

Sermons from West Denmark



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

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John 9

The healing of the man born blind

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed 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.” 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 and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

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?” Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” 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.” 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. 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.” 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. 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.”

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 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." (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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him.")

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." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. 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?" And 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, "Why, this is an amazing 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 if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

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

I intended for Al Zook to begin us today with a reflection on his experience with blindness, because it's all well and good to talk about blindness as an abstract concept or a metaphor for spiritual things but it's a different thing when blindness is a fact of your life, a daily reality to be encountered and dealt with. But, snow. So.

I do think I know what Al would do if, like the blind man in our text for today, Jesus met him on the side of the road—which is to jump up waving his arm, saying, "Pick me! Pick me!" But the man in our passage for today never asks to be healed. I'm

guessing this is because it doesn't even occur to him. As he says, "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind."

When they encounter him, begging on the side of the road (because that was the only vocation for blind people in those days), the possibility doesn't occur to Jesus' disciples either. They decide to use him as an object lesson. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Hearing this, I imagine the man's sightless eyes rolled. It was not the first time he had heard this. We're always trying to make sense of the sorrow and brokenness of the world, and we tend to say things like that. There are even passages in the Old Testament that back this up, like the one about God visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation. Later traditions of rabbis envisioned fetal sin, in which a baby can be born already guilty. Maybe you have been the victim of similar well-meaning attempts to explain away your suffering: something like "God has a purpose for this."

This kind of reasoning assumes that God is the cause of suffering, the great Afflictor in the Sky, with lightning bolts in his pocket and strings to pull for cars to veer into oncoming traffic, and seeds of cancer to plant in people's tissues, all for infractions known only to God. But Jesus says this in the beginning of the passage, and let's change the punctuation slightly (which the ancient Greek allows): "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents," he says. "But that the works of God might be displayed in him, I must work the works of him who sent me."

In other words, "These things happen. But let's see what God can do through it." I wish Jesus could have more obviously condemned our error, but sadly that's not how he rolled. He liked to keep the mystery alive.

Instead, what he says is "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world," and to demonstrate this, again without being asked, he throws back the curtains of darkness from the man. He bends down and spits into the dirt, mixes it a little with his finger, and puts it on the man's eyes, and tells him to go wash in the pool that's called "Sent."

It's funny that Jesus goes about this muddy process when a mere word from him has done more. But I love this part, Jesus getting his hands muddy because, you know, I'm a potter, and I feel like he gets me. This is the God who made Adam out of the dust of the ground, and here he is again, creating out of unlikely materials, transforming.

Maybe he's quietly claiming his divinity here, saying, here I am, still making humans out of the dirt. Just before this story, Jesus made a less subtle claim to Godhood and nearly got stoned for it. He told the Jewish leaders, "Before Abraham was, I am." He was claiming the oldest name for God, the one God gave Moses out of the burning bush: "Tell Pharaoh '*I am*' sent you." It's the strange, mysterious not-name name in little caps that sounds like "Yahweh," like Henrik told us about.

Jesus would use the "I am" name throughout John as he riffs on this not-name. *I am the bread of life. I am the good shepherd. I am the true vine.* When Jesus was out

walking on the water and the disciples asked who he was, his answer was “It is I,” in Greek, “*I am.*” When the soldiers came to arrest him, he asked them who they were looking for. They said “Jesus of Nazareth.” He said, “I am he”--“*I am.*” And they fell to the ground, knocked off their feet by the name of God.

So he says, “I am the light of the world,” and he might as well have said, “Let there be light,” at least for the man with mud on his face.

Besides re-creation, this is an anointing, not with holy oil but with the materials at hand, dirt and spit, and when Jesus tells him to go bathe in the pool called Sent, it begins to look like baptism, like the blind man is being called, chosen for God’s own. Here Jesus is about his favorite business, calling the most inappropriate people. Not the best of the best but a man presumed to be a sinner, or whose people were sinners, an outcast on the side of the road.

Throughout the story we see the vision of Jesus begin to dawn on this unlikely disciple. First he names his healer as “the man called Jesus,” then he calls him a prophet, then he describes him as sent from God, and finally, he calls him Lord. And this formerly blind man does what no one else in the book of John does—he worships Jesus.

Jesus’ commentary after this miracle contains his next “I am” claim: “I am the door to the sheepfold. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, but I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me...And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

It feels a little like metaphorical whiplash—is Jesus the light of the world or is he the good shepherd? But looking at the story of the healing of the blind man, you can see Jesus being the shepherd. The blind man hears Jesus’ voice, even before he can see him—he hears and he does what Jesus tells him. And after he is healed, after the controversy and after he is thrown out of the synagogue, Jesus goes and looks for him and finds him to see if he’s ok. It’s a tender moment in the passage—having heard that the man is suffering for his testimony of healing, Jesus goes looking for him. Leaving the ninety-nine, he searches for him with all the tenacity of a loving shepherd. When Jesus finds him, he says, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who is this Son of Man?” he asks Jesus.

And Jesus says, “You have *seen* him.” *Seen* him! What a thing, for a man born blind! I imagine the worshipping looking more like a celebration—hugging and dancing around together, Jesus and his newest disciple, chosen from the ranks of the sinners and the broken. Unlike the other disciples and the Jewish leaders, all distracted by ideology, by propriety, he’s the only one who truly sees—that Jesus is the light of the

world, the shepherd of his soul, the creator and healer of the universe, very God of very God. He sees the world, illuminated by Jesus its light—he sees it through Jesus' eyes.

Annie Dillard writes of a doctor who at the dawn of cataract surgery travelled around villages in Eastern Europe performing this new surgery on people born blind, giving them vision for the first time. Reactions to the surgery, it seems, were mixed. Apparently, to the uninitiated vision is sharp and relentless, overwhelming. Life lived blind is an insular life—your sphere of influence is only as broad as the reach of your fingertips. Suddenly, vision makes all kinds of things perceptible, too many to touch, things that have no bearing on our immediate lives but nevertheless assert their presence. It was not uncommon for the newly sighted to live their lives with their eyes closed, comfortably returning to their native lack of awareness rather than the assault of light and shape.

I wonder about the man in the story. Was he tempted to go about with his eyes closed? Did he stay on the side of the road as if he had not been anointed, baptized, and called? Or did he follow Jesus, the shepherd and light of his soul, and learn to see this new world of light and shape through Jesus' eyes?

I don't know about you, but I know I tend to go about with my eyes closed. You with your granted vision—do you hold on to your white cane? We never asked to be given our sight; we didn't know to ask, but we have been anointed with the mud of re-creation, washed and sent, and we have been tenderly sought by the shepherd of our souls, whose name knocks us off our feet. Illuminated by the light of the world, we see what we never imagined was out there to be seen: a world turned upside down by its Savior, a world infused by the never-ending creativity of its God, a world torn open and broken, waiting to be remade.

May we not return to our native blindness; may we be willing to go, eyes wide open, where our shepherd leads us.