

First Trinity Lutheran Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 2, 2008
John 9:1-41

I was Blind But Now I See

Words, words, words! There is an exercise in high school and college classrooms that asks the students to take a long piece of literature and capture the meaning in a sentence or two. These 41 verses might be summed up as, “A man is healed, people found it hard to believe it but he is still healed” Why all the words? This story is somewhat unusual as stories go in the New Testament stories because normally they are absent of detail, yet this one is full of detail.

Here in this story Jesus saw a man who was blind and did what was needed -- he healed the man. That is where the problem begins. He did it on the wrong day, to the wrong person, without proper witnesses, all wrong! The religious authorities are only so willing to tell him. The blind man, on the other hand, is just happy to be healed.

A recent article reported, “The blind will be able to see the light with a new bionic eye implant which came out in July 2007. The development of the bionic eye will at last restore blind people’s sight. The bionic eye device is called The Argus II which is a spectacle mounted camera that sends visual information to electrodes in the eye.” It is amazing what our technology can do. It is certainly a far cry from Jesus spitting in dirt and making mud to put on a blind man’s eyes. But with all our technology, it is still be far less effective than what Jesus did with a little dirt and spit. Even the miracle of technology cannot hold a candle to the miracles of Jesus.

Our story today unfolds as Jesus and his disciples are walking through Jerusalem on their way out of the Temple area. They see a man who is blind; in fact, they learn that he has been blind from birth. There are many points, which this story addresses, and the first is: The question of suffering. It was the common understanding of the day that when some tragedy or illness occurred, it was God’s way of punishing people for their sin. So we are not surprised to hear Jesus’ disciples say, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2).

From the beginning of time people have been trying to understand why bad things happen in the world. Jesus immediately addresses this question by saying that this man's blindness has nothing to do with his sin or that of his parent's. God is not punishing them. God is not angry with them. That is not why bad things happen in the world. God is not punishing individuals or the world at large.

In today's Gospel we see Jesus poking holes in the bad theology of his day, and we see the theologians fighting to defend their carefully built theology. Jesus came to heal the sick and the blind, and the religious leaders want to protect the rules. Jesus' attack on bad theology is also a time for us to reflect on the bad theology which has crept into our society, twisting God to fit into our image of what we think "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" In bad theology, sickness, tragedy and misfortune are often seen as results of not living right. We are told that AIDS is God's judgment on immoral nations. Some have suggested that the terrorist attack on Sept. 11 was God's judgment on the US for its stand on abortion. Bad theology takes shape in the less dramatic statement of wondering, "Why him and not me?" when good fortune and riches. Some suggest that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. God's "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" is wealth of the true believers.

His blindness has nothing to do with sin -- he is blind. Rain falls on the just and the unjust. Good things happen to bad people, Bad things happen to good people. Read the book of Job. This blindness presents the opportunity for God's work to be revealed. God loves us simply because God created us and continues to love us no matter what.

In fact, in spite of the bad things, which happen at times, this is a very good and pleasant world. Every day God shows his love and pours out his blessings, in spite of our sin and the fact that we do not deserve his blessings. God's response to us is affection, not anger.

Still some insist that the presence of difficulties and suffering in the world mean that God is punishing them for something. For others, it is the sign that God is not able to do anything about the problems they face, and others wonder if he simply does not care. William Frey, retired Episcopal bishop from Colorado, tells the following story: “When I was a younger man, I volunteered to read to a graduate degree student named John who was blind. One day I asked him, “How did you lose your sight?” “A chemical explosion,” John said, “at the age of thirteen.” “How did that make you feel?” I asked. John responded, “Life was over. I felt helpless. I hated God. For the first six months I did nothing to improve my lot in life. I would eat all my meals alone in my room. One day my father entered my room and said,” ‘John, winter’s coming and the storm windows need to be up — that’s your job. I want those hung by the time I get back this evening or else!’ Then he turned, walked out of the room and slammed the door. I got so angry. I thought Who does he think I am? I’m blind! I was so angry I decided to do it. I felt my way to the garage, found the windows, located the necessary tools, found the ladder, all the while muttering under my breath, ‘I’ll show them. I’ll fall, then they’ll have a blind and paralyzed son!’” John continued, “I got the windows up. I found out later that never at any moment was my father more than four or five feet away from my side.” In the same way, Jesus did not promise to spare us, but he did promise to be with us: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

The second thing addressed in this story is: The reality of blindness. There are two kinds of blindness in the story. One is of the man who was born with a physical defect of blindness. The second is of the religious folk who had a spiritual defect and were spiritually blind. In the story we have this interesting dialogue between the man who had been blind and the Pharisees. The Pharisees begin to question the man. They want to know how he received his sight. They want to know who healed him, and they want to know what the man believes about Jesus. They

tell the man who had been healed that Jesus cannot possibly be from God, because he broke the religious law and heals on the Sabbath. They seem to miss the point that the man's healing is a miracle. For some reason it doesn't seem to matter to them. The only thing they can do is to criticize Jesus for doing it on the wrong day. They are not sure they even believe the man was healed, so they question his parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" His parents answer, "We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself" (John 9:19-21).

What happens when blindness meets the Light of the World, when sinners meet the Savior, when hunger meets the Bread of life, when thirst meets the Living Water, when lost sheep meet the Good Shepherd, the rejected meet incarnate Love, and the dead meet Christ who is the Resurrection and the Life? This is what happens: The blind receive their sight, the sinful receive forgiveness, the hungry are filled and satisfied, the lame walk, the sick are cured, people are made whole, the disconsolate find hope, prisoners are set free, those who once mourned are filled with joy, the dead are raised and eternal life is inherited. This is the promise of the risen, eternal Christ.

In this present world things do not always work out the way they are supposed to, or the way we want them to. There is hunger, thirst and sickness. The question is: Will we trust God until then, as we go through difficulties and disappointments? Will we live in hope? Will we only see the present circumstances and allow ourselves to sink into bitterness and despair? As surely as sunrise conquers the dark and spring triumphs over winter, God's new day will heal all the wrongs of the world. Weakness will be turned to strength. Rejection will be forgotten in God's embrace. Joy comes in the morning. Love will conquer hate, good will triumph over evil and Jesus will reign.

I recently read this story: “Back in the 1920s, when Lou Little coached football at Georgetown University, he had a player of average ability who rarely got into the game. Yet he was fond of him, and especially liked the way he walked arm-in-arm with his father on campus. Shortly before the big contest with Fordham, the boy’s mother called the coach with news that her husband had died that morning of a heart attack. ‘Will you break the news to my son?’ she asked. ‘He’ll take it better from you.’ The student went home heavy hearted, but three days later he was back. ‘Coach,’ he pleaded, ‘will you start me in the Fordham game? I think it’s what my father would have liked most.’ After a moment’s hesitation, Little said, ‘Okay, but only for a play or two.’ True to his word, he put the boy in — but never took him out. For 60 action-packed minutes, that inspired young man ran and blocked like an All-American. After the game, Little praised him, ‘Son, you were terrific! You’ve never played like that before. What got into you?’ ‘Few people knew it,’ answered the boy, ‘but my father was totally blind. Today was the first time he ever saw me play!’”

All of us are blind and in need of Jesus’ touch. And one day our healing will be complete on that Day when God will make everything new. It is the promise of God, contained in this story of a blind man who received his sight. So great and so wonderful is this news that with joy we can sing the hymn Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am free, was blind but now I see. Amen