

## SERMON

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Sometimes we can't see what is right in front of us. Sometimes, even as we think we're working hard to learn, we don't pay attention to what is most important. The more we **think** we see, the less we might **actually** know. The more we think we have nothing new to learn, the more blind we are to what God is doing and calling us to in our life of discipleship. Sometimes it takes a man who has spent his whole life blind to open our eyes to see God at work.

Right before this encounter with the man born blind, Jesus had been arguing with the Pharisees...again... and had said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." The conversation went downhill from there and they made plans to stone him for what he was saying, but he slipped away from them.

And then, as he walked along, he encountered the protagonist of today's story. This man born blind was a beggar. He was utterly dependent on the charity of others and had spent his entire life that way. He wasn't seeking out Jesus; he was simply present as Jesus happened to be coming by. The disciples draw Jesus' attention to him by posing a theological question. It was commonly thought at the time that illness happened because a person had done something to be out of favor with whatever deity they worshipped.

In this case, since the man had been **born** blind, the disciples asked Jesus to clarify who was guilty of causing this blindness. Was it the man's sinfulness – in utero maybe – or his parents? I imagine this to be the first century equivalent of asking how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? In that, it really doesn't make much difference to the one who had been born blind. No matter how it came to be, this was his reality. He had spent an untold, but likely significant number of years in darkness.

Before we get too dismissive of the disciples' question, in all our understanding of science and medicine, we might want to consider how often we look for blame when someone is sick. If someone has lung cancer, we assume they are a smoker. If someone has cirrhosis of the liver, we assume they are a drinker. If someone has heart trouble, we might assume they don't exercise enough.

We might better understand the causes of illness, but we're still quick to try to find someone to blame, because maybe it makes us feel just a little bit better. That won't happen to me because I don't smoke, don't drink, I go to the gym. We still choose to see blame.

Jesus responds to the disciples' question with a very helpful "neither." This man isn't blind because of his sins or his parents' sins. This man isn't blind so that you can judge him or his parents. This man is blind so that we can see God in him. In this random encounter, you (disciples) are going to see what God can do.

Let me take a moment to say that this doesn't support the idea that God **made** this man blind so that many hard years later, Jesus could heal him as an object lesson. I can't say it doesn't read that way, but I think that is a limit of language and of a story passed down through generations. I hear these words of Jesus as redirection for the disciples. He's telling them to stop worrying about the cause of the blindness and pay attention to what happens next.

Pay attention to what he had just said to them and the Pharisees, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will...have the light of life." This is a chance for everyone to see more clearly what God is doing, who God is, how God is at work. This nameless man is going to encounter God and be restored. The light that Jesus is bringing to the world isn't just an abstract concept, it is a tangible reality for someone who had known only darkness. And through his eyes – open and restored, the disciples, the Pharisees, and anybody else who chooses to see, will see.

Seeing takes effort. Seeing takes growth. Seeing takes change.

Notice how much time is given to this encounter. Notice the detail with which the Gospel writer tells the story. The aftermath of this healing becomes all about the identity of this man and Jesus. No one, not even life-long neighbors wanted to believe that this man who had borne the identity of "blind beggar" could now be anything else. The Pharisees didn't want to believe that this man, "who was born entirely in sin" could be able to teach them about God or God's Messiah.

It becomes an argument about who did what to whom and how. And yet, the central truth of the story remains. Jesus came to be the light of the world, and he brings that light to a man who, by society's accounting, deserved nothing. Jesus revealed himself in this encounter so that darkness would become light for one person. And through him, whole communities, generations of seekers, would see more clearly than they had before.

The community who first heard this Gospel, the Johannine community, was very likely a collection of Jews who had come to understand that Jesus was the Messiah and had been expelled from their synagogue. Sound familiar? That's the fate feared by the man's parents. This story becomes a foundational understanding of who this community was. It's more than a simple healing story. This is the story of what it means to encounter

God. There will be doubt and confusion. There will be questions and accusations.

But God is the one speaking to us. Our response is, “Lord, we believe.” And we worship. We look for God as we gather in this place. We look for God as we hear one another’s stories. We see God revealed in the hope we hold onto in the darkness. We see God in the refreshing, still water that restores our soul.

We see that we don’t have all the answers but that the world doesn’t either. The God who brought light into the world has claimed us in a different type of pool, washed us so that we can see, claimed us as beloved children and we take on that identity, even as we may be cast out of other communities.

The world doesn’t want to see. The world wants to hide in the dark. But the light of God has come. The truth is revealed. And the truth is that you are loved. You are forgiven. You are God’s. Amen.