

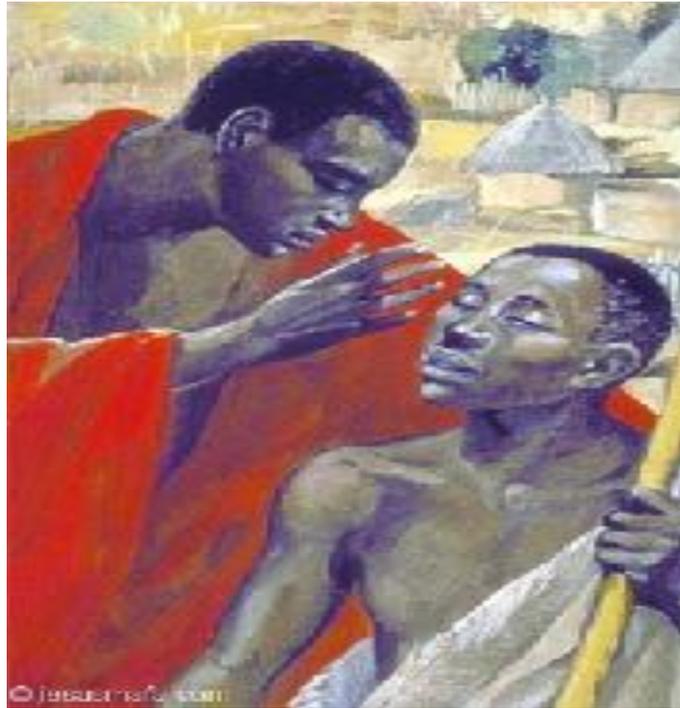
**John 9:1-17, 24-34**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup>We must work the works of the One who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ <sup>6</sup>When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. <sup>8</sup>The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ <sup>9</sup>Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ <sup>10</sup>But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ <sup>11</sup>He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ <sup>12</sup>They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

<sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup>Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ <sup>16</sup>Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. <sup>17</sup>So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

<sup>24</sup> For the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’ <sup>25</sup>He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ <sup>26</sup>They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ <sup>27</sup>He answered them, ‘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?’ <sup>28</sup>Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup>We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ <sup>30</sup>The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup>We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. <sup>32</sup>Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup>If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. <sup>34</sup>They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

“I am the light of the world” – I came into the world to redefine what it means to see.



This is a story about seeing and not seeing – a story about what we can and cannot see – what we refuse to see. More than a healing story, it is a story about who is blind and who is sighted. In *John's* Gospel the story of this blind man being cured takes *exactly two verses* – one verse for Jesus to spit and make mud, and a second verse for the man to follow Jesus' instruction to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Just two verses for the act of healing. The controversy surrounding the cure, this takes 39 verses – the controversy takes so long that we had to edit the story to get it to fit in the bulletin – 39 verses for the man's neighbors and Jewish leaders and Pharisees to interrogate him, his parents, and him again a second time. 39 verses until the Pharisees have had enough and kick this newly once blind man out of their sight – they bar him from the synagogue.

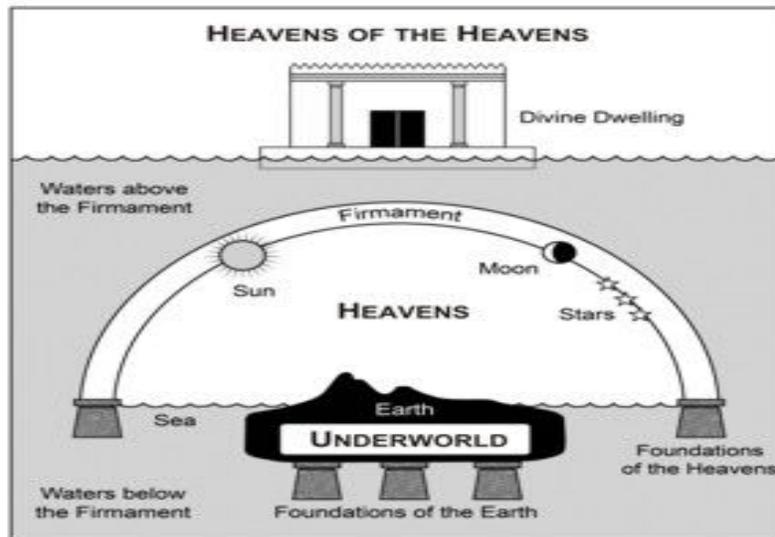
The possibility of this new reality is too much for them – so threatening that they can't even be around it. Perhaps the author of *John* is telling us that, in the kingdom of God, it is easier for the blind to get their sight, than for the self-assured and secure to question their reality. And so, it is a story about seeing and not seeing, about what we refuse to see.

