

John 9: 1-41

At this unprecedented time, as most of us are staying home, socially distancing ourselves from people, moving away from daily routines and activities, including worship services at St. Paul's; we gain a better understanding of what it feels like to live life in a new way. We gain an understanding of what it feels like to interact with people whom we cannot physically see. We gain an understanding of what it feels like to live (at least temporarily) separated from others.

Our gospel passage for today speaks of a man who was born blind. He is a person who has never experienced life in the ways that most of us do. He is a person who has lived in darkness through no fault of his own or his parents, yet the darkness he has always known has both physical and spiritual components.

In the present day, we know that blindness is not caused by sin, but in the first century, there was little understanding of disease and disability, or of cause and effect. The disciples' opening questions suggest that the man or his parents sinned and that is the cause of the man's blindness. But modern science tells us otherwise. We ask instead...who are the one's in this gospel passage who are living in darkness? Who are the one's who are actually blind?

Using a concept we will call, "picture" imagery, as described in Craig Saterlee's book, Learning to Picture God from Those who Cannot See (p. 45), I have created an exercise that will allow us to immerse ourselves in the world of the blind. But, we are not experiencing this as ourselves. Rather, we are experiencing this as the person in our scripture passage; the man who was born blind.

Close your eyes if you wish, and "picture" your life without physical sight--

* What does your blindness mean for you? How has it affected your life? You have never been able to see peoples' faces, their clothing, the beautiful colors in nature--plants and animals with

their glorious shades and hues, sunsets or rainbows. Your world has always been black, and in that visual sense, you have always lived in darkness.

* You are a beggar, and your life depends on the generosity of the people in your community. You rely on your other senses to guide you through each day. You can hear people's footsteps, and you have learned to distinguish them--the light, quick steps of children; the heavy, plodding steps of the men; the lighter steps of the women, and the shuffling steps of some of the elderly.

* You can smell them too. The perfumes and scents of the people wafting, and mixing, and mingling in your nose.

* You occasionally feel the touch of persons passing by; some jostling you and nearly tripping over you.

At times, there is a great din, a cacophony of sound, when everyone seems to be speaking at once.

At other times.... the speaking.....is.... in..... whispers.

* How do people see you? You do not know, because you have no concept of sight, or even what you look like.

*How do they treat you? Often you are ignored, avoided, cast aside by others in the community; treated like the dirt you sit in. The ground is dusty, at times muddy, smelly, and uncomfortable. Your clothes are mangled with clumps of dried dirt, and you smell, because of your closeness to the ground.

You hear a man asking those around him if you have sinned, or your parents. But today, a man whose voice you hear clearly above the others, replies differently to this question. He is not debating with the people as to whether it was you or your parents. He says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work

the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world. I am the light of the world." (NRSV)

His response is so different. He is not blaming you or your parents, but saying that you are to reveal God's works. You have heard of the one called "The Messiah." He speaks, too, of day and night. What are these things, day and night? Other persons speak of day and night, but you do not know them. And what does he mean by saying, "I am the light of the world?"

The man who speaks of "God's works," has not labeled you or called you names. He has not ignored you, but rather, he has spoken of you more kindly than most. He says that you are to "reveal God's works." How can this be, when you know so little about God, and no one listens to what you say.

Your mind is racing. Who is this man who speaks of God? You hear someone spit on the ground. Then you feel warm mud being applied to your face. A man's fingers are gently rubbing the mud over your eyelids. The once dry dirt is now wet, and there.....is.....quiet. What is happening? What is this man doing? Is he attempting to help or hurt you? You do not know, but you can feel his power! You can sense his strength! You can tell as he continues, that something good is happening!

Now he is talking to you. He says, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam."

How do you feel when you hear these words spoken directly to you in a personal, caring way?

You jump up, and with your staff to support you as you walk on uneven ground, you traverse up and down the roads leading to the pool of Siloam. Here it is! Here is the pool! Is the man who speaks of God really going to heal you?

You thrust your hand into the water. It is cool. You splash it on your face again and again.

Slowly.....hesitantly.....carefully, you open..... your..... eyes, and immediately, you can see! No longer is your world the world of a person who is blind; a world of darkness. You can see! You can see all the colors in the world. You are healed! Thanks be to God. (pause)

Our "picture" imagery has ended, but the man's questioning continues. How could this happen? The members of his community and the Pharisees do not believe that it is possible. They do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. It goes against their logic, their rules, their reasoning. It goes against what they know and believe. And yet, the man who was born blind can see. How can the man who was without sight, not believe in this miracle that has been given to him? He must believe, for it is real!

What is the message of this scripture passage? Perhaps it reminds you, as it does me, of Luke 4:17-19, when Jesus is in the synogogue in Nazareth. Scripture says,

...and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him [Jesus]. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (NRSV)

Jesus read this passage to the Jewish people, communicating to all who were present that he is the Messiah, the anointed one, the one of whom Isaiah prophesized. And Jesus' proclaiming, teaching, healing, and sharing the good news, are fulfilled in the story of the man born blind: a beggar who is poor, blind, and oppressed by society, whose sight is restored by Jesus, the one whom the Pharisees say is not the Messiah. While some would suggest that this story is simply a story of healing, what sets it apart from other healing stories is the man's progression in his belief in Jesus. Like Nicodemus, and many of the Samaritan people in our sermons of the last two weeks, the man born blind moved from darkness to light. This pericope is a miracle, a healing, a conversion, a story of discipleship that evolves as the man's faith is kindled by Jesus' word, Jesus'

touch and the work of the Holy Spirit.

But Jesus teaches that it is not the man born blind, but the Pharisees and others in the community who are blind. They refuse to acknowledge Jesus' power to heal, wondering if this is indeed the man who was born blind. The Pharisees interview the man twice, and interview his parents. They refuse to accept Jesus' healing. They refuse to accept that Jesus did nothing wrong by healing on the Sabbath. All of these people who can physically see, live in darkness by refusing to acknowledge and accept the light that comes from Jesus, who is the Messiah.

From darkness to light. Jesus is the light of the world. When the man born blind is healed of his physical blindness, it is Jesus' light that also heals his spiritual blindness. The man has become a believer, a person who carries his faith with him not only because of Jesus' healing, but because of Jesus' teaching. And now, the man is ready to share his story with others, to be a disciple of Jesus. Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, he has been changed. He, too, has moved from a life of spiritual darkness to light.

As we contemplate the changes going on in our own lives these days, let us be mindful of the ways in which uncertainty can creep into our thoughts, blinding us from the reality of God's grace. As we hear God's word in scripture, let us remember that we too can be blind to the things that God desires for us. If we let our current separation from others and fear of the unknown lead us to feelings of darkness and despair, we too need to focus our eyes once again on the light. For the light that we need each and every day, is the light of God. God who is with us in every time and place. God who loves us with an everlasting love. God who cares for us even in the midst of these uncertain times. And let us see God's light at work in the world in the many disciples of Jesus, who scatter His light throughout the world, through their Christ-like service. Jesus, God's word, who promises forgiveness, grace and eternal life to those who believe and place their trust in him.

As we continue walking with Jesus during the 40-days of Lent in his journey to the cross and his glorious resurrection, we are reminded of many who have come to faith; those who say or even sing the words of Amazing Grace-- "I was blind, but now I see." May we see clearly as our faith in God leads us to walk even more closely with him from darkness into light. Amen.