

Eyes Opened

John 9: 1-41

Northminster Presbyterian Church

February 11, 2018 – Transfiguration Sunday

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Prolific writer and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann's prayer "*Be your powerful, active, sovereign self*" begins:

"You are a God who creates and recreates,
 who judges and delivers,
 who calls by name and makes new..." (2003 124).

Our God *is* a God that recreates, delivers, and makes new — sometimes in spite of humans' actions; sometimes only with humans' willingness to change. In our passage for this morning, recreation requires a man's willingness. One's eyes and heart must be open to seeing the world in a different way, willing to change their way of living and to give up aspects of life as they know it. The man born blind has this openness to a new way of being. The Pharisees, though they have vision, cannot see a future that is different than the past.

Change can be very hard and very scary, even if it is for the better. Years ago, an eye surgeon passed a food cart and its owner on his way to the office each morning. The food cart owner happened to be blind. After walking past him hundreds of times, the doctor invited the food cart owner in for an examination to see if it was possible to restore any of the man's sight. It turned out that there was a procedure that could correct his vision. Knowing the food cart owner could not pay for the procedure, the doctor generously offered to do it at no cost to him. Yet, the man refused. To regain his sight at this time in his life, he said, would change his lifestyle too much; he would not be able to cope with the change. His reality may have some unique challenges, but he could navigate those. He could not direct the unknown. No thank you, he said.

The man born blind similarly has created honed tools that enable him to navigate through life, even if it is a life on the margins. But unlike the food cart owner, the man born blind is open to changing this reality. His heart and eyes are open, even if he lacks vision.

The man born blind hears Jesus and the disciples talking about him and he listens as Jesus spits at the ground, his saliva pooling in the dirt. He feels the air shift with Jesus' movement right in front of him as Jesus bends down to make the saliva and dirt into mud, and he is calm when Jesus spreads this mud over his eyes. He doesn't flinch when Jesus then tells him to wash his eyes in the nearby pool of Siloam. Silently, he does as instructed. Miraculously, the man returns from the pool, eyes mud-free and opened, now able to see.

This man, now healed, was born blind to Jewish parents who belonged to the community's synagogue. Presumably, he grew up learning the laws of Judaism. His description of Jesus as "The man called Jesus" tells us that he was not familiar with Jesus before this event and didn't believe him to be God (John 9:11). But he was open to Jesus putting mud on his eyes, doing work, despite the fact that it was the Sabbath and to do so was unlawful; despite the fact that Jesus was a stranger to him; despite the fact that allowing Jesus to do this may only further marginalize him from his Jewish community.

Despite all of this, the man born blind was open to trying something new with someone different.

The Pharisees, however, were not open to either — something new or someone different — especially if he broke the Sabbath. What he did was wrong. The leaders tell the man born blind: “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath” (John 9:16).

God, through Jesus, is doing a new thing right in front of them, and the Pharisees just can't see it. “...We are disciples of Moses,” they affirm. “We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we don't know where he comes from” (John 9:29). Rather than being open to Jesus, they are using the law to accuse him of wrongdoing.

The leaders' need to control the situation enables them to lose sight of the miracle of the man and God's presence among them. The authorities cannot accept the miracle, despite several confirmations of it. The man born blind's parents confirm the lifelong blindness of their son; the man born blind confirms his sight two times: “One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9: 25). It is the Pharisees that are now stuck in blindness.

The man born blind sees not only the world, but begins to glimpse the light of the world, Jesus, changing his life forever. He continues: “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (John 9: 32-33).

As disciples Peter, James and John journeyed alongside Jesus, watching him heal people, speak to and eat with the people they'd always tried to ignore (people like the man born blind) and hearing him teach ways of living contrary to the rules of the synagogue they had always known, they began to believe that Jesus was from God. But they were still unsure who he was, exactly. Was he John the Baptist? Was he a prophet? Was he the Messiah? Their humanness, like the Pharisees', blinded them from recognizing the light of the world, especially on the night when Jesus rose in radiant glory to stand alongside Elijah and Moses, revealing to the disciples his divinity. On that mountain Jesus was not hidden from them by the law but was illumined so brightly they could not see.

