

Sermon on John Chapter 9 – the healing of the blind man
Lent 4, Year A, 2023

This lengthy story that we just heard, which makes up the entirety of Chapter 9 in the Gospel of John, isn't just the story of the healing of a blind man. It's a story about the transformative power of Jesus Christ. Jesus not only heals the man's physical infirmity, he also gives the man a new life in him, just as he still gives us new life 2,000 years later.

At this point in the story of Jesus' journey to the cross, he is already in big trouble with the Pharisees. In the previous chapter he provokes them to the point that they say, "Now we know you are demon possessed!" and they pick up stones to stone him. Jesus slips away from the temple grounds and as he's going along at the beginning of this chapter, he encounters a man who has been blind from birth.

Most of you probably know that in the system of orderliness and purity of the ancient Jewish faith, anyone who suffered from illness or disability was an outcast. It was believed that if someone had a particular defect, either they or their parents had sinned and this imperfection and tragedy was their fault. When Jesus meets the blind man, his disciples ask him "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus, as God incarnate, responds "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." What an amazing revelation. Many people even in this day and age believe that infirmity is a punishment for some kind of wrongdoing, but here Jesus tells us very clearly that that is not the case. This blind man, who is cast out from his own people and not allowed to enter the temple, was put in this situation at this moment to teach the world something about God.

Jesus, of course, has compassion on this outcast and he chooses to heal the man then and there. One question that readers and listeners often have about this moment in the story is – why did Jesus choose to spit on the ground and make mud and put it on the man’s eyes? Why did he then tell the man “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” Why didn’t he just wave his hand or say some healing words? It’s because this story is full of symbolism. Some theologians say that the mud symbolizes the creation of narrative in Genesis when God formed the first humans out of the mud. The cleansing waters of the pool of Siloam might be likened to the tale of Elisha healing the Naaman the leper in 2nd Kings. It might also remind us of the healing waters of baptism, in which we are symbolically buried in the healing waters and we are resurrected into a new life.

This man whom Jesus chooses to heal isn’t just a background character in this story. He isn’t just a meek beggar along the way who doesn’t say much. After he is healed, he is brought to the temple officials, and he turns out to be an extraordinary character who argues quite eloquently with the Pharisees. While they are insisting that Jesus’ power does not come from God, the formerly blind man says “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

What an amazing testimony to the fact that Jesus is the messiah. You’d think that the Pharisees would be wholly convinced by this argument, but in their fear of the unknown and their confusion about Jesus’ methods, they cannot see or hear the truth. They are the blind men.

They drive the formerly blind man out of the Temple, and Jesus hears about it. He finds the man again and asks, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man answers “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus says to him “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” And he said “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

Then Jesus explains the symbolism of this miraculous healing: “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” One of the very first things this blind man ever sees, since the day he was born, is the face of our Savior. Jesus heals a man whom he knew would believe. He knew from the dawn of creation that some others would neither see nor believe. The Pharisees overhear him talking to the man he’s healed and they ask “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus answers “If you were blind, you would have no sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” The sin of the Pharisees, he says, is that in all their spiritual and religious training they should know better but they choose to remain blind.

The blind man isn’t just healed of his physical infirmity. He is transformed. Before encountering Jesus, he was an outcast with no future. He had no hope that his life would ever be better. Jesus found him, though, and gave him a new life. In our encounters with Jesus, we also find new life. When we reach out and ask for help from our Creator, our fear is miraculously transformed into hope and our despair is transformed into joy. God, who gave life to all creation, brings life from death.

The purpose of the Gospel of John, as stated in John 20, verse 31, is “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Thanks be to God.