

Jesus through the Eyes of the Blind Man

I Samuel 16:1-13

John 9:1-41

“He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’”

“I cannot cause light,” Annie Dillard writes in an essay entitled “Seeing,” “the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam.” The man in John’s ninth chapter had been blind from birth. He lives in a darkness no sighted person can ever imagined. John tells us his story at the center of a Gospel we know to be riddled with light and darkness, blindness and sight, truth and lie. That Jesus sees the man who cannot see him is a literal fact. It is also a theological truth. From Nicodemus in the middle of the night and the Samaritan woman at the well to Judas in the garden and Pilate at the headquarters, those who dwell in darkness cannot of their own volition see the God who has come to them in Jesus Christ. Rather God in Christ sees them in the darkness of the human condition without God and pitches his tent.

Consider this man, John says, whose story is bears no resemblance to a man returning in amazement from the optician with a new set of specks or even from an ophthalmologist with his cataracts removed. Rather, here is a man about to see for the first time. John means us not simply to imagine what it would be like to be a man born blind. He means to say that we are this man: born in the darkness without a hope in the world unless the light of the world should shine in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

As he walked along, the story begins, *Jesus saw a man born blind from birth*. That is to say, the God who has come to us in Christ sees us in the darkness of our human condition without him. “*I am the light of the world*” Jesus had just said to religious leaders a chapter before and now is about to say the same to his disciples, “*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*”

The disciples, having not put themselves in the path of his beam, see the same man but they see in a wholly different way. “*Who sinned,*” the disciples ask at the sight of the blind man, “*the man or his parents that he was born blind?*” Of course they ask this question because this is how they have been taught to see. They see by the light of the institutions into which they were born: see the man born blind begging at the gate and, according to religion or family or nation, see him through the categories of culpability and blame. Is this not how we see as a nation still? No doubt the only word pronounced over the blind man by the institution representing God in the world was word of his God-forsakenness. His sickness, his infirmity, his tragic circumstances signaled the sin passed down from generation to generation.

But sin is not what Jesus sees. To repeat, Jesus sees a man born blind from birth, a human being dwelling in darkness without God in the world, a man who can claim nothing for himself and therefore a person radically open to the claim of the Living God upon his days. “*Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind,*” Jesus says, “*so that God’s work might be revealed in him.*” “Really?” rants Annie Dillard elsewhere. “The works of God made manifest? Do we really need more victims to remind us that we’re all victims?... Do we need blind men stumbling about...to remind us what God can—and will—do?”

We do not and that is precisely John’s point! Rather here is a man, Jesus says, who evidently cannot mistake the darkness for light, whose condition does not allow him the illusion of sightedness. Therefore if light should shine in his life, the light can only be from God. So like the great God Almighty at creation Jesus bends down and takes the dust of the earth, mixes it with living water and spreads mud on the blind man’s eyes.

The act, do you not see, is an act of creation. You and I have been born into the world prematurely as regards our humanity, born with parts of us not yet fully formed, born as creatures who may exist but do not live in the fullness of life for which we were made. We look but do not see, said the prophet Isaiah, hear but do not listen, think but do not understand. We beg to receive life from the things and powers that may promise life but cannot give life. Our creation is incomplete, our humanity unfinished until the light of the world should see us and say, “Here’s mud in your eye! Let there be light.”

“*Go wash in the pool of Siloam,*” Jesus says. He says this at the time of the feast of Tabernacles when the *living water*, the flowing water from the pool of Siloam--the waters of purification according to Numbers—washed God’s people clean in the Temple. No doubt they have become, in John’s understanding, the waters of baptism, the waters of birth by the spirit.

But they have become more. For the root word of Siloam, in Greek, is *hermenuti*: to interpret, to understand the meaning, to *see* through a particular lens. “Go wash in the pool of seeing...of understanding...of comprehending” the light that, according to John, “the darkness comprehended not.” But “for the newly sighted,” Dillard continues, “vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning. ‘The girl went through the experience that we all go through and forget, the moment we were born. She saw, but it did not mean anything....’”

