

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2023
“Now I See” (John 9:1-41)

Today’s gospel reading tells the story of one of Jesus’ miracles. Actually, in John’s gospel, Jesus’ works of wonder are never referred to as miracles. Rather, they are signs because they are used by John to point to something beyond themselves, namely, the nature of God.

John tells us that as Jesus and the disciples walk along, they see a man who has been blind from birth. This man has never seen anything. He knew the sun only by the feeling of warmth on his face. He knew the beauty of a flower only by its sweet smell. His world was one of complete darkness – and had always been.

On this day, as Jesus and the disciples walk by, the disciples notice the man, but from a distance. That’s still the case isn’t it? The pattern of interaction between abled and disabled is one of distance. We tend not to get too close. But the disciples use this opportunity to get from Jesus some clarification on Jewish thought. *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?*

The Jews had always connected suffering and sin. If there was suffering in a person’s life, there also had to be sin. Therefore, when the disciples see this man, they conclude that either he had sinned in the womb – since he had been born blind – or it was the result of his parents’ sin. Why else would God have placed this infliction on him? But Jesus tells them that this man’s blindness is the result of neither.

We all know too well, don’t we, that because we live in a fallen world, good behavior is not always rewarded and bad behavior is not always punished. Sometimes innocent people suffer. That seems to be what Jesus is saying here. However, this man’s blindness – just like any suffering, tragedy, or sorrow we might have – can be a window through which we can see and know the power and glory and grace of God.

Jesus then makes mud from the dirt and his own saliva, and rubs it on the man’s eyes. Then he tells the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Now, none of us would want someone else’s spittle rubbed on our eyes – or anywhere else, but in the ancient world, it was quite common. Saliva, especially that of some distinguished person, was believed to possess certain healing qualities. So, Jesus takes the methods and customs of his day and applies them in this situation.

Jesus’ action is also symbolic of what God did in the beginning. He took the dust of the earth, and with the breath of his mouth, breathed life into the first man. In the same way, the Son of God took the dust of the earth and repeated this act of God to bring sight to a blind man.

It is also significant that the pool in which he washes is named Siloam, which means *sent*. After all, Jesus had been sent from God to bring recovery of sight for the blind. And this man would soon be sent out as a witness to proclaim that Jesus is Lord.

The man does as he is directed and, when he returns, he can see for the first time in his life. Imagine his overwhelming joy!

His neighbors who have known him and others who have seen him begging in the streets are surprised, but skeptical. This couldn't be the same man who sat and begged. It must be someone like him. But he responds, *I am the man. How, then, were your eyes opened? The man called Jesus healed me.* And he tells them about the mud and the washing.

As we move along in the story, I want us to notice the progression of this man – how his faith grows and transforms him into a new creation. But here is where the trouble enters our story. It is the Sabbath day and Jesus has broken two Sabbath laws. He has made the mud and he has healed someone, both acts constituting work, which was strictly forbidden on the Sabbath.

The former blind man is brought before the Pharisees, where is cross-examined. Some of them declare Jesus a sinner because he has broken the sabbatical laws. But others say he can't possibly be a sinner because of the signs he is able to perform. They are divided on the issue, so they ask the man his opinion. Even though he knows quite well what the Pharisees think of Jesus, and is quite certain that to come out on Jesus' side would mean excommunication, he tells them without hesitation: *He is a prophet.*

The man is now at another level. Before, he referred to Jesus as a man. Now, he has come to see him as a prophet, someone sent by God to act on God's behalf. His understanding of Jesus is growing. His spiritual eyes are being opened.

Getting nowhere with the man, and still thinking this miracle has been faked, they have the parents brought in for questioning. Afraid of being excommunicated from the Temple, they are not cooperative. *We know that his is our son, and we know that he was born blind, but we do not know how he is now able to see. He is of age, ask him.*

More frustrated than ever, the Pharisees have the former blind man brought back in. *We know this man is a sinner. Now tell us the truth.*

I don't know if he is a sinner, the man responds. *But I do know this: once I was blind, but now I see.*

Tell us what he did to you, they pressed. *How did he open your eyes?*

I've told you once already, and you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciple? Did you hear that? Do you also want to become his disciple? The man is now committed to Jesus. But he goes on. *No one has ever opened the eyes of a man born blind. Yet this man did. If he were not from God, he could do nothing.* Here he acknowledges Jesus as being from God. But he now sees him as more than a prophet. He basically declares him to be the Son of God.

The Pharisees are furious. *We're the teachers here. Who do you think you are trying to teach us about God? You're nothing but a poor, pathetic sinner.* And they throw him out. See how the Pharisees respond to an issue they can't answer. First, they heap abuse on him. Then they resort to insult, accusing the man of being born in sin. Finally, they resort to threatened force, ordering him out of their presence.

But none of this seems to matter to this man. One moment he is a blind man begging outside the Temple. The next moment, a stranger has given him sight. But more importantly than receiving his physical sight, he has been given the gift of spiritual sight. He has concluded that the man who gave him these gifts is none other than the Son of God.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, the religious experts who claim to have spiritual insight into all things relating to God, are the ones who are blind. God, in the flesh of a man, is right there in front of them, but they can't see him. Or, we should say, they refuse to see him because his ways are unconventional and he doesn't fit their mold for Messiah.

Look at what happens at the end of the story. Jesus looks for the man after the Pharisees throw him out. Jesus is always true to those who are true to him. And because of the man's loyalty, Jesus' true identity is revealed to him. And at the end of the story, he addresses Jesus as Lord: *Lord, I believe.*

We are a lot like the man who was born blind. Every day we go through the motions of our routine day, hoping that things will change for us, wondering if they ever will, and if we will ever find meaning in our lives. Then, one day, we encounter God somewhere. He comes to us unasked, uninvited, unexpected. Things begin to change. Burdens are lifted, backs are straightened, tears are dried, hope is restored, and faith is strengthened.

The God who is always looking for us finds us, but perhaps not where we expect; not in church, not in the pages of scripture, not in the traditions of our religion, but out there in the world where we live and work and play. He comes to offer healing for our broken lives and to make us a new creation. And this healing is a sign for us – a sign that God is at work in our lives to bring restoration and wholeness. Our spiritual blinders are removed, our faith strengthened, and our lives transformed. And when others notice the change in us – and they will notice – we may not be able to put into words or explain to them the mysteries of an awesome God, but what we can do is simply tell our story: *I was blind, but now I see.*

And through that story, God will be glorified. Amen.