

Lent 4A
John 9:1-41

LEARNING TO SEE

Pastor Erik here, sending grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Creator, from Jesus our Brother, and from the Holy Spirit, who knits us together in community even when we're apart.

This week we're adding a new element to this recording—a prelude and postlude offered by Minister of Music Jon Lackey and his partner James Jelasic. My message begins after the prelude...

[PRELUDE]

I hope, as you hear my voice, that you and those you love are managing well as we continue our journey through this unprecedented time.

As social isolation becomes more strict, adjustments must be made that test our capacity for change. Yet, in times such as these, we may find ourselves summoning capacities we didn't know we had!

I hope you feel new capabilities rising within you and members of your circle, so that the changes being asked of you are not overwhelming.

I'll continue sending weekly communications via email as well as posting on the SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS section our homepage: www.peacelutheranseattle.org.

I'm working closely with our technology team to enlarge our capacity to connect with each other during this time. We hope to expand options for group and individual video sharing soon. I'm grateful to Jon and James for the music offerings contributed today, and to Dustin Smith for knitting it all together.

Some of you have been taking advantage of the invitations and links that Nicole, our Director of Youth and Family Ministry, has been sending out. We hope a growing number of you will seize upon these invitations as an opportunity for meaningful engagement.

Finally, my phone calls to every Peace household continue, and if you haven't yet heard from me, know that the call is coming.

Before we turn to today's Scripture reading from the Gospel of John, I want to share a reflection about St. Patrick, whose Feast Day was this past Tuesday, March 17th.

Patrick grew up in a somewhat privileged family, on the west coast of Britain during the waning days of the Roman empire. And though his father was a Christian deacon and his grandfather a priest, Patrick, as a child, was not very religious.

But when he was kidnapped as a teenager by Irish raiders, his life was turned upside down. Sold to an Irish chieftain, Patrick found himself in exile—herding sheep and living in isolation and depravation in the north of Ireland.

It was there, during six long years of captivity, that he discovered the voice of God speaking to him from within. Responding to that voice, he fell into a rhythm of prayer each day.

It was this same voice that inspired Patrick, six years later, to make his risky escape from slavery. Walking 200 miles through forests and bogs, he found his way to a port and onto a ship, and, eventually, was reunited with his family. This experience of exile seeded a spiritual conversion within Patrick and he started on a new path of love for God, for his neighbor, and even for his enemies. Much to the consternation of his family and the amazement of his former owners, he returned to Ireland years later as a missionary to preach and practice the love and mercy of God.

The poem attributed to him, known as “St. Patrick’s Breastplate,” invokes the power of the Holy Trinity, the powers of heaven and earth, and the power of faith in Christ as ever-present companion.

In recent years Patrick’s prayer has become precious to me. Reciting it daily helps to keep me grounded as I attend the challenges each day brings. I share it with you now with the invitation that you seek out, in your own way, spiritual resources that will serve to ground you in these times.¹

I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity
by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.
I bind this day to me forever, by pow’r of faith, Christ’s incarnation,
his baptism in the Jordan River, his cross of death for my salvation,
his bursting from the spiced tomb, his riding up the heav’nly way,
his coming at the day of doom, I bind unto myself today.

I bind unto myself today the virtues of the starlit heaven,
the glorious sun’s life-giving ray, the whiteness of the moon at even,
the flashing of the lightning free, the whirling wind’s tempestuous shocks,
the stable earth, the deep salt sea, around the old eternal rocks.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in heats of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the name, the strong name of the Trinity
by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three,
of whom all nature has creation, eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
Praise to the Lord of my salvation: salvation is of Christ the Lord!

¹ This hymn version of the Breastplate, paraphrased by Cecil Alexander, can be found in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #450.
For another version of the Breastplate, sung to *The Deer’s Cry*, listen to this version sung by Rita Connolly: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkLzIeztC3c>

Now, let's shift our attention toward today's gospel for this 4th Sunday in Lent, the story of how Jesus brought healing and sight to a man who was born blind.

