“The man born blind”

A sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent, 2020

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In our story this morning, a man born blind receives his sight from Jesus. It is considered one of Jesus’ healing miracles, and yet, I have rarely experienced it as such, and I have often wondered if the man born blind did!

Right out of the gate, John’s account of a man born blind is unsettling. It begins unlike any other Gospel accounts of the blind receiving sight, for it begins NOT with the blind man asking Jesus for sight (as in the other Gospels), but with Jesus and his disciples noticing a blind man, discussing whose fault it was that he was blind, and then giving him sight without ever interacting with him—without ever asking him whether he wanted to see.

From a disability rights standpoint, this story is about as bad as it can possibly get. Not only is the man’s blindness assumed to be something he would want to change, but, according to Jesus’ own answer about fault, the blind man is merely a vehicle by which to enable God to be revealed in the world.

*“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”*

From there, it continues to be challenging. The community marginalizes the man even further than when he was blind. He is now repeatedly brought to his community’s power structure, interrogated, and eventually thrown out of the synagogue. His own family feels forced to distance themselves from him for fear of being thrown out of the synagogue, themselves—forced to choose between their identity as parents and their identity as people of faith.

In the end, Jesus does come to find the man. And what does Jesus do? Jesus poses a single question to him: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man says “yes,” Jesus identifies himself as this believed-in Messiah, and [quote] “he worshiped him.”

And that’s the end of this man’s story with Jesus…Jesus effects no grand restoration between the man and his community. Jesus doesn’t invite him on to be a disciple. …after all of that…paragraphs and paragraphs, words and words to the story of this man….the end is simply that now the man believes in the Messiah.

Early in the week, this whole passage seemed distinctly void of Good News. At least after all that, I yearned for Jesus to make it right for this guy. It was because of the wonderings of Jesus’ *own* *disciples* that this guy’s whole life was turned upside down. I mean, don’t get me wrong—as a blind man in the ancient world it would have already been assumed by many that he was being punished for something. But, at least he had figured out some sort of life, even if at the margins of his community. But, after Jesus and the disciples get done with him, he has been turned out of the community and who knows what comes next.

Like each Gospel, John’s Gospel layers interpretation onto the actions of Jesus—changes the setting, or follows it with an explanatory discourse —in order to provide very particular “take home” messages. Therefore, as the intensity and fear of coronavirus swirled around me,

I was tempted to ignore all that interpretation--everything in the story except Jesus’ spit and mud on the man’s eyes and the vision that resulted.

But, as the week wore on, and on, and indeed, it did feel waring at many different points, the liberating Good News for me began to rely on the interpretation by John’s community just as much as it did on whatever true actions or words of Jesus were (or weren’t) included.

Because, the Good News for me has become that the man believes in the powerful, liberating presence of God—the long hoped-for Messiah of Israel—the one who will free the captives and give sight to the blind—even though that liberation has caused chaos in his life…he believes even though that liberating love has distanced him from his communty.

Remember, in the biblical use, “to believe” is ACTIVE—it is not just to *think* something is true…it is to *live* as if something is true…the transformed life he now has, living in every moment with the knowledge that God’s liberating love is real and is in him and around him and for him, is so fulfilling that whatever else is going on his life, that belief enables him to worship anyway—to access awe and wonder and joy.

We find ourselves in the same environment as this man—in the midst of chaos and social distance. Although in our case, it is *not* God’s liberating love that caused that chaos and distance, we have the same access to that divine love and the awe and wonder and joy it affords us.

Even now, perhaps especially now, we are all encountering God’s active presence in our lives. Like the man, we did not ask for a new vision—a keener ability to see things we might not have before. But, Jesus has the mud on his fingers and is giving it to us, anyway. I have been on numerous Zoom calls this week where many of you have talked of the chaos and isolation, and yet, also of the moments of connection or hope or comfort you have experienced. You talked of the ability to see and hear the birds now that you are home and traffic and construction noise has ceased. You talked of the phone calls you received—the comforting voice of Christ, embodied by your neighbors and fellow parishioners. You talked of the time for family dinners or games, even of the new awareness of yourself, and those places deep within that still yearn for divine transformation. You talked of seing the grocery store cashiers, and the elderly needing to do their own shopping, and the doctors and nurses and restaurant employees, all risking exposure, and you prayed for God’s protection and intervention on their behalf.

*“…when [Jesus] found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.”*

May we all be found by…and see…and believe…and worship that same Messiah—the very love of God--incarnate in the world—even our world—even now. AMEN.