

**20/20 Blindness**  
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle  
March 26, 2017

"Here is the astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from,  
and yet he opened my eyes." (John 9:1-41)

**S**eeing is believing, except when it isn't. Sometimes the truth is hidden in plain sight. Often our preconceived notions so color what we see that we become perfectly blind – we have 20/20 blindness. Our three lessons this morning all focus on discernment to carefully evaluate what we truly see and what we don't. As we continue our Lenten journey, the message is to be applied first to ourselves. Sometimes what we see is too painful to accept so we choose not to see it or develop an alternative reality to explain it.

Last week we were drowning in water that left us thirsty. This week we stumble in darkness as though we were blind even though God's light shines brightly. Indeed, the one who sees most clearly in this morning's Gospel reading is the one who had been born blind. Last week Jesus used water to teach us about life; not just this life but spiritual life; life everlasting. This week Jesus uses light and our sense of sight to teach us about God's truth. He also reminds us, as if it were necessary these days, how resilient humankind is to the truth. The reading from the Hebrew Bible reminds us, as if it were necessary these days, that we don't always see clearly when we pick our leaders. Like Samuel we are misled by appearance, height or stature. Humankind is easily misled by outward signs where the Lord looks on the heart. In our third reading, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are encouraged to look deeply within – into the dark areas that no one but God and ourselves can see. Paul tells us we have no hope of seeing the world as God does unless we have closely – and honestly – examined ourselves.

This is the third of our four Sundays with the Gospel of John and we've jumped around a bit so let's try to set the scene. Jesus and the disciples are no longer in Samaria near Jacob's well. Indeed, we are back in Jerusalem. It is early fall around harvest time

because they have returned for Sukkot, or the Festival of the Tabernacles, one of the three Temple festivals that Jews were encouraged to attend if possible. Jesus and his disciples had a bit of a disagreement about going. The disciples said word of Jesus' works was getting around and he should let the people see him. That was precisely the reason they left Jerusalem last time! Jesus was all too aware of the divisive political atmosphere and was literally worried for his safety. The hierarchy looked at Jesus

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as an outsider and he worried the Temple police might arrest him especially under the cover of darkness. He encouraged his disciples to go on ahead without him saying his time had not yet come.

But not long after they departed he changed his mind and decided to join them in Jerusalem intending to keep a low profile. But on the last day of the festival Jesus cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As Scripture has said, 'out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living waters.'" It is one of the more memorable verses in Scripture and was the theme of the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly that I attended in Minneapolis seven years ago. Jesus' outburst created a real hubbub and the Temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees demanding to know why they did not arrest him. It was during this heated exchange that Nicodemus stood up and reminded them of the law; that before a person could be judged they were entitled to a hearing; they were entitled to due process.

Just before the beginning of this morning's reading there is a testy exchange between Jesus and the crowd. The elders and Pharisees have reminded folks that Scripture says nothing about a Messiah coming from Galilee. But Jesus pushes back hard telling the crowd "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires." Jesus goes on to say, "If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them (my words) is that you are not from God." The crowd responded angrily by picking up stones to throw at him, "but Jesus hid himself and went out of the Temple." (John 8:46-47)

So we might say the atmosphere is testy in Jerusalem in these first days after the festival! There is a price on Jesus's head and those who are in positions of power are not constrained by the law or the truth in pursuing their objectives. It is a volatile situation on this Sabbath day when Jesus encounters the man who was blind from birth. We get the strong sense that this person standing near the pool of Siloam was a bit of a fixture. The question asked of Jesus by his disciples takes us back to our conversation just two weeks ago regarding sin – do you recall? We looked at Paul's letter to the Romans who made the case for the first time that Adam's behavior in the garden condemned all humanity to Original Sin.

It was an original argument but we see from this morning's reading from John that it wasn't entirely novel; it had its roots in Jewish and Greek thinking. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This is a reflection of the long-held belief that the abundance of one's life was a reflection of one's sinfulness. Poverty or prosperity indicated God's judgment of that person's behavior. The prosperity gospel is alive and well today and may be heard in more than a handful of America's mega-churches. We recall from the story of Job that prosperity and sin are directly linked. It is most apparent in the misguided insistence by Job's friends that somehow he must have sinned against God. Zophar says, "Know that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." (Job 11:6b) Knowing that the Lord held Job to be righteous in every way, Zophar

receives the Lord's rebuke at the end. In that light, the poetic core of Job's message seems to be that sometimes, stuff just happens. As the ordeal comes to a close and Job fully apprehends God's greatness, he says I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you (Job 42:5).

"Who sinned? This man or his parents?" Jesus answers the disciples that it wasn't sin that caused this man's blindness. Sometimes stuff just happens. Rather, this blind man presents us with an opportunity to reveal God's works to others. But time is short and we must get to work he says. And right away, without regard to Mosaic law concerning the Sabbath, Jesus restores the man's sight. It is the only example of the healing a congenital disorder in the gospels. Are people amazed? Does the blind man gush with praise and thanksgiving? Not exactly. Let's spend a moment to examine the reaction of the various witnesses. The blind man responds with gratitude and belief but not the sense of great joy as the lame man who picks up his mat and walks. The crowd is also divided. There are those in denial or willful ignorance fearing reprisal from the Pharisees for somehow being disloyal. A few know what they saw but are keeping mum. The Pharisees, those in authority, are also in denial and try to discredit Jesus: why we don't even know where the man was born, which of course was not true. When that doesn't work they go after the parents again threatening excommunication. Frightened, they dodge the issue saying ask our son, he's of age. When that doesn't stick, they attack the blind son suggesting he lied about his background – as though they were demanding a certificate of blindness. There is an uncomfortable familiarity about this story.

But the notion that our earthly lives are a reflection of God's judgment lingers to this day. We hear it in the pulpit and we hear it in the bully pulpit. The Interpreter's Bible acknowledges that "there is something majestic in the conception of a fundamental justice woven into the very web of life, running through all things, and working itself out in everything that happens to us." But it concludes that, "the ethical and practical consequences of the doctrine are as a rule disastrous, inciting indifference

and callousness, or at least to a dull and helpless apathy to others' pains. Why should I help? For they have brought it on themselves." (Interpreter's Bible, Exposition, Vol. 8)

Without dismissing sin as a reality in the world, perhaps we are ready to let go of the notion that our daily ups and downs are a reflection of God's favor or disfavor. Prosperity isn't guaranteed to anyone; sometimes stuff just happens. But willful blindness or willful ignorance including lying is another matter. When the blind man stands strong in the prosecution by the Pharisees they begin to get uneasy. Later, when the blind man clearly names who has restored his sight, the Pharisees start to crumble. Hearing the exchange between Jesus and the blind man some of them ask, "Surely we are not blind are we?" With his best sense of courtroom irony Jesus replies: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'we see,' your sin remains." As Matthew Henry, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian minister summarizes, "the sin of the self-conceited and self-confident remains; they (the Pharisees) reject the gospel of grace, therefore the guilt of their sin remains unpardoned, and the power of their sin remains unbroken." In other words, while we may profess to be blind, God sees clearly and our sin remains.

As we continue our journey to the cross let us be bold to the truth. As we make our way in today's reality, let us be vigilant for deniers who claim not to "know where he comes from." Let us stand tall as the blind man stands tall saying, "Here is the astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes."

Rich Lenten blessings to you all.

Amen