The appearance of Jesus with Elijah and Moses in the glory of shining light and clouds made Jesus unrecognizable to the disciples, and they were definitely scared. Upon hearing God's command to them: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” They were “overcome with fear”. They became blind to God incarnate standing right in front of them. The disciples got off the mountain and said nothing about the encounter.

The disciples and the Pharisees were both afraid of a God that was not familiar to them. Their humanness blinds them from Jesus' divinity. And they don't realize it; they don't realize they are blinded from seeing the light of the world.

Herein is the problem, as Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary's Professor Osvaldo Vena reflects, “The only way people can approach the light of God shown in the person of Jesus Christ is acknowledging their own blindness.¹” It's hard to recognize blindness when your vision is fine, or so you think.

¹ 2017, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3191.

Yes, you may have 20/20 vision, but physically observing the things around us is no guarantee that we can see God's presence in the midst of it all. In fact, it is no guarantee that we'll be able to see what is right in front of us. One night last week I had put my second grader's homework sheet on the counter so he'd be sure to see it in the morning. The next day, as he came downstairs, I told him that it was waiting on the counter. He then sat at the counter, looking at the sheet and random pens and that were strewn about. After a few seconds of watching him *not* start the homework but just sit there, I said, "Nathan, do your homework please." To which he replied, "I will mom, but where is it?" I paused for a second, baffled by his question. "Right in front of you," I replied. He looked down again and said quietly, "Oh, right," and got started.

Unfortunately these experiences of blindness are not limited to children (though they may be more prevalent). We are constantly taking in information, hearing buzzing or feeling buzzes from our smart devices. We are taking in news bytes all the time; new bites that, these days, are an awful lot to chew. But there is no time to digest the information because we are on to the next task. In an age of perpetual distraction, it is easier than ever to miss what's staring you in the face, and more difficult than ever to see God. So much of the time we lack attention to and awareness of the holy in the ordinary. We also neglect to live out God's commands because it is easier not to. Because to love the person you are fighting with, in the business office or the bedroom, makes you too vulnerable.

On this transfiguration Sunday, the man born blind offers us the example of one who had his eyes opened, and the eyes of his heart. He is one who is paying attention to and is aware of God, even if he can't articulate it, one who, through the miracle of regaining his sight, begins to come to faith; moves toward a relationship with Jesus. He is one with eyes and heart opened to be warmed and transformed by the light of the world's glow.

Have our lives been transfigured through our relationship with Jesus? Are we moved to love one another even when we're having a bad day? Are our hearts and eyes opened?

Brueggemann's prayer suggests maybe not, but we are trying. We "...ponder the chance that we are too glib, that we say more than we mean, that we say more than we can in fact risk. We make our gingerly confession in a world filled with those who cynically acknowledge none but themselves...and we are their fellow travelers with those who in vulnerability have no chance but in prayer to you...and we stand in solidarity with them." (2003 124).

In these moments of solidarity, our eyes are opened, if only for a few moments at a time. Friends, this is the journey of faith. A journey of eyes being opened time and time again, until, we pray, they are opened fully, like the man born blind.

In the meantime, we pray the conclusion of Brueggemann's prayer, with hearts and eyes opened, this moment:

"...we ask, beyond our critical reservations,
 that you be your powerful, active, sovereign self.
 Give us eyes to see your wonders around us;
 Give us hearts to live into your risky miracles;
 Give us tongues to praise you beyond a doubt.
 For it is to you, only you, that we turn on behalf of the world
 that waits in its deathliness for your act of life. Amen" (2003 124).

Works Cited

Brueggemann, Walter. 2003. "Be your powerful, active, sovereign self" in *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. p. 124.

Vena, Osvaldo. March 26, 2017. "Commentary on John 9: 1-41" from *WorkingPreacher.com*. Accessed on February 7, 2018.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3191