

Sermon for Sunday, March 19, 2023 – Blindness and Vision  
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement, Westfield  
Rev. Patricia M. O'Connell, Deacon

*1 Samuel 16:1-3; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41*

This very long gospel from John today is multi-layered.

Thematically, on its face, it is a story about Jesus healing a man blind from birth--a story about blindness and vision. The Pharisees and the people from the neighborhood can't come to terms with what may be true. They can't reconcile what they are seeing with what they know.

It is also a lesson on sin –

- questioning whether there is a causal relationship between the man's blindness and sin—*"His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* After all, it is a human tendency to cast blame. Somebody must have done something wrong.
- raising the prospect that healing on the Sabbath is a sin—*"This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath."*, and
- suggesting that Jesus himself must be a sinner—*"We know that this man is a sinner"*.

If this gospel were a one-act play, there would be four distinct scenes.

Scene One: The stage is set. Jesus is walking along the road with his disciples. Jesus sees a man blind from birth. The disciples see him as well. Jesus uses a mixture of the basic elements of water in the form of spit and earth to heal the man of his blindness. The people from the neighborhood are disbelieving. The classic tension between faith and doubt whips the people into a frenzy. They inquire about Jesus. He is no longer there.

Scene Two: The man, formerly born blind was brought to the Pharisees by the neighbors. The Pharisees are divided between those who can't get beyond the fact that Jesus had the audacity to heal on the Sabbath and others, who recognizing Jesus' sin of seemingly working on the Sabbath, ask *"How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?"* The blind man states the obvious that Jesus is a prophet.

Scene Three: The parents of the man formerly blind are brought into the picture. They do not know how or why their son who was born blind can now see. The man formerly blind is also questioned. He does not know whether Jesus is a sinner. What he does know is that he was blind from birth and now he sees. He said to the Pharisees,

*“Here is an astonishing 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 he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”*

Outraged by the attempts of this man, formerly born blind, to try to teach them, the Pharisees drove him out of the neighborhood.

Scene Four: Jesus and the man formerly blind have a second encounter. It may be that Jesus, having heard that the man was thrown out of town, went looking for him. In this scene, Jesus reveals himself to the man and the man expresses his belief in Jesus and worships him. Jesus proclaims, *“I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”*

### **How are we to interpret the good news in this story?**

During my diaconal formation, when I was being mentored by Mother Nancy Webb Stroud, she cautioned me, when pondering scripture, that I must not get overly enthralled with a basket of cute little puppies left at my door. She wisely advised, as Mother Nancy was known to do, that I give my tender loving care to just one or two of those adorable loving puppies.

John’s forty-one verses can be compared to a basket overflowing with cute little puppies. There are two who jumped out at me and captured my undivided attention. I have named them blindness and vision.

Blindness can be defined in one of two ways: 1) It is the inability to see because of injury, disease, or a congenital condition and 2) It is a lack of awareness, perception, or judgment.

Vision, on the other hand, is the state of being able to see and/or exhibiting unusual perception or foresight.

There is more blindness in this gospel than what is attributed to the blind man. The Pharisees and the neighbors demonstrate, each in their own ways, how what we believe

can sometimes get in the way of what we see. Our prior beliefs get in the way of seeing what is actually present to us. The Pharisees were quick to rush to judgment about Jesus, to identify his act of healing as a violation of the Sabbath and to proclaim him as a sinner. It raises the question for us, the hearers of today's gospel, to ask ourselves, "To what extent am I blind?"

Healing is transformational. The blind man not only gained his sight; he had vision. Though Jesus was a stranger to him, whom at the onset he did not see, the man formerly blind knew him to be a prophet. He demonstrated wisdom in his challenge to the Pharisees as they expounded their theories that Jesus was a sinner.

During the last three weeks of reading from John's gospels, we have seen over and over again how Jesus meets people where they are. He challenges them to move beyond their stations in life and to follow him. In this gospel, the blind man is healed of his blindness and made fully whole through his acceptance of Jesus as the Son of Man. The Pharisees and the neighbors were given opportunities to see and believe as well. They lacked the vision, though, to get beyond what they could not understand. They were blinded by their own self-interests.

This is a story about blindness and vision. It gives us insight to explore the ways in which we go through life blindly. When you leave here today, look around you, look at your neighbors and be prepared to see the healing grace of God at work in our world.

Do not be disbelievers like the neighbors in this story or judgmental like the Pharisees.

Be like the man who was formerly blind. Believe and worship Jesus, the Son of Man, who seeks you and me out to heal us.

Amen.