How often this is the case with our believing? Light shines in the darkness, a moment of seeing is given, and then

we are on our own. As it is in the story, so it is in our lives: Jesus is there for a moment and then vanishes, leaving us to make sense of what the rest of the world cannot see. “Like many of us who live between Christ’s coming and his coming again,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “the man has to make his own sense out of what has happened to him and decide what he will say about it, in the face of enormous opposition.”

Well, there is no joy in his hometown but only questions and doubts. “He was formally well known among these people,” New Testament scholar and preacher Fred Craddock writes. “His stumbling and hesitant walk, his dependence, his poverty were his identity, they defined his place in the community. Now he walks upright, assured of place and direction, quite independent, only to discover that he has no place anymore”: no place because to see him as he is in the light of Jesus, those who first taught him to see things their way necessarily had to acknowledge their own blindness. They cannot.

Likewise he receives no affirmation from the religious community but rather accusation and judgment. The miracle, of course, happened on the Sabbath when healing is permitted in life and death situations. “What *was* the hurry?” they said. “The man has been blind from birth, for God’s sake!” Yet his life was hanging upon a gossamer thread without Christ. To see this, religion would have to acknowledge its distance from God, its misunderstanding of Scripture, its blindness. Religion cannot. Therefore the one born blind, who now sees things differently, whose very seeing has transgressed the law, must be excluded.

As Richard Lischer goes on to observe, the church in the time between Jesus’ resurrection and promised return “has always been pretty good at investigating irregularities but not so good at acknowledging the power of God that can be contained by no religious premises.” We are, in Barbara Brown Taylor’s words, “the consummate insiders—fully initiated, law-abiding, pledge-paying, creed-saying members of the congregation of the faithful.” Therefore when the man born blind attempts to bear witness to the light of the world in whose light he sees light, the authorities counter, “You were born entirely in sin, and you are trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.”

Thirty-nine verses later, Jesus returns. He has heard, somehow, that the man has been excommunicated. So Jesus again seeks this man who has yet to lay eyes on him! “*Do you believe in the Son of Man?*” Jesus asks him point blank. In complete innocence and admitted ignorance the man simply says, “*And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.*” Jesus says, as he has said to the woman at the well and as he soon will say to Martha at her brother’s death, “*You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.*” “*I believe,*” he says. “*And he worshipped him.*”

You and I dwell in the time between Christ’s coming and his coming again. We dwell amid communities—both secular and sacred, religious and scientific, Western and privileged—that are pretty darned sure they see things as they really are. We have learned to look through the lens of culpability and blame, law and order, right and wrong, bolstering our considered political and social judgments with the imprimatur of the Lord God Almighty. Only the testimony of the marginal counters our culture of certainty. For the most part their voices are silenced. For the most part those who have seen the light finally give up as though they prefer the darkness.

“A disheartening number of [these patients] refuse to use their new vision,” Dillard reports, “continuing to go over objects with their tongues and lapsing into apathy and despair. . . . Of one twenty-one-year-old girl, the doctor relates, ‘. . . she is never happier or more at ease than when, by closing her eyelids, she relapses into her former state of total blindness.’” Part of the reason for this, Dillard opines, is that “It oppresses them to realize, if they ever do at all, the tremendous size of the world, which they had previously conceived of as something touchingly manageable.” Need I state the obvious? We who once have seen our lives in the light of Christ would prefer to close our eyes than to realize the world is not something touchingly manageable by our small judgments.

Miraculously “Some do learn to see,” Dillard says at the end, “especially the young ones. But it changes their lives.” There is the rub! “. . . a twenty-two-[year]-old girl was dazzled by the world’s brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When at the end of that time she opened her eyes again, she did not recognize any objects, but ‘the more she now directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of gratification and astonishment overspread her features; she repeatedly exclaimed, ‘Oh God! How beautiful!’”

What is faith but seeing and listening and living every moment of every day as if for the first time in the light of him who first has seen us? We cannot cause light; the most we can do is try to put ourselves in the path of its beam. May gratitude and astonishment overspread your features every moment of every day, my friends; for it is the same God who said “Let light shine out of darkness” who has shone in your heart to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!