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Lent 4A
Peace, Seattle
April 3, 2011 epk
John 9:1-41

BEGINNING TO SEE

His name was Lloyd and by the age of 7 he was the odd guy out in our 1st grade class at Lincoln McKinley Elementary School. And it wasn't hard to see why. Lloyd was, well, different.

- Decay had turned his teeth brown,
- his sandy hair was like an abandoned nest,
- his shoes were chronically untied,
- and he smelled like a bag of dirty laundry.

Lloyd would do odd things, too, like chew his pencils in half. Our teacher, Mrs. Morris, called his name for all the wrong reasons. We all got used to Lloyd being the class oddball. And as we all know, once a person has been typecast; once he has a reputation for fulfilling a certain role, it's hard to see him in any other light. In fact, you no longer see the person, you only see the role he is supposed to play.

And that, it seems to me, is one of the dynamics within this story about the man born blind who finds his life transformed, though not without cost, by his encounter with Jesus.

Like the other extended narratives in John's gospel we're privy too these weeks of Lent, there's so much more to unpack in this chapter than we can manage in one sitting. At its core, the story is simple: a blind man has his eyes opened by Jesus. But in the events that follow his healing, the man finds his life and relationships utterly changed.

Witnessing to Jesus as the light of the world may be, as Jesus himself suggests, the very thing for which God has been preparing the man his whole life—but it comes with a price, and a warning about the resistance we can expect when our eyes are opened to God's revelation in Jesus, and there's no going back to the way things were.

Let's look, then, at the relationship between the man born blind and his community—that is, his neighbors, his parents, his church.

You see, at the beginning, the man born blind is kind of like my first grade classmate Lloyd. He is the beggar. That is his place, the role he is allowed to play. He serves as a kind of cautionary tale to the community…an illustration of the maxim "there but for the grace of God go I." To his neighbors, that's the sum of who he is—THE BEGGAR BORN BLIND—and that's all.

His parents, whose own lives have come under scrutiny because of his blindness, have developed coping strategies through the years. By the time he's reached the age of majority, they've absolved themselves of responsibility for his condition. The helplessness they once felt settles into a passive recognition that their son will be a beggar as long as he's in this world. That's how things are destined to be...until Jesus takes notice of him.

RABBI, his disciples ask, WHO SINNED, THIS MAN OR HIS PARENTS, THAT HE WAS BORN BLIND? Jesus answers, NEITHER THIS MAN NOR HIS PARENTS SINNED; HE WAS BORN BLIND SO THAT GOD'S WORK MIGHT BE REVEALED IN HIM.

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Then spitting on the ground, Jesus makes mud, spreads it on the man's eyes, sends him to wash, and he comes back able to see.

And that's when the arguing begins.
ISN'T THIS THE MAN WHO USED TO SIT AND BEG?
Some say, YES, and others say, NO. But he keeps saying, **LOOK! IT'S ME! I AM THE MAN!**

Over and over again, first with the neighbors and then with the Pharisees he's asked:
WHO DID IT—AND HOW? And every time he gives the same answer, but they are never satisfied. They want the truth, but only if it will leave their world intact.

The man's own parents, called to the carpet, do everything short of disowning him to keep from taking on this hot potato. NOBODY pauses even for a moment to celebrate with the man—to mark the beginning of his new life. Everybody's too busy guarding turf**.**

We have this tendency, you see, to value order and stability more than truth.

The more established, secure and comfortable a community is, the more averse it can become to visionaries and visions that test tradition; that go beyond what everybody else can see.
And that's why this man who was born blind but who is blind no longer is such a threat!

We're at the front end of a new VISION process at Peace. And I wonder if this story doesn't have something to say to us. Something about not getting too comfortable, about not avoiding risk, about being willing to go to new places where the Christ vision might lead us.

4th century bishop St. Ambrose saw in this gospel story a metaphor of the Christian's journey from font to table. He wrote:
You went, you washed, you came to the altar, you began to see what you had not seen before.

"Began to see…" **It's a process.**

When we begin to see, the gulf between where we are and where we ought to be, is so discouraging. Finding our blind spots revealed is a humbling thing. Discovering how entrenched we are, how dependent we are on things remaining the same, how wrongly we've judged another—spouse, child, parent, friend, stranger—is a humbling thing. But that's not where Jesus wants us to stay.
When the man who had been blind is called before the Pharisees a third time, he's ready for it.

HOW DID HE OPEN YOUR EYES, they ask for the umpteenth time, and he replies:
WHY DO YOU WANT TO HEAR IT AGAIN—DO YOU ALSO WANT TO BECOME HIS DISCIPLES?

They rebuke and revile him, but their threats can't stop him now. His vision is now crystal clear, and he has found his voice…

HERE IS AN ASTONISHING THING! YOU DO NOT KNOW WHERE HE COMES FROM, AND YET HE OPENED MY EYES…NEVER SINCE THE WORLD BEGAN HAS IT BEEN HEARD THAT ANYONE OPENED THE EYES OF A PERSON BORN BLIND. IF THIS MAN JESUS WERE NOT FROM GOD, HE COULD NOTHING.

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"You went, you washed, you came to the altar, you began to see what you had not seen before."

"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."[1] 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.

Amen.

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