The summer that Jenna and I started dating, I was home in Lincoln for a few weeks visiting my family, and my mom and I went to go have coffee with our family friend Jolene. Jolene is blind, she has been blind from birth. She has always challenged my categories of sight and blindness, for example, she always asks what color things are. So we were driving with Jolene to a coffee shop and she said, "Marc, I have to tell you that I had a dream about you the other night." That sentence always makes me a little nervous, you never know where this might go or what your dream self might have done. "I dreamed that you were married to a woman named Jenna." This was before I had told her about this new woman in my life. I am not one who usually puts too much stock into dreams that tell us the future, but what could I say...I hoped she was right. Some of us can see what others cannot.

Jesus and the disciples are walking along, the disciples notice a man who is blind. The disciples, being good Seminary students, see this as an opportunity to ask their professor, "why – why is this man blind?" They do not ask what you or I would probably ask, "Jesus, what is the appropriate response to someone panhandling?" If only they would have asked that! But they do not, they do not even ask if they should give him some money – they do not strike up a conversation with him – and they certainly do not expect healing to occur. Instead they want to

have a conversation, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This was the worldview at the time, that tragedy or blindness was a punishment from God, and so this is all they could see, someone being punished for the sin. They did not expect any healing to happen, they probably did not believe it possible. **So, their worldview blinded them to the activity of God.**

Preachers and Biblical scholars, we like to help explain Biblical worldviews. It helps to make sense of many Biblical stories and writings – it helps us explain and understand people writing from thousands of years ago. We explain the ancient worldview in this way:



four corners of the earth, the pillars that hold us above the ever-extending ocean, the firmament that creates the dome and separates land from sky; the view that the gods live up above the firmament (one God if you are monotheistic, all the gods if you are not) – the belief that wars up in the heavenly dwelling are played out with wars down here (warring gods and warring peoples). This was part of the Ancient near East worldview. But the people at this time, they were no less convinced of the correctness of their worldview than we are of ours.

I am sure that in a few hundred years, someone will be explaining away our worldview as primitive and blinding, that if our theological writings are being used, their scholars will be explaining away our primitive worldview – they will do so with the same arrogance with which we explain-away the ancient near east worldview (as if it has nothing to teach us). They might say things like, “they didn’t think Pluto was a planet”, or “they believed they were the only intelligent life”, or “they believed all of this was created with a Big Bang”, or “they thought the planet was only 4.5 billion years old.” And they will snicker at our ignorance. They might say things like, “they took pills to try and get well”, or “they believed you could have peace through war” or “they believed that there was no spiritual dimension to life – they only believed in what they could see or think of.” And so, **our rationalistic worldview, it can blind us to the activity of God**

The neighbors of this man, those who had seen him begging every day, they could not fathom that this could be the same person. Some thought it must be him, but others said, “no, it is just someone who looks like him.” He kept telling them that it was him, “I am the man” he said, “he made mud and put it on my eyes...I once was blind, but now I see.” They did not believe him. And who can blame them, for the story itself says, “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.” It did not matter what the man said, no one would believe him. He was just a beggar after all, what does a panhandler have to teach us? **So, their experience – and lack of experience – it blinded them to the activity of God.**

The past few weeks in Adult Sunday School we have been talking about race and the church, and how and why the concept of race was created, about how it was used. And as part of

that discussion we talked about a part of Drew Hart's book, *Trouble I've Seen*, in which he says that for those of us in the dominant social group, we need to "not go with our gut." And what he means by that is that, the dominant social location is actually the worst place to see from – that my socialization as a white male with a growing savings account actually gives me the most blinders – it actually makes it hardest for me to truly see what is happening with anyone who is in another social location.

