February 11, 2018

Transfiguration Sunday

“The Presence of Christ: Believing is Seeing”

John 9:1-41

*9As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ 3Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. 4Wemust work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, 7saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8The 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?’ 9Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ 10But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ 11He 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.’ 12They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’*

The Gospel of John has a deep mystical aspect to it that is strange for our modern way of thinking. This story today of the Man Born Blind has within it a theme that continues throughout the Gospel of John, which is simple on the face of it: When light appears, so does darkness. Or, we could say whenever freedom is present, resistance arises. Or, if you want to get more personal, CS Lewis used to say that Satan only cares about human beings when Christ arrives. Today, blindness overtakes us when we think we are seeing; and seeing can only happen when we are in relationship to Jesus Christ. Blindness and sight, in this story, are representative of how we believe.

The Man Born Blind represents the movement to full belief that happens once we come into relationship with Christ. The Man Born Blind’s experience provides four layers to belief in Jesus: Jesus as a man, Jesus as a Prophet, Jesus as ‘from God, and Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Our story will guide us and we will also let the hymn Amazing Grace help us as well. In your bulletin is a sheet with the lyrics on it, but they are not in the order of the song. Instead, they are in the order of our story today.

***Sing Verse 2 of Amazing Grace***

***‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved***

***How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed***

Jesus is A MAN

History is full of great teachers who help us see through what we think are real and true things in our world. The awakening to new ways of seeing can be overwhelming, startling and beautiful.

Think of the great teacher Socrates, and his biographer Plato. There, we see a world of shadows and ideals. Everything we know can only be grasped by questioning what we see in such a way that we begin to see what is true and real when we seek an ever deeper fundamental truth about any given thing in the observable universe.

Or think of another great teacher, Aristotle. There, we see a world which is constantly striving to achieve a more perfect example of itself. Creation, ideas, artistic expression, human beings are all progressive in the sense that they are striving for a continually perfecting perfection.

Or think of the Buddha. After 40 days meditating under a tree, the Buddha had a simple 4-fold insight into the nature of the world. All is suffering. We suffer because we are attached to the things of this world. Detachment ends suffering. Enlightenment, or the continual awareness of this 4-fold way, is available to all.

These are beautiful ideas, and they are all from fantastically intelligent teachers. They all, in a way, predict and point toward Jesus, who is also a great teacher. Today, the great teacher teaches the disciples that physical differences, ‘disabilities’ as we still call them’, are not the result of sin. Back in Jesus’ day, people who were disfigured, disabled, or not ‘normal’, were all considered to be paying for either their own sins or the sins of their parents. Jesus denies this and rejects it, and instead proceeds to act out, instead, an example of what it means to be transformed and regain personal dignity.

*2His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ 3Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned;* ***he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.****4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’*

By the way, there is a translation issue here. The line ‘he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him’ is an addition. Once we see through the addition and remove it’s influence, the story changes dramatically. (Read verse again, without bold)

When the Man Born Blind is healed by Jesus, immediately he is confronted by the crowd. Imagine for a moment what this must have been like for this man. He has never seen anything. Now he sees everything. What must the world have looked like? How powerful must have been the light, the colors, the movement, the shadows. He never gets a chance to enjoy it. Instead, his neighbors start interrogating him. They doubt he is the person he says he is. He tells them several times, “*I am the man*”.

When they ask who and how this happened, the Man Born Blind answers “*The man named Jesus did this*”. This is the first step in coming into a relationship with Jesus Christ. We know Jesus was a man who walked the earth and lived as we lived. He was a great teacher, and a worker of miracles. Those things, in and of themselves, do not necessarily make Jesus or anyone else more than a man, but they make him great. There are quite a few movements throughout the Christian tradition that stop here as well and never see Jesus as anything other than a great man. This is not what Scripture tells us, but it is a solid and good place to begin to understand who Jesus is. He was a man.

***SING VERSE 1 of Amazing Grace***

***Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me***

***I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see***

*13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.14Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15Then 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.’ 16Some 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. 17So 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.’*

Jesus is a PROPHET

The Man Born Blind has no opportunity to enjoy his new-found sight because Jesus’ act has immediately created conflict. The mere act of seeing for The Man Born Blind has created conflict with his neighbors. Do you see how Jesus’ presence and the things he does creates conflict and difficulty for everyone? Even great events, miracles, create problems. Things do not get easier for the Man Born Blind just because he can see now. His friends are angry with him. It is so troubling to them that his friends now bring the Man Born Blind to the Pharisees so that the religious experts can interrogate him.

They ask what happened, and the Man Born Blind tells them the story he told his friends again. The gathered people argue among themselves about the nature of who can perform a miracle and where that power comes from.

Prophets are people called by God to deliver a particular message to the people. Sometimes the message speaks to something happening right now. Sometimes the message speaks about what is going to happen because of what is happening right now. Sometimes, prophets act out what God is trying to do with God’s people. In the Jewish tradition, to call someone a Prophet was a big deal, because the prophetic tradition was powerful and transformative. Prophets always had a conflicted relationship with Israel and her people. Jesus followed in that path. And Prophets were from God.