This reading, which comprises the entire 9th chapter of John's gospel, is a long one.

The richness of this story with all its nuanced details has served as a teaching text for centuries. As I read it, I invite you to pay attention to words or phrases that capture your attention. If you wish, you can write them down.

If you'd like to follow the story in your own Bible, pause this recording until you have it in hand.

The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the 9th Chapter. Glory to you O Lord....

The Gospel of our Lord. Praise to you O Christ.

This story is about physical sight and spiritual sight; about how we respond to mysteries and life-changing circumstances we don't fully understand. It's a story about what it means to see how in Jesus God's light has come into the world, and the consequences of living out that insight.

Like many of the narratives in John's gospel, it gives us more to chew on than we can handle in one sitting! So today, I'd like to focus with you on five of the moves the story makes, and say something about how we might hear this text in our current context.

(1) First, the story opens with a question – WHO SINNED, the disciples ask Jesus, THIS MAN OR HIS PARENTS, THAT HE WAS BORN BLIND?

Do you hear the assumptions embedded in that question?

- Someone must be at fault.
- Someone must be to blame.
- Things like this don't HAPPEN without a reason.
- God's will is being manifested here; punishment to fit some crime.

At its root, the question WHO SINNED? is really a technical one:

What sinful circumstances led to the outcome whereby this man was afflicted with blindness?

But Jesus doesn't engage this question; he doesn't go down that road. Instead, he reframes what's about to happen by saying: Pay attention! You're about to witness what transformation at the hand of God can look like!

(2) Second, Jesus violates all the personal safety protocols we're living with these days:

He spits on the ground, he stoops to mix the mud, he smears it over the blind man's eyes, and then he sends him off to wash in a community pool.

Did you notice the name of the pool to which Jesus sends him? SILOAM. And in an aside to his audience—to us—John the writer reminds us: SILOAM MEANS SENT.

For John, Jesus himself is THE SENT ONE: the word become flesh sent by God to bring light to the world. And baptism, like the Siloam pool, is the threshold to a new way of seeing.

The question for us then becomes: Can we, like John's first hearers, recognize the journey to Siloam as our journey—and the pool there as the FONT where we, once blind to the fullness of God's love, find our eyes rinsed clear?²

Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan, said it this way: YOU WENT, YOU WASHED, YOU CAME TO THE ALTAR, YOU BEGAN TO SEE WHAT YOU HAD NOT SEEN BEFORE.³

(3) Move number three. Able to make use of his eyes for the first time in his life, we watch how, through the rest of the story, the man's sight grows clearer & his testimony stronger as he moves by stages from physical sight to spiritual insight.

When asked first by neighbors and then by religious leaders HOW IT IS HE CAME TO SEE, (and HOW, by the way, is a technical question...) he identifies his healer first as...

- **THE ONE CALLED JESUS.**
- Then as **A PROPHET.**
- Then as **A MAN FROM GOD.**

And finally, after meeting him face to face, he calls him **LORD!**

The journey of the man born blind is a journey to which Jesus beckons each of us:

- To be touched by him.
- To have our eyes rinsed clear.
- To take as our own his LENS for looking at one another and this world God so loves.
- To have our blinders removed as we step away from the forms of blindness that cloud our lives and move into a deepening relationship with the Light whom no darkness can overcome.

BUT, this journey, this movement from blindness to true sight, as the story points out, is not automatic!

(4) Which brings us to the fourth observation: The ones, on paper, most qualified to “see,” the religious experts, end up least able to perceive what God is up to!

They haul in every witness they can find demanding to know the truth of what happened—and then they summarily reject it—so that this single episode of healing ends up revealing just how BLIND their collective vision has become.⁴

Friends, this new Coronavirus has our country grappling with a number of realities we hadn't seen clearly before.

- How weakening of our institutions increases our vulnerability at times like these.
- How the assault on science weakens our ability to prepare and respond.
- How poor management of resources undercuts our ability to provide medical teams with the basic supplies and equipment they need.
- How ineffective leadership and government by ideology inhibit our ability to navigate this crisis.

