

“HE OPENED MY EYES”

JOHN 9:1-41

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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We are just over halfway through the season of Lent and our series “Encountering God: What Have We Witnessed?”

Our text today is an appropriate one for this theme in that it is a story about how people encounter the work of God.

It is a text about how to see, about who sees and who doesn’t.

Often sermons take the form of explaining the text first and then applying it at the end. Today, I simply want to walk through this text and make a few observations and comments about what it means along the way, within the narrative itself.

In his Believers Church commentary on John, Willard Swartley divides this story into seven scenes in a drama or a play. We’re going to walk through these seven scenes and see what we see (you can follow along in your bibles if you have them).

Scene One: Who Sinned? (9:1-5)

The disciples see a man born blind and they ask: who sinned to cause this man to be born blind?

It’s a question that probably strikes us as a bit strange, possibly even offensive. The disciples *assume* that the reason the man was born blind was because of someone’s specific sin.

But it wouldn’t have been strange or offensive in that context. The Hebrew Scriptures that were the foundation of the disciples’ worldview had no shortage of instances where this connection was explicit.

There are numerous instances in the Torah where it says that the sins of the parents will be visited upon their children, sometimes for multiple generations (Exodus 20:5, for example).

This connection between sin and suffering was just the basic assumption that governed all of life.

And we might pause to consider just how different this is from our context. We may not make the *explicit* link between suffering and sin that the disciples do, but we have the same hunger to make moral sense of the world.

We are creatures who hunger for an explanation. This past week we witnessed the families of victims of Malaysian flight who went down storming the Malaysian embassy in Beijing. Why? Because they thought their loved ones were still alive? Probably not. But they were demanding *some* kind of reason, some kind of explanation, *something* to make *some* kind of sense of the suffering they are experiencing. They want someone to blame, someone to hold accountable. They want moral order restored.

Jesus doesn't play the blame game. He doesn't give them an easy answer for suffering. He doesn't give them a nice tidy answer to put into their "explanation file."

Neither this man nor his parents sinned, he says. This man's blindness is not a variable in a divine equation or a nasty effect of misbehavior. You must not reduce it to that.

It is, rather, an opportunity for the work of light to be revealed in him. It is the stage for redemption.

Scene Two: Jesus Heals the Blind Man (9:6-7)

The blind man encounters God as a healer.

Jesus heals in many ways in the New Testament. Sometimes he just speaks a word and people are healed—even from a long ways away (Roman centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-17). Sometimes people are healed simply by touching his cloak (the woman suffering from hemorrhaging in Mark 5:25-34).

Here the healing is a bit more elaborate. He spits on the ground, makes some mud and spreads it on the man's eyes. He tells him to go wash in a pool.

We don't know exactly why Jesus chose to heal in this way at this time.

Was he making a connection to Israel's prophetic traditions where, in 2 Kings, the foreign commander Naaman is commanded by the Elisha to go and wash in the river Jordan to be healed of his leprosy?

Is he making an allusion to even *earlier* in the story, way back in Genesis where God himself fashions new life out of the dust (Genesis 2)?

We don't know for sure. But we do know that as in all instances of healing, Jesus is offering a sign of the kingdom of God, demonstrating that he is a prophet like no other, God's unique agent of redemption, as we will see later.

Scene Three: Interrogation—Round One (9:8-17)

This is where things begin to get interesting. This is where the question of what, exactly, this community had witnessed begins to take shape. We begin to see that the reactions to this healing are mixed.

The people in the blind man's community seem genuinely confused.

Isn't this the guy who used to sit and beg? It can't be. How did it happen? Where is this Jesus? Nobody is able to make sense of what they have witnessed, despite the formerly blind man's desperate attempts to tell them!

So, it's off to the Pharisees, the religious experts, the ones who will make sense of all this mysterious business.

I've been a pastor for nearly six years now, and one thing I've noticed with each passing year is that the New Testament makes for difficult reading as a "religious expert" 😊.

When I was growing up, I always assumed that the Pharisees were something like the villains in the story of Jesus. But they weren't. They were the ones who had devoted their lives to God, studying the Scriptures, interpreting them for others. They were the ones with Masters degrees in theology.

The Pharisees hear the same version of the story as those in the community. Their response should be, "Praise God!" right?

Wrong.

Instead, they say, *This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.*

We know that the Pharisees were very, *very* concerned about laws about the Sabbath.

Apparently, the kneading that would have been involved in making the mud for the blind man's eyes was one of the thirty-nine categories of work explicitly forbidden on the Sabbath.¹

Their response to a blind man being given the gift of sight is to grumble about how this doesn't fit within their categories of how God operates.

He doesn't keep the Sabbath, therefore he is a sinner, and therefore he couldn't have been an agent of God.

It's easy to ridicule the Pharisees, isn't it? How dense could they possibly be?! How narrow and heartlessly judgmental!

But are there ways in which we, too, have our nicely fenced views, our boxes with borders carefully drawn? Do we, too, have clear ideas about how God is allowed to operate?

Are we prepared to hear, embrace, and celebrate new life, healing, and reconciliation, even when good news comes from outside those boundaries? Are we prepared to encounter and bear witness to the goodness of God, even when it takes place far from the boundaries of institutional Christianity?

On the reserve, for example?

Over lunch last week we talked with Cheryl Bear about growing up on the reserve. She commented that people would talk about what "dark" places these were, whether spiritually or socially or whatever.

Many, many good Christian people thought that God couldn't be operating on the reserve, whether because our aboriginal neighbours weren't Christians or because of the "corrupt" Catholics that were working there, or whatever.

¹ Willard Swartley, *John: Believers Church Commentary* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013), 236.

But Cheryl (and many others) think of her reserve with great fondness. It was and is her home.

