

Sermon: I Once Was Blind
Text: John 9:1-41
Date: February 25, 2018
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.
John 9:24

Lent, week two. In case you've missed this along the way, let me briefly say that our theme for Lent this year is *The Ridiculous Journey: Following a Nobody from Nowhere*.

Grace and I found a film series centered around that theme, featuring commentary by several well-known faith leaders, and we are using that series in our adult education class through Palm Sunday.

So we thought it would be wonderful and fruitful to weave what we're doing in the classroom together with what we're doing here in the sanctuary, during worship throughout Lent.

We further decided to explore this theme, of this ridiculous journey, by following along with Jesus through the gospel of John, and exploring each week one of the big stories about this nobody from nowhere found in John's gospel.

Grace got us off to a wonderful start last week, with her sermon on the woman at the well. Her closing invitation resonated so deeply with me that I shared it with Session as our opening devotional this past Tuesday.

In case you weren't here last week, and just to help set the stage for all of us for this ongoing journey, I want to share it again today.

In this season of Lent, I invite you to find time to come to the well, come to the waters. Whatever that well may look like. Lent is a time of reflection, introspection, examination of our lives and the world around us. It is a time to notice where we are thirsty and why.

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Part of what I love about this question, this invitation to engage in spiritual reflection, is that it is grounded in a bodily experience. We all know what it's like to be thirsty. And on some primordial level, we also know how essential it is to our survival to satisfy that thirst.

So, it's a powerful move to shift the focus from literal thirst, and to ask where we are thirsty spiritually.

The story Anne told for us today is grounded in yet another bodily experience, only this one is not universal.

It's a long story, and it covers a lot of ground thematically and theologically. But through all the other detail and dialogue, one sentence leaped off the page for me as I was preparing for today:

One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.

That moment when the blind man regains his sight must have been an extraordinary experience for him, a stupendous transformation.

But we, the reader, we get no glimpse of what that moment was like. We are effectively blind to it.

What was it like for this desperate man, so long accustomed to a life of blindness, a life on the margins, a life reduced to begging for pennies from unseen passers-by to buy a crust of bread, a man who had never seen his mother's face, or the beauty of the Judean hills covered with flowers in the springtime--what was it like for this man suddenly to see?

John doesn't tell us but it turns out that we have access to another story that can shed light on that question, one that can illuminate of what it's like to be blind for many, many years, and then suddenly to see.

So I'm going invite you to follow me on a little bit of a journey of our own today. And to do that, I'm going to ask you to close your eyes. We've done this from time to time.

But usually I invite you to do this to better imagine the narrative world that we're visiting, say, the sights, smells and sounds of the city landfill outside of Tegucigalpa Honduras.

But this time, I'm going to ask that you approach this exercise a little differently. This time I'm not going to ask you to focus on what you can see in your mind's eye. I'm going to ask you to imagine that you can't see anything at all. I'm going to ask you to imagine that you are totally blind.

With eyes closed, imagine that you were born with vision, but were blinded by a small chemical explosion as a young child. You lost one eye altogether in the accident, and you totally lost the vision in the other.

Which is one of life's cruel ironies. Because even more than most children, you seem flooded by a boundless energy. Your whole being is animated by wild enthusiasm, your perception of the world fueled by insatiable curiosity.

Plus, you loved to run. Full-bore was basically your only speed. Indeed, despite your blindness you still run. But now it's a hazardous undertaking. You frequently hit your head on low hanging branches. You smash your shin on playground equipment you literally cannot see.

Years pass and you slowly adjust to your blindness. You come to accept your limitations, and you even learn to work around them to a large extent.

You find a wonderful life partner who sees past your blindness and is happy to marry you. But she, or he, must do almost everything.

You can't help much around the house. You cannot dust, or sweep, or reliably sort and do laundry.

You cannot drive to the store when you're out of milk.

You cannot drive yourself to the doctor or the dentist. Or to church.

You can't see the beautiful sanctuary that means so much to your wife, with its soaring wooden beams, towering rock wall and clear windows that look out at dogwood trees that bloom in the spring.

You cannot see the rattlesnake that slithered onto your porch while you were relaxing in your favorite chair.

You've learned to live with and adapt to these limitations. Luckily, you married someone who's good with a shove and not afraid to use it on a rattlesnake. And you've come to accept that this is your life, that you will never see things like movies, or sunsets, or flowers in the spring, or where the mashed potatoes sit on the dinner table, or what the sanctuary looks like at church, or the flash of your spouse's smile, or the color of her eyes.