When the Man Born Blind identifies Jesus as a Prophet of God, his understanding has gone from Jesus as a great teacher and great man to someone chosen by God to deliver God’s message to the people. Understanding Jesus as a Prophet increases our understanding of Jesus, but it also creates problems. Prophets call the people out on their stuff. Prophets set the people in conflict with their traditions. Prophets will not affirm the status quo; they will call for it to be dismantled and rearranged in accordance with God’s wishes for God’s people. Israel did not like her Prophets, and yet they honored their Prophets greatly.

*16Some 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. 17So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ The Man Born Blind said, ‘He is a prophet.’*

***SING VERSE 3 of Amazing Grace***

***The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures,***

***He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.***

*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 sight19and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ 20His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21but 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.’ 22His 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. 23Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’*

*24 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.’25He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ 26They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ 27He 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?’ 28Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ 30The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ 34They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.*

Jesus is FROM GOD, A SON OF MAN

In this story, and I believe in our deepening relationship with Jesus, the pressures get more difficult, not easier. With each confession of the Man Born Blind, things get worse. Once the man born blind confesses Jesus is “*from God*”, he is ejected from the Temple. Now, the Man Born Blind has lost his relationship with his neighbors by proclaiming Jesus a man like all of us, he has gotten into conflict with the authorities of the age by saying Jesus is a Prophet, and he has lost access to his faith by saying Jesus is *from God.* The Man Born Blind has even lost his livelihood, because he begged at the gates. Everything he has relied on is now gone because he sees.

*The path of faith, the path of a deepening relationship with Jesus, is a difficult path. It is not meant to be easy.*

The entire gospel of John is dealing with this issue.

A person who teaches truth will set himself and those who see what he sees against those who cannot or will not see the truth. This conflict simply happens.

A Prophet who brings the word of God to the people will, by the very definition of a prophet, be set against the people she is bringing that word to.

Proclaiming someone as ‘from God’ means you are setting yourself against everyone who thinks they know who God is and what God wants.

This increasing pressure and conflict is simply what happens in the deepening vision of the journey of faith. Coming to faith itself creates the conflict. The mere fact of the Man Born Blind’s healing CREATES the conflict.

Jesus says in v5, “*as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world*.” In the gospel of John, wherever light exists, darkness exists also. And light only exists where Jesus is.

John writes in 1:5, *the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it*.”

JOhn 3:19 says: *light has come into the world, but people love darkness over the light b/c their deeds were evil*.

John is speaking about a very mystical thing with the Man Born Blind and that thing is Light Creates Darkness. There is no sin until Jesus is present to forgive sin. There is no darkness until Jesus is present to bring light into the darkness.

The thing about manifesting our light, in the Christian sense and contrary to the new age language of the culture, is that coming into the light means you also bring with you all the darkness, not just yours, but your community, your institutions, your past darkness and shadows.

The brighter the light in which you stand the darker your shadow. The path of Christ creates the struggle.

Coming into the truth, seeing things as they are, creates the resistance to the truth.
Living into the truth creates the resistance to the truth.
Following Jesus creates the resistance to the truth.
The easy path of faith is the illusion.

***Sing Verse 4 of Amazing Grace***

***Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come***

***‘tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.***

*35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ 36He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ 37Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ 38He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. 39Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ 41Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.*

Jesus as LORD AND SAVIOR

Last week, we spoke of loneliness and how Jesus overcomes that by helping us reconnect and restore our sense of community. This week, we see a deeper truth to what Jesus does with us.

The Man Born Blind is now wholly alone – rejected by his neighbors, by the religious authorities and by the institution of his faith. He is alone. The truth I want us to understand, a truth which comes about because of deepening faith, is that it is precisely at this point that Jesus shows up. At the deepest, most difficult point in the Man Born Blind’s life, Jesus seeks the man out and sits with him. Now, rather than an interrogation, Jesus asks gentle yet direct questions.

*“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”*

The Man Born Blind answers with a direct confession, “*Lord, I believe”.*

I believe that you, Jesus, are the Son of Man, and if you are that – a man, a prophet, one from God himself – then you, Jesus, are my Lord and my Savior.

For those who are blind, Jesus’ presence as man, prophet, son of God, and Lord and savior, is a judgment of grace, an Amazing Grace, which only deepens our sight and faith. The struggle to that point is very real, and for many people, there may be no end point in this life to that struggle, because the struggle, the pressures, the forces that align against faith, are woven into the path of faith itself.

If we are struggling to see more deeply, there will be times when Jesus is mostly a great teacher for us, a human being like us.

There will be times when Jesus is mostly a messenger who speaks God’s word to us.

There will be times when we are profoundly moved by the glory that God would send a Son, an only Son to be with us.

And there will be times when Jesus is our Lord and our Savior, personally visiting us and healing us.

All might be true at the same time, or only one aspect will be present. Regardless of where we are in that trajectory, we share the struggles of the Man Born Blind. He is like us, and for the Man Born Blind, the deeper his belief, the deeper his sight. For him, believing is seeing.

***Sing verse 5 of Amazing Grace***

***When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun,***

***We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, than when we’d first begun.***

Lent begins this week on Ash Wednesday at 6pm, and our path through the 5 weeks of Lent will reflect on this trajectory of faith, from Awakening with Lazarus next week to Becoming the Good News with Jesus on Easter Sunday.