

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
April 2-3, 2011
John 9:1-41

“On the Lenten Road: In the Pool”

Today on the Lenten road we find ourselves, as we did last week, by a water source. Last Sunday we stood next to Jacob’s well as Jesus engages a Samaritan in conversation about her need for living water (John 4) – not the kind of water you drink, but the water that quenches our spiritual thirst. Today we find ourselves by the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem, fed by the Gihon spring outside the city walls. The water was channeled into the city by Hezekiah’s tunnel, hewn out of solid rock 150 feet below the city streets. Tourists and pilgrims in Jerusalem can still walk through that narrow tunnel even today. Here at the Pool of Siloam, a man born blind washes the mud from his eyes that Jesus has put there, and that man now sees for the first time in his life. How do we describe this? How do we put this into words? Astounding? Mind-boggling? Unbelievable? Maybe we’ve heard this story from the Bible so many times that it doesn’t even register with us anymore; it’s “whatever.” Not astounding, mind-boggling, or unbelievable; just “whatever.” And so the good news that God’s kingdom has broken into our world through Jesus who makes the blind to see is lost on us. And that is exactly the point, my friends: are we the ones who are blind? Are we the ones who can’t see? Are we the ones who need Jesus to open our eyes? Our Lenten preaching series, “On the Lenten Road,” continues today. May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

In John’s Gospel, blindness and seeing are never only about physical sight; they are really about spiritual understanding. Chapter 9 of John is this whole story of Jesus’ healing the man who was blind from birth. It is an amazing story – a story on several levels. It is about Jesus healing a man born blind, but on a deeper level it is also about spiritual blindness. It is about man’s pride, self-centeredness, and arrogance that blinds us to who we really are before God. It is about how quick we are to blame and point fingers so the spotlight can be shifted away from us and onto others. But when all is said and done, it is about Jesus who is able to open our eyes and cause us to see.

We like to think that we are modern and enlightened people, but just let some tragedy befall us like the recent earthquakes, tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan, and very quickly we start to ask basic questions like the disciples asked Jesus: **“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”** (John 9:2). Who is responsible for what has happened? Who is to blame? Is God punishing us because of our sins? In the face of disaster or tragedy, our modernity and enlightenment can fly out the window, and we are reduced to basic human existence, wondering where God is in all this. After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, a state senator from Alabama said that this happened because Mississippi and Louisiana had legalized gambling. God sent the hurricane to punish those states for their sin. A pastor in Alabama, hearing the senator’s theory, responded, “Well, if the Lord was aiming for those casinos then the Lord needs to improve his aim. The hurricane took out about eight casinos and nearly a hundred Methodist churches!” (*Preaching – April 3, 2011, William H. Willimon*). Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question turns things in a new direction: **“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him”** (John 9:3). In the face of tragedy or disaster, that is the question for us to consider: how will the works of God be displayed through this?

There are really two miracles going on here in John 9. The first is outward as Jesus heals the blind man, giving him sight for the first time in his life. I think we who have the gift of eyesight cannot really grasp how desperate this man's situation was. Besides the protection for the blind written into God's Law (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 21:18), there were no support systems for this man and those like him other than family and the kindness of those who would toss him a few coins as he sat by the street begging. Just think: this man, blind from birth, had never seen the faces of loved ones, had never enjoyed the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, had no reference point for what things looked like. As terrible as physical blindness is, there is something even more dreadful, and that is spiritual blindness – lack of insight into who God is and who we are in relationship to God. The controversy that followed Jesus' healing of the blind man is truly amazing, and not in a positive way. People should have been rejoicing and singing praise to God! Opening the eyes of the blind was a sure sign that God's promised reign was now breaking into the world (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; Matthew 11:5). But instead of rejoicing and singing, there is suspicion, fear, and stubborn refusal to see the gift and the Giver of the gift for what – and who – they truly are: God's gracious and saving presence revealed in Jesus, the Son of God. The first miracle of opening blind eyes gives way to the second miracle of opening the eyes of our hearts and minds to Jesus, as the man in the Gospel lesson confessed: **“Lord, I believe, and he worshiped him”** (John 9:38). Ironically, in John 9 it is the man who was blind that now is blessed with both physical and spiritual sight, while it is the religious leaders who, in seeing, do not see and who are blind to the Lord. And where are we in all of this?

In holy Baptism, we have been washed clean in those cleansing waters of regeneration when the Holy Spirit was first given to us. The Baptismal font becomes for us our Pool of Siloam. In holy Baptism, our old sinful self was drowned and died – the suspicion, fear, and stubborn refusal of our sin that blinded us to God's gracious presence. In holy Baptism, the eyes of our hearts and minds have been opened to who God is and how much God loves us and has done for us in his beloved Son, Jesus, who gave his life for our sin upon the cross. The ever-present danger for us now is that after having received so much from God, we, like the Pharisees of old, will shut our eyes tightly and become blind to God's presence among us now. Our constant prayer of repentance on this Lenten road must be: “Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.” And with the eyes of faith opened, we see ourselves, our world, and one another no longer through our eyes, but through the eyes of Jesus. Amen.