

“Able to See” John 9:1-40 Psalm 23 March 30, 2014

A woman I knew when I was in Southington had a son with a debilitating lung disease. Once she shared with me her experience when she attended a healing service in a church in a nearby community. She had wheeled her son in, and was quickly surrounded by several elders of the congregation who determined that a very strong “demon” was in her son. The head pastor came over, and with much fanfare began to search for the sin that had caused her son’s affliction. “Did you drink alcohol while you were pregnant?” No. “Had you turned away from the church?” “Have you confessed your sins before the Lord your God?” Finally they all laid hands on the boy and prayed for his deliverance. She left that “healing” service quite confused and upset. Her son’s condition was not obviously changed, and he died several years later.

This woman’s experience comes to mind every time I hear today’s gospel lesson. In Jesus’ day, it was generally thought that any kind of illness or deformity reflected God’s displeasure with the person or his or her family. After all, in Exodus it says, “The sins of the fathers will be visited upon the third and fourth generation...” (Ex. 20:5)

In John’s Gospel, this story about Jesus and the man born blind immediately follows an exchange between the Jewish leaders and Jesus that became so heated that the Jews tried to stone Jesus. The religious authorities became increasingly determined to get rid of Jesus.

Remember that in John’s Gospel the themes of Light and darkness, blindness and understanding, are extremely important. At the very beginning of his Gospel, John proclaimed Jesus to be the Light of the world.

Two Sundays ago, also from John’s gospel, we heard about Nicodemus, the educated Jewish leader who approached Jesus in the dark of night with questions and who then left - still in the dark - with even more questions. His eyes were not opened. Then last week, from the fourth chapter of John’s Gospel, we witnessed the encounter between the Samaritan woman, who had been rejected by five husbands and was considered an outcast in her own community, and Jesus. They met in the heat and bright sun of the day, and this woman *did* see, as she and Jesus had the longest and deepest conversation recorded in the Bible between Jesus and any human being. The “wrong” person, a Samaritan woman, saw the Light in John 4, and through her, many others came to see and believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

In today’s lesson, a man who was considered to be out of favor with God because of his physical blindness became able to see, and finally, the formerly blind and inarticulate beggar became empowered to challenge the high religious authorities! At the end of this story, the formerly blind man accuses the Jewish power-wielders of being blind! They throw him out.

When Jesus’ disciples first saw the blind man in today’s story, they asked Jesus whose sin had caused his condition. Jesus’ reply may raise concern for some of us: “Nobody’s sin caused this man to be born blind. He was born blind so that God’s glory might be revealed.”

Hold on! Was Jesus saying that bad things happen to people so that God can look good? That my friend's son was born with cystic fibrosis just so God could be glorified?

That's not where Jesus was going. I believe Jesus was saying that, even in this apparently hopeless situation, God is able to bring forth something good. The man had been blind many years.... Nobody had been able to help him.... Then the Light of the world healed him.

Looking back some two thousand-plus years, it feels sort of good to declare that the Sadducees and Pharisees of Jesus' day were "blind" as they were unable to see who Jesus really was. How could they have missed seeing Jesus' greatness? How could they have been so blind as to not have realized that Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy, "The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap"? Why didn't they hear the echoing voices of so many of the prophets, calling folks back to TRUE relationship to God instead of an empty ritual supported by injustices to the poor? Couldn't they see that Jesus was bringing the same message, calling folks back to loving God with all they were and all they had and loving neighbor (no matter WHO that neighbor happened to be) as much as they loved themselves? They were blind.

But what about us, today? Where are WE in darkness; where are WE refusing to see what God would have us see? Where do WE need healing and vision? – What does it take for our eyes to be opened, for us to know that God is with us right now, calling us to spend our lives in worthwhile, light-producing ways... We hover too often in darkness, saying, "No, we can't help out this person, because we might need our money." "I cannot stop and listen right now, because I'll miss my big appointment." "I don't have time right now to read the Bible or try to pray, but I will some day..." We hover in darkness, and refuse to let our Lord give us vision as to what is really important, refuse to let Jesus change the way we see things, refuse to let God's love heal us through and through.

We are called to be people of the Light of God. We are shown that Jesus can give sight to the blindest beggar. We are warned by today's story not to let our OWN constructions - our pride, our accomplishments, even our religion - get in the way of God's work.

We try so hard to walk on the egg-shells of life, often struggling to appear intact even as we face health, economic, relationship, and job challenges.... Even in church we don't always feel that we can show our pain... We are afraid to look vulnerable. Afraid to show our weaknesses.

I hope that you hear from today's scripture lessons, and especially Psalm 23, that our Maker is also our Shepherd, and that our Shepherd wants more than anything to open our eyes to his presence and to lead us: through our every challenge, when we need still waters, and even as we face death. God is with us. With God, what seems to be hopeless or impossible is finally not.

The late Michael Yaconelli shared Brennan Manning's story of a man who had been converted to Christianity. This man was approached by an unbelieving friend who challenged him: "So,

you have been converted to Christ, have you? You must know a great deal about him. Tell me, in what country was he born?" The man answered, "I don't know."

"How old was he when he died?" "I don't know."

"How many sermons did he preach?" "I have no idea."

"Well, for a man who claims to be a follower, you certainly don't know much about this Jesus, do you?"

"You are right, and I am ashamed at how little I know about him. BUT THIS MUCH I KNOW: Three years ago I was a drunk, I was in debt, my family was falling apart and they dreaded the sight of me. Now I go to AA instead of to the bar, we are out of debt, my home is loving, and my children are happy to see me when I walk through the door. All this Jesus Christ has done for me! This much I know of Christ!" (from *Messy Spirituality*, Michael Yaconelli, pp. 69-70)

We will not get out of this life alive; that was one of my mother's favorite sayings. But we *can* go through life, even with our weaknesses, afflictions and mistakes, led by the One who can lift us up and who can turn even the most hopeless situation into something that reveals to us God's loving presence. We can *know* that we belong to God. When we do, God's Light shines and we become more and more able to see what is important in our lives, and what God wants us to do.

My friend's son, Joshua, died a few years ago as a teenager. He was not physically healed from his affliction. But he really lived while he was alive. His church surrounded him with encouragement and support, his family cherished him and adapted to his needs along the way, he participated in youth group and CROP Walks and life. There was a witness of life and light, even in the face of the downhill road that took them all through the experience of death.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me... (Psalm 23:4)

We don't have all the answers to life. We don't know why some people seem to have easy lives and others have struggles that seem to never be resolved or eased. But we *are* offered a Shepherd, one who knows us and all our challenges, heartbreaks and hopes, and one who promises to stay right by our side through our every breath and beyond. I pray that each of us will have the strength and vision to fall down on our knees before our Master and ask him to help us, that we may receive Christ's Light ourselves and share with others the power and hope of God's never-ending love.

Religious arguments and doctrinal differences will continue to abound, we will experience loss and hardships, but underneath everything are the everlasting arms of Emmanuel, God-with-us, our Shepherd, the One who claims us as his own and leads us forward through all of life and death, our Light! Thanks be to God! Amen.