jesus came to dispel the darkness of our enemies of sin and death and the devil, and to replace it with his eternal life. He did this for the man born blind, and he does this for each one of us.

Jesus fearlessly walked into the darkest depths this world has ever known. This account foreshadows the same kind of trial Jesus would be given, except his was carried out to an even more tragic end. The darkness of sin and evil brought about his false trial, his sufferings, his crucifixion, and his death. God's own Son was treated shamefully by sinful humans. And they not only cast him out, but they also nailed him down. It was physically and spiritually the world's darkest moment. The sky was pitch-black, and our Christ and Lord hung on the cross.

But Jesus didn't go to the cross in vain. There, crucified with him, was all our sin. And so, when three days later Jesus walked out of the tomb and was raised to new life, he had taken all the darkness this world with which the world consumed him, all the darkness of our sin, all the darkness that we were steeped in, and he overcame all of it. And he replaced it with his own eternal light, the bright light of Easter morning, the light of everlasting life. Jesus came to take our sin-darkened world and restore it with God's love and goodness.

And in your Baptism, he delivered this specifically and personally to you. In your Baptism, God *saw* you. God *came* to you. He took a sinner like you, and washed you with his water and his Word. And by doing so, he replaced the darkness that once kept you blind and captive, and enabled you to see his glorious light and life. You were given the same miracle the man born blind was given. You were given the gift of spiritual sight. The gift of faith, so that you may now see Jesus as your Christ and Lord, so that you may worship him, so that his works may now be displayed in you. Which is a miracle indeed.

As Christians, we are able to live through dark times. And that doesn't mean that our flesh is no longer susceptible to the dangers of this world. In this body and life, we trust in God to provide for our daily needs, and he promises to do so. But even if, in God's wisdom, we feel the effects of this sin-darkened world for a time, we need not fear. We need not linger in the darkness. Because we have already been given Christ's glorious light.

And what's more, we live looking forward to something even greater than this moment. As I've heard David Maier, President of the LCMS Michigan District, say multiple times, Christians are always living knowing that the best is yet to come. And it's true. We, as Christians, are looking forward to the day when Jesus promises to come to us one more time, on the day of our own resurrection. The day when Jesus' Easter light will shine on us, and we will be raised immortal for all eternity. The day when the darkness of this world will be finally and forever be replaced with the light of the new heavens and the new earth. The day when there will be no more sin, no more suffering, no more disease, and no more death. That's our certain hope. And you will see it with your own eyes.

Until that day, may the light of Christ, and the hope he's given you, shine through you. This world needs his light, now more than ever. And since you know the light you have been given by Christ, by his death and resurrection, and since you know the future hope of your own resurrection, may you live in such a way that the world can't help but notice that you are not subject to dark things of this world, but that God has shone brightly on you his light, and love, and peace, which will last forever. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**