



Lent 4: March 22 2020

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "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." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and 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."

Someone once said this: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” (Marcel Proust)

It’s hard to believe how much the way we see things has changed just in the last month. We’ve gone from relatively few cases of COVID-19 to mounting numbers each day. We’ve gone from in-person worship together to prayer and worship from a distance. We’ve gone from stable financial markets to something entirely different. We’ve gone from life as normal to life as unpredictable.

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Our story from John’s Gospel for today is really all about this. Yes, of course, it’s about the healing of a blind man but, more than this, it’s an extended and confusing set of conversations that lead us into a meditation contrasting two different ways of seeing and responding to the world.

The story starts out just like many other healing stories, but before long, we realize much more is going on here. Yes, Jesus and his disciples encounter a blind man whom Jesus heals, but most of this reading is a whole series of exchanges between different people that follow the healing:

- exchanges between the neighbours who cannot believe what has happened
- exchanges between the newly-sighted man and the Pharisees
- an extended exchange between the Pharisees and the man's parents
- and finally an exchange between the newly-sighted man and Jesus himself

Within all these exchanges we encounter two different ways of seeing the world, two different pairs of eyes through which the characters and we can look at things.

The first pair of eyes are what I would call “eyes of a former time.” These eyes see the world in terms of simple, binary categories—the afflicted and the able-bodied, outsiders and insiders, sinners and righteous people.

We see this right from the start in the story, when the disciples, upon seeing the blind man ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This same way of seeing the world will, of course, be picked up by the Pharisees as they deal with the blind man and with Jesus himself. For, as the story unfolds, the Pharisees judge them both as sinners—the man because he is blind (those with physical disability were regarded as sinners) and Jesus for daring to violate the rule against healing on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees' ways of looking at things and their static categories, in fact, drive much of the action and confusion. Their way of looking at things leads to alienation among the Pharisees, the blind man, the blind man's parents and Jesus. Their way of looking at things leads to confusion. But most of all, their way of looking at the world leads nowhere. For their static categories cannot comprehend the surprising and dynamic life that Jesus has come to offer. And so in the end, seeing the world through the eyes of static categories in this story leads to an oppressive blindness because no one—neither those categorizing others nor those being categorized—can go anywhere new. And into new territory is always where Jesus is headed, is always where Jesus meets us.

And so it should come as no surprise to us, that, in stark contrast to seeing the world through eyes of former times that are all about static categories, in this story, Jesus gives the man born blind new eyes and new possibilities.

These new eyes don't see the world through the lens of static and confining categories, but instead propel the newly-sighted man into motion and put him on a new path. With his new eyesight, the man becomes free, capable of choice: a full potential participant in the dynamic life that Jesus represents and expresses—a life of dignity without fear and alienation, a life lived in relationship to God and to others.

Just look at what our Gospel says about the changes the man goes through on account of being given his new sight: He goes from being a blind man sitting by the side of the road cut off from society to a newly sighted person repeating the bare bones of what has happened to him, to a man who stands up on his hind legs, takes on the Pharisees, and asserts that Jesus

was sent by God, and finally to a person who stands before Jesus, and confirms that Jesus is indeed the Son of Man, God's presence in the world in the flesh.

Through this process, the man's new eyes come into focus. He comes to see more and more that Jesus, the Lord of life, banishes all static and confining categories, dignifies all human beings and sets them on a path of a dynamic life in God where fear and alienation have no power over humanity.

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Today you and I have been given new eyes by the Coronavirus situation that we would never have wished to receive—eyes that can see the potential of infection everywhere, eyes that can wake up each morning wondering what the bad news will be today and what we'll need to change about our lives next. And part of this, of course, is necessary, if we are, with God's help, to protect ourselves, our families, our church communities and the neighbourhoods and people in our broader communities from the spreading of this virus.

But the eyes of our faith, the lenses that our baptisms have given us allow us to see something equally crucial. They allow us to see that in this situation, we do not need to be isolated from God or from one another even if we are in self-isolation. They allow us to see that a dynamic life of faith means we have to be willing daily to give up the categories of life we had settled into. They allow us to see that in this situation we are called more than ever into the dignity that Christ Jesus has given us all.

It is a dignity that can care for itself. It is a dignity that can manage fear. It is a dignity that can find new ways to stay connected to a life of prayer and community in the Church. It is a dignity that can find new ways to care for the others in our lives.

Where in your life are you being asked to claim the dignity that is yours in this situation? To look through the lens of your baptism at your own fear, at how you can care for yourself, at how you can care for others and at how you stay connected to Christ Jesus and his Church?

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This is what our Christian life is all about—seeing the world through different eyes—eyes that do not deny the realities before us and around us. But eyes that know that we have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Eyes that see the world *through him* and resolve *through him* to act on what they see.