

“What Do You See?”

Lent 4

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From the Pulpit

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I have to admit: I originally named this message “Jesus, Blindness, and Holy Spit”—quite tongue-in-cheek. However, I believe, “Learning to See” better captures our imagination in a way that will serve us well.]

When was the last time you played the game I-Spy? Some of my earliest memories with my parents are related to the game. I remember traveling with my family and my mother saying, “I spy something green.” With excitement, with wonderment, I would look around until I finally saw what she saw. What a fun moment of getting it! Now I wonder if, to some degree, this might be what it is like to follow Jesus?

In this week’s gospel story of the blind man—or should I say blind people—Jesus is working one of his “signs” in a way that invites double entendre. Over and over again in the gospel of John—this text composed in community—Jesus’ teachings are misunderstood. Too often, people take him literally, missing the multiple layers of meaning. Not often enough, others take him seriously. To read John—or let John read us—is to see how the stories in this gospel are often a carnalization of the spiritual and a spiritualization of the carnal. Paradox, nuance, mystery.

This particular story is speaking about the unseen and those that were blind to Jesus as the source of God’s light breaking into the

world. In fact, the word “blind” is used in the gospel of John 17 times—15 of those are in this chapter.

Now, to help with the length of our text today, I suggest that we look at it, with imagination, and as a short story: I have made it into a prologue, 4 scenes, and an epilogue.

The prologue begins with Jesus “seeing” the blind man. At once, the disciples ask who is responsible for this man’s disability—was it his parents? Or was it the man, himself? It was commonly believed that sin was the cause of illness—even Jesus tells a man in John 5. The disciples’ question may seem obtuse to us, but Jesus is certainly drawing a connection between blindness and sin, though perhaps not the way we think, at first. I am struck by the way that Jesus uses the disciples’ questions to show us how to see that even the worst circumstances can still become a witness to God’s power, presence, grace, and love.

Jesus then spits in the mud, rubs it in the man’s eyes, and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Keep in mind, the man cannot see Jesus, but he does what he is told; he finds the pool, he washes, and he sees. Holy spit, indeed. With that, the prologue ends and we turn to scene one.

In this first scene, the now-seeing man is questioned by his neighbors: “*How then were your eyes opened?*” He responds, “*The man called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, ‘go*

to Siloam and wash; so I went away and washed, and I received sight.” Clearly his answers don’t appease the neighbors, because they bring the man to the Pharisees.

The second scene is enacted before the Pharisees. They aren’t too happy about what’s happened either. It doesn’t fit their religious formulations. All they know is: this man was healed on the Sabbath and that breaks their rules. Further, the man born blind won’t say what they want to hear. In fact, he offers no real explanation: “*He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see*”. He simply accepts a gift he’s been given. While those around him certainly cannot.

I want to remind us here, for John’s purposes, that Jesus is bearing witness to, or reflecting, if you will, the light breaking into the world. Since Jesus is often in conflict with the Pharisees, the religious elitists, and legal experts, it would appear that he needed to make something in order to violate the Sabbath. Hmm... Some of the Pharisees contest the healing, saying: “*This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.*” And others said, “*How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?*” Interesting logic here by the Pharisees: because Jesus does not keep the Sabbath, he cannot be of God. This scandal exists today: so-called godless ones who reject religion but still do good works!

But the Pharisees—like the neighbors—were divided in their opinions. When given a chance to make a judgment about Jesus, the once-blind man says that Jesus “is a prophet.” At first, the seeing man called him a “*man called Jesus*”; now, he is a prophet. Is his sight developing, still?

In the third scene, we are told the Jews do not believe that this man had been born blind and had received his sight, so they called the parents to come and bear witness. The parents confirm he was born blind and now can see; but they do not acknowledge *how* or *who* is responsible. Instead, the man is old enough to give an account for himself.

