

The Man Born Blind

Before we get into the story of the man born blind, a note about where we are in the lectionary. In John's year Lent is treated as an extended exploration of Jesus' passion story. Next Sunday we'll hear about the raising of Lazarus. We'll walk through Jesus' last week and end with his crucifixion on Palm Sunday.

When Lent comes early, like this year, we miss a significant chunk of the first part of the book.

We miss the feeding of the multitude...the Bread of Life saying...the unbelief of Jesus' brothers ...the woman caught in adultery...and just before this a near stoning. I would encourage you to read the left-out section – John 5 through John 8.

Light is a big theme in John. Jesus tells us here that he is the light of the world. In today's story, we see how that plays out.

Darkness and blindness are metaphors for the spiritual darkness of unbelief...of separation from God. Having one's eyes opened then is an image of the dawning of belief and trust in Jesus. In this story, who gets their eyes opened and who doesn't?

On the surface of course, the light of the world physically brings sight to a man born blind. Another healing. But as with all the miraculous healings in John's gospel, it's a sign that points to a whole deeper layer of the story. The man who is physically blind is not the only one who can't see.

Let's start with the disciples and their question. Whose sin caused this man's blindness? Now, we may scoff at that...say we don't attribute sickness and disability to sin.

But are we sure about that? Parents of children born with disabilities often worry that it's something they did...and often that worry comes from our society.

However enlightened we might be, have we ever secretly wondered the same thing about a family's misfortune? Not out of cruelty, but fear. We don't like things we can't control. If we admit that nobody did anything wrong – if it's no one's fault, then it could happen to us or someone we love.

Jesus responds, this is not the result of sin. That problematic next part is probably a mistranslation. Jesus is not making the man an object to show God's power. In the Greek manuscript, the phrase He was born blind is not there. And in the ancient texts there was no punctuation.

A better way to think of Jesus' response is this: He was born blind. That's a fact. It's nobody's fault. But still God's work can be revealed in him. And we must do that work now, while we can. So Jesus does.

The disciples' eyes are really the first opened. Instead of seeing the man as an object for theological debate, they see him as a man...a man worthy of Jesus' healing attention.

The neighbors have apparently never seen this man as anything other than a blind beggar. They have reduced his humanity to his disability. They may not have been uncompassionate...but to them he has not been worthy of much note otherwise.

When Jesus heals him, their eyes are opened. They are forced to look behind the blindness of the man...because he's no longer blind. They can finally see *him*...not his blindness. What might have been different if they'd seen *him* all along?

Then there's the Pharisees...they are the ones who seem to never get their eyes opened.

In part, they are blinded by the fact that this healing happened on a Sabbath. Now the Sabbath law is no small thing. We have largely dismissed Sabbath rest in the rush of jobs and families and activities that suck up every free day we have.

But this is one of the key foundations of Jewish life together. Sabbath is about justice and freedom from endless slavery to an oppressive system. The authorities see their role as safeguarding that law.

But they too have failed to see this man. If the Sabbath law is about freedom, then what better thing to do than free someone who is captive in part by his blindness, but perhaps even more so by his community's treatment of him.

The vision of the Pharisees is simply too narrow. It's not just the healing on a Sabbath. At this point, the authorities have begun to see that Jesus is claiming something for himself far beyond what they have capacity to see.

They don't have room in their understanding of God to believe that God might be doing something completely new.

At the end of the story, the Pharisees remain blind. But that doesn't mean hope is lost. The blind man's sight wasn't restored immediately at Jesus touch. He had instructions to follow. And even from there, the deeper seeing of belief and trust came more in stages. Perhaps one day, the same could be true of at least some of the Pharisees.

That often echoes our own life of faith. Growing in our ability to see and follow Jesus tends to be a gradual thing for most of us. Or a wandering path with some switchbacks here and there.

So how do we hear this story for our own lives? It's easy for some of us who have been people of faith our whole lives to think we already see pretty clearly. We already believe Jesus is the Messiah, although we might be hard pressed to say what it means for our everyday lives. We might feel like we don't really need our eyes opened – that they already are.

You've no doubt heard the old parable about the blind men trying to identify an elephant. One man feels a leg and says it's a tree trunk. Another feels the elephant's side and says it's a wall. Another grabs the trunk and says it's a snake. The tail is a rope and the tusk a spear.

Each man is very sure he's identified this thing correctly and in some versions of the tale, they get into a big fight because they believe the others are lying. None of them can see the whole thing.

The ability to see Jesus for who he is isn't the only point of today's story. What Jesus also does is change how others see the blind man. Jesus sees him as a whole person.

The disciples at first see him as an object lesson in the theological discussion of theodicy – God's role in suffering.

The neighbors see him as a beggar...a drain on society...someone whose survival is dependent on the generosity of the community.

The Pharisees likely haven't seen him at all until his healing presented them with a challenge to their authority.

But Jesus forces everyone to really see this man.

To see him as a man God loved. A man in whom God's work would change everything not only for the man, but for the whole community.

When we hear in John's gospel, sight is about belief, it's not just belief that Jesus is the Messiah. It's not just our own personal relationship with Jesus. It's about seeing just what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

And Jesus is the Messiah who brings life...who brings healing and humanity to a man people mostly ignored or saw as less than fully human. He's a messiah who restores a community, because a community can't be whole until all its residents are living fully in that community.

So, about whom do our eyes need to be opened? Who do we not see? Who are the people we regard as not really worthy of being seen as fully human? How might we be called to bring Christ's light to someone who has been unseen?

In a few minutes we will baptize little Jepson. At the end of our baptism service, we light a candle and say "let your light so shine that others may see your good works and give glory to God."

Jesus is the light of the world and he is at work restoring our sight. And then he calls on us to do the work that he did...to restore sight and belonging in a world that wants to sow hate and exclusion...a world that desperately needs that light.