

What Did You See?
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February 24, 2008 — Third Sunday in Lent
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

Today's text from John 9 is actually the lectionary's gospel reading for next Sunday. But the lectionary assigns the whole of chapter 9 for one Sunday and I don't see how it's possible to preach on this whole chapter in one sermon. So I'm going to take three Sundays beginning today to reflect on John 9. It tells the story of Jesus giving sight to a man who was born blind and what happens to that man after he is healed.

All four gospels describe Jesus healing various people who were blind. But John tells this story in a particularly interesting way. Not only does he give much more detail but he uses a simple miracle story, if miracle stories can ever be called simple, to teach about Jesus being the light of the world.¹ In other words, the blind man's physical sight is healed but more than that is happening here. In these three sermons we'll see how he progresses from seeing with his eyes to seeing with faith.

In the beginning all he knows is that a man called Jesus healed him. By the end of the chapter he can worship Jesus and say to him, "Lord, I believe." (9.38) But as the blind man gradually sees the light, others in the story, particularly the religious leaders, become increasingly blind. By telling the story this way, John's Gospel asks readers important questions, which we begin to answer today. What do we see? What do we see in Jesus? Do we see the light of the world? That's what we want to grapple with this morning. Let's read it in John 9.

John 9.1-12 (NRSV)

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."

¹ "The foundation of [chapter 9] is twofold: a simple miracle story in which blindness is cured, and the saying, I am the light of the world (cf. 8.12). The miracle is an efficacious sign of the truth of the saying, and the divisive, judging effect of the light alluded to elsewhere (3.19ff., cf. 12.35f., 46), is brought out in the narrative." C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: S.P.C.K., 1967) 292.

Introduction

Over the years I have found healing stories to be the most difficult to preach. This is not because I don't believe in healing or because most of the people to whom I preach don't believe in healing. If we didn't believe in healing and wholeness and that these are God's gifts to us, we wouldn't have a service for healing as we are this Tuesday evening. I believe that Jesus is the Great Physician. I also believe that all healing comes from God, even if the agent of that healing is a doctor, a therapist, or a medication. So believing in healing is not why it's difficult to preach about.

Nor does the difficulty arise because most of the Bible's healing stories are miracle stories. I have found that people have different reactions to the Bible's miracle stories and for the most part they are not a problem. The big miracles, like God parting the Red Sea at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 14), or the sun "standing still" for a day so Joshua and the Israelites could destroy the Amorites (Joshua 10), or even Jesus walking on the water or stilling the storm (Matthew 14 and Mark 4), don't cause problems for most Christians. Some take these stories literally as written. Others regard them as symbolic, more like pious legends or parables. Still others think of them as based on historical fact but told with an eye towards teaching faith. But most people don't anguish over these kinds of miracle stories.

That is not the case with the healing miracles. We do anguish over them and the difficulty in preaching about them arises because healing is so personal. We've all been sick, sometimes very sick. We all have people very dear to us who have been sick and died from their illnesses. We know deeply and poignantly that we are mortal, as are all whom we love. We pray constantly for healing. We will likely do that when we share concerns a bit later in this service. Healing and the hope for healing and the hurt when healing doesn't come are very personal to us. That's why it's hard to preach about. We want healing and it doesn't always happen. Then we read about Jesus healing, even something as amazing as healing a man born blind, and we don't know why it doesn't always happen for us. So we tend to blame ourselves for not having more faith, thinking if we did have more faith then Jesus would heal us and those we love.

But as difficult as a healing story may be, let's push ahead because I think it teaches us something very important about faith.

Seeing the Light Takes Time

Notice first that Jesus didn't get drawn into the theological argument that the disciples wanted to have about faith. Who's to blame, the disciples wanted to know, that this man was born blind? That's the kind of question that can be argued about endlessly and the disciples were like a bunch of smart-alecky seminary students who can stay up all night blabbing on about blame and fault and sin. Jesus wouldn't have anything to do with that kind of talk. He said the man was born blind "so that God's works might be revealed in him." (9.3b) Let's not misunderstand that. Jesus was not saying that God caused the man to be born blind. He was saying that *every* human life, no matter the circumstances of birth, is where God's works can be and are to be revealed. Jesus is the light of the world for every human life.

So Jesus brought himself, the light of the world, into that particular individual's life and then Jesus just disappears. He doesn't show up again until verse 35 which we won't get to for another

two weeks.² Jesus just isn't in this story very much. In fact, he almost seems to hide himself. At the beginning he heals the man born blind, not because the man asked him to or because the man exhibited great faith or even any faith, other than doing what Jesus told him to do. Jesus just brought light into a blind man's life because Jesus is the light of the world. And then he is gone. The once blind man is asked, "Where is the one who healed you?" The man replied, "I don't know." He could see now but not everything was clear and Jesus was nowhere in sight.