In the fourth scene, the Pharisees question the man a second time, instructing him to give credit to God, not this man called Jesus, whom they have determined is a sinner. He broke the Sabbath rules, thus, they want the seeing man to denounce Jesus. He replies, “*All I know is that once I was blind, now I see*”. When they ask him again how it happened he says, “*I’ve told you already, and you wouldn’t listen. Why do you want to hear it again?*” It appears hearing, in addition to sight, is a challenge for the Pharisees. The seeing man asks, “*Do you also want to become his disciples?*” The more the Pharisees question him the more eloquent and bold this formerly blind man becomes. Finally the man says of Jesus: “*If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.*” Frustrated and angry, the Pharisees drive him away. And the curtain closes.

In the epilogue, Jesus again finds the man. When the story began, only Jesus could see the man; now the man could see Jesus and they could see each other. The disciples, his neighbors, and the Pharisees have all asked their questions and reached their conclusions. Now Jesus asks, “*Do you believe in the Son of Man?*” “*Who is he?*” asks the man. “*Tell me so I may believe.*” Jesus says, “*You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he*”. The seeing man replies, “***Lord**, I believe*”. Whereas the story began with the man’s confusion, it ends with his confession.

Remember, at the beginning of the story he called Jesus “a man”. In his first conversation with the Pharisees, he said Jesus was “a prophet”. Then he called Jesus “a man come from God.” Here, he acknowledges Jesus as “Lord”. With each encounter his vision keeps improving, deepening. At last, he truly sees. “*Lord, I believe*”.

John concludes the story with Jesus’ words, “*For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind*”. In John, sight and light represent ways to see where God is at work. Be it in the world or in others, a living faith in Jesus is about learning to see. Jesus opens our eyes.

Perhaps spiritual blindness is about the failure to see *when & where* God is at work. The neighbors could not see past the man’s disability and previous status as a beggar. The Pharisees could not see because of their Sabbath regulations and religious assumptions.

Even the parents could not see, so they left their son to fend for himself.

What a juxtaposition: the man in the story is given the gift to see the physical and the spiritual, while most of those around him have physical sight while remaining spiritually blind. On the one hand, Jesus gives us sight so we may see ourselves, others, and the world as God does. On the other hand, Jesus' light serves as a judgment to expose the darkness, the lack of God's light, spiritual blindness.

The story tells us at the end: *“Some of the Pharisees said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.”* When light breaks through, things that were previously unseen—in darkness—come to light. In the case of the Pharisees, it exposed their ironic failure to see God. What's more, the Pharisees insisted that they could see— a pious hypocrisy. [That is what Jesus is insinuating when he calls them “the blind leading the blind.”] Jesus is showing how bad religion is religion that blinds us, that keeps us from really seeing the world and experiencing God's goodness.

The challenge, for us, therefore, is to learn to see. But how? How can we see the unseen? How do we avoid becoming like the spiritually-blinded Pharisees? How do we let God's light break into our minds, into our hearts, into our worlds?

Remember the story of Nicodemus in John 3? He came to Jesus at night—I call him Nick-at-Nite—saying that clearly Jesus had come from God. How does Jesus respond to him? Unless you are born again, you cannot *see* the kingdom of God. As Jesus teaches us in the story—to see, we must be reborn, regenerated, renewed, transformed. Are we willing to ask God to help us truly see?

I fear that the older we get, the more we lose touch with our childlike imagination. There is certainly a reason why Jesus references children as the ones that the kingdom of God belongs to. So, what if we saw our lives as a long game of I-Spy, in which God is telling us: *I spy goodness. I spy peace. I spy justice. I spy potential in that person.*? What would it be like to live our lives in way that we search and look for these things, in ourselves, in our communities, in our world?

The man in this story gained his sight, yes, but he also continued gaining sight. It was a process. He was learning to see. He started with seeing Jesus as a man; he ended by seeing him as Lord. His physical and spiritual realities completely changed. And that process, that transformation, is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This is our prayer, that we are all learning to see, day by day.

Let me ask you: What do you spy? What do you see? **Amen.**

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