

“LIGHT FOR THE BLIND”

John 9:1-41

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series A)

March 26, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 9, verses 1 through 41. It is on page 758 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus reveals himself as the light of the world who gives sight to the blind and reveals those who think they see as blind. I'll warn you: it's a long reading. So please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 9, we begin reading at verse 1.

^{9:1} As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud ⁷ and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ 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 ¹⁹ and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. ²¹ But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²² (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) ²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵ He answered, “Whether he is

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a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”²⁷ 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?”²⁸ And they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”³⁰ The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³⁴ They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.”³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.³⁹ Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?”⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Sometimes things are not what they seem. Sometimes those who appear to have sight are really blind, while those who appear to be blind can really see. And sometimes those who seem to be righteous are really sinful, while those who look so sinful are really righteous. Sometimes things are not what they seem.

And I can think of one occasion when the sun’s light was hidden and darkness covered the earth during the middle of the day. But in the midst of this apparent darkness, the Light of the World was shining like never before.

Sometimes things are not what they seem.

This is what we see in the gospel lesson. We have a blind man, who apparently must have been a terrible sinner, a Jesus who apparently has no regard for the Third Commandment, and a bunch of Pharisees who are just trying to do the right thing. But the blind man sees, the Sabbath-breaker is the Righteous God in human flesh, and the law-abiding religious leaders are blind sinners. No one turns out to be what they seem.

This historical account takes place in the city of Jerusalem. And the story opens with Jesus and his disciples coming across a beggar who had been blind from birth (9:1). The mere fact that he was blind from birth gave the disciples a theological conundrum. It was often assumed that serious physical disabilities, like blindness, were God’s punishment for some specific sin. We end up making the same theological error whenever we ask, “God, why is this happening to me?” So the disciples wondered, *Why was this man born blind? “Who sinned?”* (9:2).

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If it was the blind man, then somehow he must have committed some really serious sin before he was even born. But that seems hard to do. Certainly, all humans—with the exception of Jesus—are naturally born sinners. But you can’t compare two ultrasounds and say, “Oh, this one on the left is really bad.” So it’s hard to fathom how this man could have committed some really terrible sin before he was even born.

So maybe it was his parents who committed the terrible sin. But if that’s the case, it hardly seems fair to punish the blind man for the sins of his parents.

So the disciples don’t quite understand it, but everyone seems to think there was a terrible sin before the man was born. The Pharisees assume the same thing later on when they get fed up with him and say, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” (9:34).

Everyone seemed to think that someone sinned for this man to be born blind. But things were not what they seemed. So Jesus said, **“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him”** (9:3).

Very rarely in life do we know exactly why something happens. We can discern cause and effect well enough. But when it comes to why God allows certain things to happen—why some tragedy happened to you and not someone else—we just don’t know. And to try to figure it out is to attempt to pry into the secret mind of God. We just can’t do it. But this one time, Jesus gives us a glimpse into this man’s tragedy. The reason is, **“that the works of God might be displayed in him.”**

So Jesus performs the work of God on this man. And in this case, the work of God is to spit on the ground, make some mud, smear it on the blind man’s eyes, and tell him to go wash it off (9:6-7). Now, if this doesn’t work, that’s a really mean thing to do.

So this is one of those things that you shouldn’t try at home. When you meet a blind person, don’t do what Jesus did. The “What Would Jesus Do?” ethic doesn’t work very well here. We’re not always supposed to follow Jesus’ example. There are some things that are just for him. When you meet a blind person, do not smear spit-mud on their eyes. That would be considered rude.

But for Jesus this sort of behavior is okay, because he’s God. If he can create man out of dust, then he can also spit on the dust and use the mud to fix someone’s eyes. So that’s what he does. Then he instructs the blind man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam.

And it works! The guy comes back seeing (9:7)! His neighbors could hardly believe it. Some did believe it, but others insisted it couldn’t actually be the same guy (9:9). Never in the history of the world had something like this been done (9:32).

