

John 9:1 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; but [he was born blind] so that the works of God might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the spittle and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷ saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am [the man].” ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam [Sent] and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

John 9:13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

John 9:18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

John 9:24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵ He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷ He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not [sent] from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

John 9:35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir [kurios]? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”³⁸ He said, “Lord [kurios], I believe.” And he worshiped him.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.”⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

Lenten Conversations: What Makes for True Life?

Our sermon theme is *Lenten Conversations*, and in today’s gospel passage we can follow conversations between Jesus and his disciples; between Jesus and the Judeans and their leaders, the Pharisees; and between Jesus and a man who had been born blind. We get to see in this story how new life and true life is offered to this man who was unable to see and was isolated, and who was begging for food and inclusion.

As is always true in the gospel according to John, there are layers of meaning in this story, with common words and actions signifying both literal and metaphorical ways to understand the message. For example:

* *blindness* indicates literal blindness, the lack of vision in our eyes, or diminished vision or even loss of vision that can come with age. The man born blind was not able to see anything with his eyes. At the same time, there is blindness in the metaphorical sense of not noticing what is right in front of us, of not getting what is staring us in the face.

* *seeing* indicates perceiving things with our eyes clearly and precisely, and also comprehending with our hearts and minds what’s going on, thus understanding things in a deeper way.

* *light* is that which enables us see; and today’s gospel passages raises the question of what that light is and especially who that light is. Such light is contrasted with night and darkness, when we can see only dimly.

* *working the works of God* indicates acts of healing and justice and setting things right, so that everyone can see and perceive the glory of God in human beings fully alive.

How we see and perceive things has definitely been a major concern for our community, state, and nation in the last couple of months. In fact, research scientists began to see things differently soon after the novel coronavirus was first identified in China and then moved to other parts of Asia (Korea and Iran) and to Europe (first Italy, then Spain and central Europe). Since January 19, when covid-19 showed up in Washington State, people have scrambled to look closely at the effect of this flu that’s going viral and to contain its spread. These last two weeks especially, our perspective has changed dramatically in our country, region by region, state by state: we now see and understand that we need to take strong measures to keep this virus at bay. And we hope that those Spring Break revelers in Florida, the masses of people who populated our beaches, and others who continue to shrug off this threatening virus will soon see the light!

So how do we see, why do we not see, and how do we see again, in a new way? All these questions are raised when Jesus’ disciples passed by a beggar blind from birth and ask Jesus, “why was this man born blind?” The story ends with another question, asked by the Pharisees, “surely we are not blind?” In

between those two questions about blindness, there are several strands of conversation woven together:

* *One is about sin, fault, and blame*: was anyone at fault that this man was born blind? Did his parents sin, did he sin? Given what we know today, we might ask those questions if a child has fetal alcohol syndrome or is born to a mother addicted to drugs. We know that a parent's addiction may cause all kinds of suffering in the life of a child, that in such cases, the sins of the parents are indeed visited upon an innocent baby. How heartbreaking that can be. — And there other discussions about sin and sinfulness: is the One who was sent from God (John 9:4) a at fault for performing a healing on the sabbath day, is he a sinner for making mud with his spittle and spreading it on the eyes of the man born blind on a day that is holy to God and hallowed by God (John 9:6, 16, 24)? Is the man who had been born blind a sinner for witnessing to what Jesus has done for him (John 9:34)? And what about those who think that they see everything the right way, who are convinced that they know how things ought to be, who are like the Judeans and Pharisees: what is their sin (John 9:40-41)?

* Notice that Jesus brushes aside the questions about human fault, blame and sin, and instead *directs our attention to God and to the works of God*; for that is the way thorough which a new future will open up to this man born blind. As the one who was sent by God (John 9:4), Jesus's life and ministry is all about doing what is right in God's eyes, is about doing the works of God. With his deed, Jesus mirrors an act of creation (see Genesis 2:7), the one where God had taken mud / dirt / soil (adamah in Hebrew) to create a human being (Adam): Jesus takes mud from the ground and mixes it with his own spittle for a healing salve. This new act of creation, this re-creation of eyes brings a new quality of life to this man who was born blind but now gains sight and insight.

* If it takes Jesus' action to initiate this healing miracle, it also takes the actions of the man born blind to bring it about fully: he is sent by Jesus to a pool of water named "Sent" and follows Jesus instructions to wash. This man is *striving for sight*, and *with his new sight comes new insight* about his own identity, who he is, and about the identity of the one who healed him. To be sure: the man who is now able to see remains the one who had been born blind, and he is still the son of his parents (Jon 9:18-23). But he is no longer socially isolated, he is now interacting with the Pharisees, important religious leaders; he is no longer marginalized and kept at arm's length but approached by people who want to hear about his healing; he is no longer just calling out for alms but speaking up strongly about what he knows of God's grace in his life and of Jesus who brought it about.

* And as the man born blind strives for sight and then insight about who he is now, *the identity of the one who touched his eyes with mud* is also revealed more and more: he is a man named Jesus (John 9:11), a prophet (9:17), a man from God (9:33), the Son of Man who came into this world for judgment (9:35, 39), and Lord (9:38)!

It can be deeply disorienting when we need to see things in a new way, when there are events or people we know who change before our eyes, when we have to come to a new understanding of a situation that is baffling. Is has been disorienting for all of us these last two weeks when the covid-19 situation seemed to change daily, when our routines had to be modified drastically, when we had to re-think how we interact with one another, even within families, even within our family of faith. We truly face a bewildering new reality.

What gives us *hope* in the midst of this strange new life, and *what can we do* to help with this situation and make things easier?

Here is our hope: it centers on Jesus Christ, the light of the world (John 9:5), who helps us see things as they are, perceive the true nature of what is, see deeply and understand profoundly. We have faith that the light of Christ will help us look without fear at ourselves, our families, neighbors, and all God's children. We trust that the light who is Christ, the light of the world, will illumine all places, even /especially where there is darkness, isolation, disorientation and dread.

And here is what we can do to help bring some healing to our community: we can dare follow Jesus and embrace his invitation to do the works of God; we can be a light to others who perceive the world as dark and threatening; we can reach out to people in our family, church, and neighborhood who need words of care and encouragement; we can be instruments of God's kindness and grace even remotely on social media; we can stay connected as God beloved community who strives for true life, no matter what. When we do that, Christ's light will shine brightly, even in dark times, and bring healing to our lives.

1Sam. 16:1 The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” ² Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’” ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” ⁴ Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” ⁵ He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

1Sam. 16:6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’S anointed is now before the LORD.” ⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” ⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” ¹¹ Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” ¹² He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is

the one.” ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Eph. 5:8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— ⁹ for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰ Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”