

Lent 4, Year A
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What would it be like to be blind from birth? I'd like for you to close your eyes and think for a moment what that would be like. Imagine that you could not see the ones you love or the beautiful and marvelous things of this world in which we live; imagine not having any sense of direction; imagine living life in darkness.

Now open your eyes. I've got a truth for us this morning that may not be immediately apparent, and that is we are all born just as blind as the man we hear about in today's Gospel. We may not suffer from a physical blindness, but as we live and move in this world, we wander in the darkness until we come to know Christ. Until a personal and life-changing encounter with Jesus we cannot understand what God is saying to Samuel: "For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

The gospel lesson today and the season of Lent is a call to each of us to look beyond the outward appearance and take a good look at our hearts. I would venture to say that this Gospel lesson may be one of the most concise examples of what a life impacted by Christ can and should look like. We see this man go from sin to salvation; from being lost in the darkness to seeing the light of Christ and going forth to share it in the world.

One of the first things we ought to notice is that it is Christ who initiates the healing. In the gospel, Jesus sees the man, forms the mud and anoints his eyes. Jesus takes action, making the first move. After that, the man has to follow Jesus' instructions to go and wash in the pool at Siloam. Then, and only then, is the physical healing complete. Christ often begins a work in us through the movement of the Holy Spirit, but it does not come to fruition without participation on our part. If the man never goes to the pool to wash, he never gains his sight. Likewise, we too have to decide to take a step in faith and follow through when we get our marching orders from Christ. Otherwise, we're just walking around with mud on our faces.

The story isn't over though, because physical healing is merely a vehicle for the greater healing which is yet to be done. The blind man has only seen a glimmer of what Christ is about. There is more now that the first step in faith has been taken. New life and growth is to begin.

As people begin to question him: Who did this? How did it happen? Is this even the same person?, the man replies in the simplest terms by telling his story. No deep theological jargon, just the facts. And what makes his story even better is that he has never seen Jesus. He went away from his first encounter blind and came back seeing while Jesus continues on his way.

I am reminded of the story of Thomas following the resurrection where Jesus says "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." The blind man has no idea where Jesus is nor could he pick Jesus out of a crowd by looking at him. The man only knows the work that Jesus has done in his life. That means that his story is simple, and that's all we're called to do too: share just the facts.

People are often unsettled by such stories, and the events of the day cause them to carry the man to the Pharisees. As he recounts his story to them, we see the Pharisees divided on the issue. Which is greater, the observance of the Sabbath or the need for healing? There was an exception that permitted healing when life was in danger, but does giving a blind man sight fit such an exception?

At first glance, no. Blindness is not a condition that is inherently life-threatening. But what if this is merely the first chapter in the man's recovery? Again, God's words to Samuel echo through this encounter as we see that Jesus' healing is not only a question of the physical cure but of the spiritually restorative work begun in that healing. Jesus was in fact beginning to heal a life-threatening condition. He was beginning the healing of a man lost in sin and darkness. What is sin if not a life-threatening condition?

In the present circumstances, those which keep us separated today, we take seriously the risks and consequences which a physical ailment can inflict upon us. How often do we really look at sin in that way, as the disease that it is, a cancerous virus that spreads within our lives if left unchecked? We have rightly taken precautions to check the spread of Coronavirus for ourselves and those around us, fleeing from before it for the well-being of ourselves, our loved ones, and even the strangers we meet along the way. Imagine if we took the threat of sin, and with it the story of Christ's cure, just as seriously in our day to day lives.

We return then to the story to find the Pharisees so turned around they even ask the man who he thinks Jesus is. The seeing man was creating such a stir with his story that they asked the opinion of a man who had never laid eyes on the Torah; who was no scholar, scribe, or Pharisee; who hadn't even seen Jesus. This is the power of a personal story when it involves Christ. It sets the norm aside and declares something new and different is happening in our lives and in the world.

There is often a questioning of the validity of such a story. In the gospel, they seek out his parents. And then when that route doesn't work, they ask the man yet again for his story. At this point the man's tone change. No longer sharing just the facts, he is growing bold in his proclamation of Jesus. "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?"

This formerly blind beggar whether out of cheeky frustration or genuine desire has just attempted to evangelize the Pharisees, which is pretty gutsy stuff. It makes us wonder who we see in our lives that we could tell about Jesus, who we can invite to follow Christ as we do. The man does and takes it a step further after they claim refuge as Moses' disciples. He continues:

Why, this is an amazing 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 if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.

This uneducated man speaks plainly and with confidence before those who were the spiritual authority of the day. And what does it get him? Kicked out. Again, the seriousness of a life

with God's grace and our repentance is set before us. Are we willing to be cast out for our beliefs? This man is, and as he is rejected by others, Jesus comes to him once more.

What follows is perhaps the simplest yet most important exchange of the blind man's life. Jesus asks the man as he asks each of us, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" before revealing himself to the man, to which he says "Lord, I believe," and he worships him. What began with physical healing has ended in spiritual salvation. What is our answer to the question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

We are now at the midway mark of Lent and at last Easter is in sight. It offers some much needed encouragement as, in addition to our disciplines and preparations, the present crisis weighs on us. Some may find themselves wondering about the importance of Sunday worship, daily prayer, Lenten fasting and disciplines in the midst of such a time. They may ask, is all this worth it? I tell you all, it most certainly is. Paul reminds us in Ephesians "for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord."

As our lives are upended, we need now, perhaps more than ever, to focus on the light of Christ, and my friends, Easter is the source of that light in the Lord. In Lent, much of our focus is on the cross of Good Friday and on the atoning work done there. It is an appropriate reminder and reflection for such times as these that we may know that Jesus is well-acquainted without infirmities. But we are also to look on towards Easter itself. The two are necessarily linked together. The cross points towards the light which is found on the other side, and the light of resurrection shines back on the cross bringing into focus all that which is done. When we approach the foot of the cross, we stand in its shadow because the brightness of the resurrection shines back on us through the Passion. Easter is mediated to us through Good Friday. But the shadow of the cross is not the darkness of this world. For darkness is not dark to the Lord. In truth it is as bright as the day. Hence, Ephesians finishes today with this wonderful call: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Christ came that we might live in the light. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness of physical and spiritual blindness has not overcome it. Easter will be here quicker than we realize. Let us not wander in the darkness. Let Jesus put the salve of his cross and Passion on the blind spots in our lives so that we may know the healing of the risen Christ, and may live in and see by the light of Easter morn.