And you go on like this, fully reconciled to your blindness, until one day your doctor tells you there's been an advance. Researchers have developed a new technique, one that involves transplanted stem cells, which he believes can restore your vision.

It sounds too good to be true. Like one of those stories from the Bible your pastor seems to love so much, but that you secretly believe are little more than fables. But this one is true. (Let me ask you to keep your eyes closed for just a moment more.)

And we know the story is true because it happened to Mike May. All of it, starting with the chemical explosion as a child.

Mike's full story is documented in a book called *Crashing Through*, by Robert Kurson.

As Kurson notes, the accident happened when Mike was so young, he grew up thinking his blindness was normal. He never really thought about having vision after that, or what it would be like to see the ocean, or the stars. He was happy to walk through life, totally blind, unable to see his mother's face, or, later, his wife's face, or to watch his sons play soccer.

Until he met Dr. Dan Goodman, who performed the stem cell transplant and changed Mike's life forever.

After the surgery was over, Mike headed to Dr. Goodman's office, for what he believed was a routine post-op visit. But the doctor surprised him. While inspecting his stitches, Goodman started to lift the gauze from his eyes.

“[Now] he’s pulling open Mike’s eyelid. (Let me now invite you to open your eyes.) “Can you see a little bit?” Dr. Goodman asks.

Here’s how the author describes that moment:

“BOOM! WHOOSH! OOOOHHHH....

“A cataclysm of white light explodes into [Mike’s] eye and his skin and his blood and his nerves and his cells, it was everywhere, it was around him and inside him, inside his hair, on top of his breath...glued to Dr. Goodman’s voice, on his hands, it was fantastically bright . . . but not painful...and it rushed toward him and around him . . . and now Goodman asked again, ‘Can you see anything?’

And Mike exclaims, “Holy smoke! I sure can!” (*Crashing Through*, pg. 126 ff.)

Mike May immediately begins to notice color, everything around him was now blooming with it, again, like a miracle you might hear about in church. His wife’s face slowly takes shape, materializing in front of him like she’s Eve, being made from something inside of him.

He walks to his car on his own, no guide dog, no cane.

After a terrifying and wondrous ride on the freeway, his wife at the wheel, Mike gets home and his youngest son leaps into his arms.

Mike is staring at his boy’s face from three inches away. He thought he knew him so well that there was not anything more he could possibly know. Except now he sees that his son has freckles. He traces the freckles with his finger. Then, when he says this out loud, “You have freckles,” his wife bursts into sobs.

His other son now joins his brother and the two of them take their dad outside. Mike has spent scores of hours in the backyard with them. He knows it by feel as well as he knows the sound of their voices.

But now it’s as if he’s been taken to a planet made completely of miracles. A single daffodil is not just a yellow flower, it’s a pallet of yellows, a cacophony of color, sitting on top of a stem so perfectly green it belongs in a museum of perfect things.

Mike May once was blind, but now he sees. He was perfectly at home living without sight, totally blind to the astonishing wonders that surrounded him every minute of every day.

Having that veil lifted was so far beyond what he could imagine or believe, he might as well have been in a different realm. He might as well have been in heaven.

But then something unexpected starts to happen. Mike starts to see things that are not so wondrous. Things he wishes he could not see, things he wishes were not true, things he wishes were not part of the world around him. Homeless people sleeping on park benches. Air pollution belching from industrial smokestacks. Marchers carrying tiki torches through America's cities. Photographs from Aleppo and from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High.

Which brings us back to the beginning of our story. Imagine that you were the blind man, sitting beside the pool of Siloam.

It's been many years now since Jesus passed by and restored your sight. You've since gotten married and moved away, out to the countryside, where you can enjoy the flowers that bloom every spring in the Judean hills.

On the anniversary of this life-changing event, you return for a visit to that pool which was your home for so many years.

Your mind drifts back to the memory of what it was like to live without vision.

Which is why it surprises you when one of the people who used to put pennies in your basket approaches you and asks you a question you did not see coming.

What wonders have you grown blind to since your sight was restored?

You ponder the question for a moment and briefly consider whether this stranger is really Jesus who has returned to ask it and just as you're ready to answer, the stranger asks another question, one that stays with you the whole way on your long journey home:

What are you choosing not to see, and why?