

Year A Lent 4 | See, Said the Blind Man John 9 vv1 to 41

If you have ever seen the Superman movies or the television program, perhaps you are like me and you wonder how on earth is it that nobody recognizes Clark Kent as Superman when all he does to change is to take off his glasses? The pharisees in this story seem to be having the same problem. How is it that they do not see who Jesus really is when the evidence is plainly put before them? The theme of seeing and not seeing weaves its way through all of John's Gospel, used to indicate understanding and not understanding. Light and darkness also appear in this story and are closely linked to seeing and not seeing. Light allows us to see better and Jesus is the light who brings understanding of God and God's kingdom to the world. John has a few important points he wants us to see – that he wants us to understand about God and God's kingdom because right understanding changes the way we operate in the world. In other words, we – and therefore the world – are transformed when we immerse ourselves in the truth of God set before us through Jesus Christ. There is a saying that Christians are in the business of transformation so let's have a closer look.

John gets to the teaching right away. Jesus encounters a blind man and his disciples ask, "Who sinned? This man or the man's parents?" People thought that God punished sinners by inflicting a disease or deformity on them. This blind man must have broken his relationship with God – or his parents did. That's why he's blind. Jesus very bluntly sets them straight. This man's blindness has nothing to do with whether or not he sinned or his parents sinned. God does not inflict disease or deformity on us in order to punish us for doing things contrary to the way God would have us be. We, I believe, would completely agree with Jesus on this one. We, in fact, look on the disciples as being a little silly here. As if anyone

would look at a blind person today and say to ourselves, “Wow, that person must have really made God upset.”

And yet...and yet...many people don't seem to have a problem thinking this way on a grand scale: COVID-19 was God punishing the world's bad behaviour; big earthquakes are God's doing, wiping out sinners; the AIDS pandemic was God punishing homosexuals. Jesus says, “NO,” very clearly. NO. Psalm 119:68 says of God, “You are good and you bring forth goodness/instruct me in your statutes.” This is exactly what Jesus goes on to explain to the disciples. God did not cause this man's blindness but God is able to use this brokenness – and all brokenness – to bring forth good. Jesus heals this man's blindness and shows us the power and mercy and love of God. He shows us that, in God's kingdom, all people will be made whole.

As soon as this man is healed, though, we hit a snag. People are unable to see – unable to understand – not only what has happened but also who it is who made it happen. This man's community gather around him and begin to argue whether or not this really is the blind man who has been begging among them for years. Like Clark Kent, this man has not altered his appearance. The only thing different about him is that his eyes now function properly. Perhaps he has removed a cloth that had covered his blindly staring eyes, perhaps not. But the people who saw him day after day for year after year since he was a young boy don't recognize him. They are unable to see that this is the blind man now healed. Maybe they had never truly looked at him before – simply tossing money and food at him without really taking a good look, never taking the time to talk to him, form a relationship with him.

This man's community is not the only group of people having difficulty seeing today. This divided community brings the man before the Pharisees who also have trouble seeing and become divided. Their division is caused by a different lack of understanding. They confirm with the man's parents that he had, indeed, been born blind and is now able to see. But, rather than rejoice in this miracle, they argue over the one who has performed the miracle. Jesus has healed this man on the Sabbath – the day of rest from all work. Healing this man, in the opinion of some, is work and therefore Jesus has sinned, has turned from God in doing this healing and cannot possibly be from God. Other Pharisees say that is nonsense. Jesus must be from God to do such a good thing for this man, to be able to heal a man born blind. This has never been done before, we are told.

Three times, we are provided the details of this man's healing...Jesus put mud on his eyes, told him to wash, and he regained his sight. Despite this, some of the Pharisees want to hear the story again because they simply refuse to believe what their eyes are seeing. A previously blind man is standing right in front of them, now able to see. And it was Jesus who gave him his sight. Some of the Pharisees are mired down by ingrained widespread beliefs about sin and about God. Work on the Sabbath of any kind is a turning from God and must not be done, no bending, no discussion. People with health or financial struggles are being punished by God for sin – no bending, no discussion. At the end of their conversation with the man who was given his sight, the Pharisees still say to him, "You were born entirely in sins." New information, life transforming information is ignored or discarded. The blind man understands and believes the truth of what he has experienced and what Jesus has said to him: Jesus is the Son of Man. Many others with physical sight remain blind to the truth and do not believe.

