

3.19.2023 Lent 4

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

“Believing is seeing”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

It is often said, “Seeing is believing,” meaning visual evidence allows us to know and verify that something exists or has really occurred. So much of our life in this world is based upon verifiable and scientific evidence that helps us understand and know the truth of God’s creation around us.

In today’s gospel, Jesus offers us an additional way of knowing the truth about ourselves and this world. Faith another way of knowing and understanding ourselves. To know Jesus is also to say, “Believing is seeing,” because we see ourselves and our neighbor through the eyes of faith in Jesus.

Today’s gospel story about the healing of the man born blind contains many themes central to John’s gospel. Sight and blindness, light and darkness, life and death, belief and unbelief are all central themes in John’s gospel message about God’s love for the world. The first chapter of John says it all, “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*”

Jesus’ healing of a man born blind provoked an extremely hostile reaction from religious leaders who could not see the new thing Jesus was creating before their very eyes. Throughout this story, the Pharisees remain spiritually blind to the things of God.

Imagine with me the life of the man born blind. We know he had a mother and father nearby because they were called to bear witness about their son. They seem to have been loving and caring parents, who had raised their son to be independent, saying, “*He is of age, ask him.*” Perhaps their son lived with them, but because of his inability to see, he had made his living by begging.

Their son would have also been unable to read or study the scriptures as the Pharisees had. He could have been excused for not knowing the scriptures, and yet he said to the Pharisees, “*Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he came from, and yet he opened my eyes...If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.*” Though the blind man had not had the advantage of sight, of being able to read and study, his ability to believe and see the work of God surpassed the Pharisees. Clearly, his parents weren’t to blame for his condition.

We also struggle with the idea in today’s text that somehow our human sins – our mistakes and stumbles – are also somehow responsible for the illness, misfortune and adversity that mark

human existence. So perhaps we should not be surprised by the disciples' question, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" Jesus' answer, however, flatly refused to accept the idea that physical disability and illness are God's retribution for sin, saying, "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.*" Jesus confronted the hypocrisy of those who claimed to understand scripture and yet rejected God's saving work of compassion, healing and grace. By saying that God works through human weakness Jesus is leaving open God's continuing work of creation revealed hidden in weakness and suffering. The "spoiler alert" during the season of Lent is that God will be fully revealed in the weakness of one who died for others on the cross. This is why, during Lent, we meditate on the crucifix at the high altar: God is revealed hidden in the suffering and weakness of Jesus.

In spite of overwhelming visual evidence that a man had been miraculously healed, the Pharisees remained blinded by the sin of their own religious pride. They could not see the possibility that God's work might be revealed in someone suffering in darkness and weakness. The healing of the man's physical blindness, however, was only a prelude to the miracle of faith. The man born blind also came to see Jesus through the eyes of faith.

John's gospel is concerned with moving from darkness to light, from exclusion to inclusion, from death to life. Jesus led Nicodemus from darkness into light, a transformation that caused Nicodemus to come forward helping to provide a burial for the one who had been crucified. Jesus offered the Samaritan woman "living water," offering grace and inclusion a woman who had been excluded for her ethnicity and religion. After feeding the five thousand, Jesus said to the crowds following him, "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven...which I will give for the life of the world.*" In the Eucharist, Jesus continues to offer himself as the bread of heaven for all who believe. Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the tomb of death, revealing God's love as hope and life for the dying. Jesus is the one who offers light, water, bread, and new life – means of grace that transform human weakness into faith.

Today's gospel is read during Lent to renew our trust and faith in Jesus. The healed man, said, "*I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see...If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.*" The man had been healed and was now also able to see God present in Jesus. The Pharisees, however, were relentless. Instead of praising God, they drove the man out of their community, as if by banishing him they could restore sacred purity to their community. God's light had been revealed to them and yet they preferred darkness.

The reason Psalm 23 is read with today's gospel is because Jesus is the Good Shepherd who, having heard that the man had been driven out of his community, went and found him. Jesus not

only healed the man; he also went and found him in his rejection and loneliness. Jesus cares about us. He is the shepherd who searches us out of darkness, exclusion and rejection. With Jesus, believing becomes seeing. Loved and accepted, we see ourselves within a new community of grace in Christ Jesus.

The healed man also *said*, “*Lord, I believe,*” and he worshiped Jesus. Believing is seeing. St. Augustine said it this way, “Unless you believe, you cannot understand.” Believing is how we see and understand Jesus in us, in our neighbor, and in this world. Believing helps us see how we are to live for others in this world.

The gospel story turns on Jesus’ judgment about the blindness of the Pharisees. Defiant to the end, they said, “*Surely, we are not blind, are we?*” Jesus replied, “*But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.*” The Pharisees remained in the blindness of their own pride. They could not see how limiting their own religious tradition, law and culture had made them. Their need to control God’s law as revealed to Moses, blinded them to God’s creative word revealed before them in Jesus. They could not envision God’s future unfolding before them in the gifts of grace and faith.

Today’s sending hymn, “Be Thou My Vision,” reminds us that renewed vision and wisdom come through the grace of knowing Jesus. Faith changes the way we see ourselves, our neighbor and the world. Believing is seeing God present in darkness with light, and in weakness with grace.

Faith allows us to envision God’s mission in our lives and in this congregation in amazing and new ways. Like the Pharisees, we will not be saved by our knowledge or traditional religious piety, but by a faith that sees and trusts in the new thing Jesus is creating among us.

Faith sees God hidden in weakness and suffering. Jesus searches us out in our separation from God and neighbor, so that restored, we might live with compassion for others.

Be thou my vision, Lord. Believing is seeing. Amen.