² Susan Briehl, *That You May Have Life Scripture Study*, p. 34. GIA 2005.

³ From *Our Sight Restored*, author and publisher unknown.

⁴ Susan Briehl, *That You May Have Life Scripture Study*, p. 38. GIA 2005.

The arrival of COVID-19 presents many technical challenges to us and to our healthcare system. But it also presents a series of adaptive challenges—challenges that are bigger than this one crisis...

Challenges that require new discoveries, experiments, and adjustments; that require flexible ways of thinking, changed attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Without these moves, we will never be able to make the adaptive leaps necessary to survive, much less thrive, in this new world in which we find ourselves.

Leaning into that new way, that new life, is risky business. For it means leaving what we know behind.

That's the journey the man born blind had to take. Along the way he discovered that new ways of seeing the world come with inherent risks, and life changing consequences.

(5) Which leads us to the final question. Will we take the risk?

It's a marvel the formerly blind man, after all the hubbub his healing caused, didn't just turn around and head right back to the street corner with his begging bowl!

Things would have been much easier for him if he had!

- His relationship with his parents would have stayed intact;
- his neighbors would have stopped treating him like a freak,
- he wouldn't have been driven out of his faith community.

**If only Jesus had warned him: LOOK, THIS IS GOING TO COMPLICATE YOUR LIFE!
ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO SEE?**

If only the man had said, THANKS JESUS, BUT NO THANKS, he could have avoided the whole controversy!

**But something deep within him longed—groped for this healing nonetheless.
And so it is with you and me.**

When Jesus comes into our lives and into our world, we may not recognize him immediately. We may not “see” him at first. But gradually, as he stands with us without judging, as he walks beside us without criticizing, our curiosity is aroused, and we draw closer. Until, finally, we are ready to listen.

**WHO ARE YOU, JESUS? We ask.
And he tells us: I AM HE, THE ONE YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR.**

“Thomas Merton says that when we are baptized, we are not given a new world to live in, but new eyes with which to see this world.”⁵ Sometimes that gift of sight is as stark and profound as the blind man's. And sometimes it's a gradual dawning over a period of years.

In every case, Jesus invites us to trust his companionship on the road, and to let his vision become our own. When we do this, individually and as community, others begin to notice. And the light we reflect helps us move, together, toward the kind of world God longs to bring into existence.

⁵ Susan Briehl, *That You May Have Life Scripture Study*, p. 38. GIA 2005.

Let us pray...

Word made flesh, we look with you at the families, communities, and countries around the world who are suffering greatly from the consequences of COVID-19 and its effects both on bodily health and economic well-being. As the circle of impact widens and the crisis deepens, give us the assurance that you are here beside us and will not leave us orphaned. Open our eyes to ways we can strengthen relationships within our households and neighborhoods and serve others who need companionship and care.

Be with frontline responders and health professionals who put themselves in harm's way to provide care and to seek solutions. Give wisdom and insight to doctors and researchers as they seek a path toward the containment and effective treatment of COVID-19 and to elected leaders as they work toward easing the economic pain that so many are feeling.

Lord, Christ, we look with you at all those within our circle here who are in need of comfort and healing. Those known to us, and those known only to you.

Finally, keep our congregation safe while we are absent from each other, and strengthen our bonds through prayer, encouragement, and creative engagement.
Trusting in your love for us and for all, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today is Sunday, March 22nd and I am here at Peace until Noon.

If you would like to talk or pray together, you can reach me at the church #206-935-1962.

Know that I'm available at any time through my mobile number.

At 9am this morning I'm hosting a virtual gathering of Adults on the ZOOM platform which you're welcome to join. If you missed this week's gathering know that we'll be meeting regularly at 9am Sunday going forward.

Finally, I want you to know that you can email specific prayer requests to a NEW MAILBOX address. The address is: prayerrequests@peacelutheranseattle.org

The peace of the Lord be with you always.