It is curious that John devotes so much time in this story to the blind man and his conversations without Jesus around. John, normally, focuses very intensely on Jesus' presence and work so why is Jesus absent from centre stage for so long? "According to Jo-Ann Brant, a Johannine scholar at Goshen College, Jesus does not completely leave the stage here. She points out that John [is using] a literary device called *mise en abyme* (also known as the "Droste effect"). [In a nutshell, this means] the story of the man with blindness serves as a miniature version of the larger story of Jesus. The narrative of the healed man [echoes] Jesus' narrative in many ways, for example: the crowd questions his identity (9:8-9), he asserts "I am" (9:9), he speaks frankly and logically throughout but is treated as an invalid witness (9:18), he is accused of being a sinner, and he combats the Pharisees with sarcasm and truth (9:34). This story within the story heightens the ironic punchline of the episode—that those who think they can see are blind to the truth while the one who was blind (a "sinner" and accused of being an invalid witness) is the one who sees" (Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

This miniature version of the larger story of Jesus also provides us with a glimpse at how followers of Jesus might go on after he has left the stage of earth. Like so many other Gospel stories, this one doesn't end with the good news that the Messiah has arrived, bringing the kingdom of God. There is an action piece to these stories. There is always work to be done. "We must work the works of him who sent me," Jesus tells us. He follows this up with, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Jesus here indicates that he knows the time is coming when he will be physically absent from the world. We must work the works of the one who sent him in his physical absence. The pool that the blind man is told to wash in is, no coincidence, the pool of Siloam "which means Sent". You know I

like to remind us that we are a sent people – we gather to be sent. Jesus was sent, the blind man was sent, and we are sent – sent into the world to work the works of the One who sent Jesus, to be the light of the world in Jesus' physical absence from the world. As I said when I first started talking about this story today: Light allows us to see better and Jesus is the light who brings understanding of God and God's kingdom to the world. We are to be that light – taking the understanding of the truth that we learn and sharing it with the world as we work the works, revealing God's kingdom. We are to be like the healed man, imitating Jesus as a bold witness to the truth in all that we do and with words too when necessary.

Why? Why must we be the light of Jesus in the world? Why are we sent? Why do we witness to the truth? Because this is what we signed on for in baptism. The early church understood this story as an unmistakable reference to baptism – a baptism that then sends us into the world. The pool of Siloam was the source of water for the temple rituals. The man is healed as he is first immersed and then he emerges from the water – a reference to baptism into Christ as being the means of our salvation, the healing of our spiritual blindness (remember, salvation means to be healed, made whole). Good manuscripts of this story tell us the Jesus didn't just spread mud on the man's eyes but that Jesus anointed him, *epichriein*, the word related to Christ – which is why we call Jesus the Christ – the anointed one – and it is where we get the word christening. Anointed with oil and anointed by the Holy Spirit in baptism we are then sent, just as Jesus was sent after his baptism – sent to work the works, to be the light of truth in the world.

This story is a comfort for those who realize that being the light of truth is tough when you're not sure you know enough to be the light of truth. When first asked

how he was healed and who did it, the man only says it was “a man named Jesus.” When he is pressed by the Pharisees, he then names Jesus as a prophet. Later, as he retells the story and argues with the Pharisees, he realizes that he believes Jesus is from God. Finally, when he sees Jesus again, he believes Jesus is the Son of Man and he worships him. At our baptism, we receive a candle symbolizing that we have passed from darkness into light. That is, we know God is the light of life and we turn to God. This turning, though, is a constant, gradual process of enlightenment and learning. Jesus’ final words to the Pharisees today is just as much a caution for us: There are none so blind as those who are sure they already see. It is these people who, by the end of the story, Jesus names as the sinners – those turned away from God. They cling to their beliefs and customs despite new, life-giving information that says different. The Church has been one of those people just as individuals within the Church can be those people. Worship together is our time of transformation so that we don’t become – or remain – one of those people. In prayer, in Scripture study and in worship, we learn, we change, we grow. Let us work the works and be the light...for we *are* in the business of transformation.