Only one year of my life have I had a non-white roommate, Doug Jones. Doug is a 6'2" tall 225 pound Black man. And Doug used to tell me stories about the police in his home town harassing him – he told me about getting pulled over for no reason, about getting searched for no reason. And when he would be telling me these things, I would always be thinking to myself, "that can't be right – you must be exaggerating", or "that must just have been one bad cop – you must have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time." It was not until the height of things in Ferguson and the Black Lives Matter Movement that I remembered those stories and began to think, "maybe Doug was telling me the truth." I could not see it because that was not my experience, because I had been socialized to trust the police, because I had never been treated unfairly by police or pulled over for no reason. Doug tried to tell me, but I was unwilling to see... **So, our experience – and lack of experience – it blinds us to the activity of God.**

And the Pharisees enter our drama, they take a different tactic. Perhaps seeing that some people were beginning to believe that this man was actually healed, they began to try and cast doubt on the source of the healing – they tried to cast a shadow over the 'light of the world.' It is so much easier to cast doubt than build hope, so much easier to point out where things were not perfect, or

could have been said a bit better. The Pharisees point out that the healing took place on a Sabbath. And so, perhaps the man was healed, but not healed with power from above – only with power from below. They could not hold together the possibility that any good thing could take place in a manner that was not totally consistent with following of the law. They were secure in the law. They were confident in the law. **And so, their security, it blinded them to the life-changing activity of God.**

Some of you have heard about Michael Sharp, a Mennonite who was working with the United Nations investigating conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo – he with one other UN worker and four Congolese were kidnapped just over a week ago. Nothing has yet been heard of their situation. Michael's father, John Sharp, was interviewed this past week, he said of his son's abduction, "I have said on more than one occasion that we peacemakers should be willing to risk our lives as those who join the military do. Now it's no longer theory." Those are the words of a parent who sees differently – one who, even in his pain, tried to acknowledge his son was trying to be faithful to the God of peace – the God who often moves us beyond security. **Our false American sense of security, it so often blinds us to the life-changing activity of God.**

In the full 41 verses of this unfolding drama, what I find most amazing is that not one living soul says, "Alleluia!" or "Thank God!" No one asks him what it is like to see for the first time or whether the light hurts his eyes. All they want to know is how, who, where and what – they want it explained – they want it explained away. Our story is a healing story of a man who was born blind, and **it's the story of a religious community that had absolutely no expectations.** Their

lack of expectation, their lack of imagination, their lack of possibility – it blinds them to the activity of God.

This might be the most hypocritical sermon I have ever preached, for in no story do I relate better to the Pharisees than in this story: when it comes to struggling to believe the unbelievable – when it comes to seeking to disprove the mysterious – when it comes to accepting that which falls outside of my known and rational worldview – I am with the Pharisees on this one. In stories of mysterious healings or aliens, I am always the first to ask, “what is the most likely rational explanation for this?” Probably like most of the leaders of our dying Christian institutions, my expectations are usually quite low – I don’t usually expect much dramatic change. There is probably a correlation to this and the swiftly shrinking sizes of our institutions.

Me and the Pharisees, we like to point out that there are a lot of astounding things that happen in the world that *may not* have anything to do with the power of God. They may have to do only with the power of the human imagination, or the power of suggestion, or the placebo effect, or worse yet, with the power of outright deception. *What if something is not God and we believe that it is?*

But, the story of the man born blind suggests that there is another question at least as important as that one. “What if it is God and I believe that it is *not?*” That is the one question me and the Pharisees forgot to ask.

The good news for me, is that every time this drama repeats itself in our own time, we get to try out for a different part. We may even get to add one: the dazzled witness who says, “**Praise God, will you look at that!**” Because wonder, not suspicion, is the beginning of worship.

Let us remember that we follow the one who said, “I am the light of the world” – the one who came into the world to redefine what it means to see.

May we have eyes to see.

May we see with hope;  
may we see with possibility;  
may we see with expectation;  
may we see with wonder.

May we have eyes to see.

Amen.