This isn't the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus hides himself. In the verses just before today's text, the religious leaders in Jerusalem were arguing with Jesus and accusing him of blasphemy. Jesus had told them that Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith, rejoiced that he would see Jesus' day. And the incredulous leaders replied, "You are not yet 50 years old, and have you seen Abraham?" And to that question, Jesus replied, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am."

When Jesus used the words "I am," he was essentially saying the divine name. We pronounce it *Yahweh*. For the Jews, saying the divine name was forbidden because it was so holy. So Jesus not only spoke God's name but claimed to be God. In a burst of spontaneous anger, they rose up to throw stones at him. But we read in the verse just before today's text that Jesus "hid himself and went out of the temple." (8:59)

So what's happening here is a tension about seeing the light. On the one hand, there is Jesus who is the light of the world, so much so that he brings sight and light even to a man born blind. And on the other hand, Jesus seems to hide himself. This tension suggests that seeing is not a simple matter. Seeing the light of the world requires faith and faith takes time. That's the lesson of the man born blind. Jesus healed him but not everything about Jesus was revealed to him right away. It came eventually, as we'll see over the next few weeks. But seeing with the eyes of faith takes time.

In a book I'm reading right now, Michael Lindvall tells about a professor of church history at Yale Divinity School who once invited an Orthodox priest to lecture his class on the great creeds of the church. The lecture was pretty dry. In fact it was quite boring and when it was over someone in the class asked a typical seminary-student question.

"Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?" The priest looked confused. "Well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort most can learn it by heart."

"No, you don't understand," continued the student. "What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed — like the Virgin Birth?" The priest still looked confused. "You just say it. It will come to you eventually."

Now frustrated and impatient, the student pleaded, "How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?"

"It's not your creed, young man!" said the priest. "It's [the church's] creed. Keep saying it, for heaven's sake! Eventually, it may come to you. For some, it takes longer than others. How old are you? Twenty-three? Don't be so hard on yourself. There are lots of things that you don't know at

² "In John 9 Jesus comes and heals and then is gone. He returns at the end of the story to encourage and vindicate the one healed. In other words, our text records what life was like for those whom Jesus has blessed but who were living in the world between the first and second appearances of Jesus. John's church was suffering a great deal (15:20-16:4) and most likely identified closely with the healed man who receive abuse from family, neighbors, and religious leaders." Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A Lent, Holy Week, Easter* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) 58-59.

twenty-three. Eventually, it may come to you. Even if it doesn't don't worry."³

I think the priest saying "don't worry" is exactly the same as Jesus saying so many times to his struggling disciples, "Peace be with you."⁴ Don't worry. Peace be with you.

There are lots of things we don't know at twenty-three or fifty-three or ninety-three. Jesus calls us to follow him in faith our whole lifelong. Sometimes it seems like he is hidden from us. But don't think that comes from a lack of faith. It comes because seeing Jesus requires the risky faith of following him through all the struggles and all the joys of life. Faith happens over time.

Conclusion

We don't talk much anymore about Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). But he was truly one of the most important persons in the first half of the 20th century. At the age of twenty-six, he wrote a book about Jesus and the Bible that shook the foundations of biblical studies at the time. He became one of the greatest organists of his day. He wrote a book about Bach that is still a definitive study of the great musician. He pastored a church in Strasbourg for a time and could have settled for a noted clergy career. He could have been a master organist throughout Europe. He could have joined a distinguished seminary faculty.

Instead, he chose to go back to school and study medicine. Then he went to a place called Lambaréné in what is now Gabon on the west coast of central Africa. In a remoteness unlike anything the world knows today, Schweitzer lived out his life giving free medical treatment to the very poor. He wrote these words about the risky decision to follow Jesus in faith.

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou Me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is."⁵

When we follow him, Jesus will reveal himself in our toils, in our conflicts, even in our sufferings. And in faith we will see the light of the world. May God grant us such faith. Amen

³ Michael L. Lindvall, *A Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 18.

⁴ Luke 24.36: While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." Mark 4.39: He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Mark 5.34: He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Luke 7.50: And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Luke 8.48: He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." John 14.27: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. John 16.33: I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" John 20.19: When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." John 20.21: Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." John 20.26: A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

⁵ Quoted in Lindvall, 19.