She encountered God in the rivers and forests of her childhood, in the priests and nuns that she met. She encountered Jesus far from the safe boundaries of good mostly white, upper middle-class Mennonite or Protestant or Evangelical churches.

There are many other examples that you can think of on your own.

(We might think of World Vision's flip-flopping this week on whether or not they would allow people of all sexual orientations to work for them, and the response of some Christians who pulled their child sponsorships after the initial announcement.

Whatever we think of homosexuality, do you think the Christian response ought to be "border patrol" or celebrating anyone who wants to participate with Jesus in feeding the poor?)

It might make us uncomfortable to ask questions like these about how God might be operating outside of assumed boundaries, but I can assure you that the Pharisees would have been even *more* uncomfortable about a Sabbath violater!

Wherever there is goodness and beauty and truth, wherever there is healing and restoration, God is present.

Do we honour this or do we complain, like the Pharisees, that God's generosity is spilling beyond the boundaries of our carefully maintained religious borders?

Scene Four: Enter the Parents (9:18-23)

The Pharisees are getting fed up with this blind man and his inconvenient insistence that this man, Jesus, had healed and restored him.

So they call in the *parents* for interrogation!

By this point, we're not quite sure if we should be laughing or crying at the desperation on exhibit here. The Pharisees will stop at nothing, it seems, to discredit this man, to preserve their religious and moral categories about how the world works.

One commentator that I came across this week, Deborah Kapp, summed things up very well:

The Pharisees do not want to hear or believe the man's story, *because it opposes the story they want to tell*. They want Jesus to be the sinner, not the hero of the story; they want another explanation, one that *leaves them in control of all the religious goods and services*.²

They rehearse the same versions of the same questions...

Is this your son who was born blind? How can he now see?

The parents are afraid of the Jews, it says. They are afraid of the power of the gatekeepers to police the borders of the community. They don't want to get thrown out of the synagogue, so their answers are very careful.

Yes, he is our son.

We don't know how he can now see or who did it.

Ask him yourself. He's old enough, he'll tell you.

Scene Five: Interrogation—Round Two (9:24-34)

The Pharisees are getting nowhere with the parents, so it's back to this poor man who really ought to have been allowed the opportunity to celebrate the incredible gift of receiving his sight rather than justifying and defending himself before the grouchy religious experts!

He utters these famous words:

I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.

But it's not enough. They keep at him.

The man is getting exasperated and it starts to show.

² Deborah J. Kapp, Commentary on John 9:1-41 in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 118.

I've told you all this already! Why do you keep pestering me?! Do you also want to be his disciple (a bit of sarcasm ☺)?

In all of this, the man's approach is instructive. He doesn't argue or parse religious texts. He doesn't defend or spin the facts or anything like that. He simply says, "All I know is that he opened my eyes."

Is there a lesson here for us?

How often do we slide into explanation or justification mode? How often do we present God as the solution to an intellectual problem or an existential puzzle rather than simply talking about how we have encountered God personally?

Are we prepared to be this unsophisticated in how we talk about faith?

Like the blind man, are we prepared to say, "You know, there are so many things I don't understand, and so many things I don't know. I don't *know* how all this fits within the religious rules and regulations."

But I do know this: I met him. He opened my eyes.

Scene Six: Jesus Returns (9:35-39)

Jesus disappeared from the stage a while ago, right after he told the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. When the man came back, Jesus was nowhere to be found.

While everyone else was battling it out about how God works, who and when God heals, who's a "sinner" and who isn't, and how sin works with suffering, Jesus has been in the background.

Isn't this just Jesus' way? While people are squabbling about the rules, he is over there on the side, far from the fray, bringing healing, restoration, new life, with little care or concern for what the experts say about how God works.

And now, he comes back when he hears that the formerly blind man has been judged and sentenced by the religious leaders. He seeks the man out, asks him if he believes, reveals who he is.

Isn't this *also* Jesus' way? Those with the power and the influence don't understand who he is or what he is about. Those on the margins are given special insight into who Jesus is—things the rich and the powerful can't or won't see.

The formerly blind man hears his invitation, and he believes.

Scene Seven: Who Sees? Who is a Sinner? (9:40-41)

Here is where it all comes together. Here is where Jesus interprets the story for us.

The question is, who sees and who doesn't?

The disciples and the Pharisees (and probably everyone else) was concerned about the question of sin.

- Who's a sinner and who isn't?
- Whose sin caused this?
- How could a "sinner" heal anyone?

Jesus is more concerned with who *sees God* and *how* they see.

Jesus wants us to see that our vision is off, that we don't see the way we ought to.

We don't see because we are afraid.

We see this with the Pharisees throughout this passage. Fear is behind their entire reaction to this miraculous healing:

- fear that they didn't understand God
- fear that their worldview wasn't as stable as they thought
- fear that God was, perhaps, more generous than they were
- fear that God could not be controlled or managed by their systems
- fear that they were not, in fact, the ones who understood God best; fear that a blind man by the side of the road knew and *experienced* more of God than they did, with all their learning and sophistication

Behind the desire to control, there is almost always the presence of fear.

The blind man, in contrast, is *not* afraid.

He's not afraid of those who doubt among his neighbours and community. He's not afraid of the Pharisees who have great power over him, who eventually throw him out of the synagogue.

He's not afraid to worship this man that others see as a suspicious sinner.

He sees truly.

In 9:39 — Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

The judgment in this text is not between the saved and the damned or the sheep and the goats or the in and the out.

It is between those who see and those who do not.

So where are we?

Are we the righteous religious elite, convinced that we are the ones who know and *understand* God, that we know where to look to *see* God?

Or are we blind enough to see the one who opens our eyes?

This is the question that we are faced with halfway through our journey through Lent, and throughout our lives.

May God help us to recognize our blindness and in so doing, to see.