So they take the man to see the Pharisees (9:13). Maybe they can sort this out. The Pharisees interview the man, but something doesn’t make sense. This healing apparently happened on the Sabbath day, when no work was allowed. Now, they know the only way a person could perform such a miracle is if he were sent from God. But anyone sent from God would also respect the Sabbath laws (9:16). It doesn’t add up to them. The formerly blind man must be an imposter. So they don’t believe him until they also interview his parents, who confirm that, yes, he was blind from birth (9:18-20). Beyond that, the parents aren’t willing to comment on how he received his sight. The Jews had already threatened to excommunicate anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Christ (9:22).

So the parents are unwilling to comment on it, but the man who used to be blind—he is more than willing to stand up for Jesus. He had begun to see a glimpse of the Light of the

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World, and he was eager to testify of that Light (9:25-33). So here’s this guy who just hours earlier had been a blind beggar. For most of his life, people paid very little attention to him. He wouldn’t have received much education in those days. But he goes toe-to-toe in a theological debate against these well-educated leaders in Judaism. He’s outnumbered and overmatched, but he absolutely schools them, for one simple reason: he has the truth on his side. He doesn’t know everything about Jesus yet, but he knows what he knows, and that is more than enough, at least for now.

He embarrasses the Pharisees, and they don’t like it, so they excommunicate him from the synagogue (9:34). But that doesn’t seem to bother the formerly blind man. They have the synagogue, but he has Jesus.

A little bit later, when Jesus hears about all this, he comes and finds the man again (9:35). He had given the man sight; now it was time to give him the rest of the package.

So Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man (9:35). That’s a term for the Messiah that comes from the Book of Daniel (7:13), and Jesus often uses it to refer to himself.

Now, the man doesn’t quite know yet who exactly Jesus is. But he knows he is at least a prophet (9:17), so he is willing to accept whoever Jesus identifies as the Son of Man. So he says, “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” (9:36).

And then Jesus says to this man who had just been blind, “**You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you**” (9:37).

“[The man] said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshipped him” (9:38).

Jesus had mercy on this man, and in one day everything changed for him. He was a blind beggar, whom people wrote off as being a condemned sinner. But Jesus rubbed some spit-mud on his face and spoke some words to him, and now he has eyes to see the wonder of God’s creation for the first time and faith to see Jesus as his God and Savior. Think about this: he had never seen anything in his entire life, and now he is looking at God, eyeball-to-eyeball.

It was a wonderful miracle and a marvelous gift to the formerly blind man. It shows Jesus’ compassion for this man as well as for all who suffer from physical disabilities. But it also has a spiritual significance, and Jesus tells us what that is.

Jesus uses this miracle as sign of the purpose for which he came into the world: “**That those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind**” (9:39).

He was speaking in spiritual terms, and the Pharisees overheard and understood what he meant. So they asked, “Are we also blind?” (9:40).

And Jesus basically says, *Yes*.

He says to them, “**If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains**” (9:41). It is because they insist on their own righteousness that they are condemned as sinners.

So it turns out that nothing is as it seems. The righteous Pharisees who are just trying to do the right thing turn out to be blind sinners. The formerly blind man who must have been born in utter sin is not blind anymore and is a worshipper of the One True God, whom he now sees with his own eyes. And the Sabbath-breaker who smears spit-mud on people’s faces is not actually a sinner. He is, in fact, a prophet—and *more* than a prophet. He is the Christ. He is the Light of the World. He is the One True God in human flesh. The religious leaders condemn him

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as a sinner, but he is the exact opposite in every way. Things are not what they seem. And this is how it usually goes with Jesus.

For on that dark Good Friday as the sun’s light failed in the middle of the day, the Light of the World shone forth as never before. On that guilty Good Friday as a so-called insurrectionist, blasphemer, and Sabbath-breaker was condemned as a vile sinner, the righteousness of God was manifested. And on that deadly Good Friday as blood, and breath, and life itself fled from the body of God, life and light and grace and peace burst forth upon a dying world.

On that dark Good Friday, things were certainly not what they seemed.

So now, “people dwelling in darkness, upon them light has shone” (Is. 9:2). For things are not always what they seem.

And, finally, you, dear sinner, are not what you seem. For on you the Light of the World has dawned, and your Father in heaven finds you to be something quite different. He finds you to not be a sinner. But he finds you to possess the righteousness of Jesus Christ. You no longer belong to the darkness; you are children of light (Eph. 5:8). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.