

4th Sunday in Lent (Year A)*John 9:1-41*

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, '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.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

As far as I can tell, today's story from John's Gospel is by far the most detailed account of a miracle in all four of the Gospels. This story takes up an entire chapter and has many characters - Jesus, the man who as formerly blind, his parents, the disciples, the religious leaders, and strangers in the crowd. This story is unique in the fact that the vast majority of the content of this chapter is not about the miracle itself but rather about its aftermath.

The miracle is simple enough. Jesus and his disciples come across a man who has been blind from birth. After quickly correcting their mistaken notion that the man was disabled because of sin, Jesus spits in the ground, makes mud, smears it on his eyes, and tells him to wash it off in a nearby pool called Siloam. He does so and then he can see. If this story ended here, it would get lost in the other stories of miraculous healings.

However, what follows once the man gains his sight sets this miracle apart from all others. What follows are several lengthy interrogations in which everyone and their brother try to solve the mystery of how this happened and whether or not this miracle was performed in a worthy, "righteous" manner.

First the man encounters his neighbors, the ones who for years - decades, even - watched him beg by the side of the road. They sit in disbelief. "Could this be the man who we know as the beggar?" "Of course, not. It's just someone who *looks* like him!"

Then, the man is dragged in front of the religious leaders and they interrogate him. "How could this man have done a miracle? After all, he did what you say he did on the Sabbath. Therefore, that makes him a sinner. And we know that sinners can't perform miracles. So, who's lying here?"

Not getting the answer from him that they wanted, they go and track down the man's parents. They ask *them* how it is that he now sees. They deflect to their son, citing that he is of age to answer questions for himself.

Finally, the religious leaders call the man back before them and lambast him once again with vitriol. They continue to call Jesus a sinner.

And all along this rollercoaster ride, as the formerly blind man is in a tug of war between people who just won't bring themselves to accept what has happened, this man is steadfast in his testimony: "I do not know whether he is a sinner," he says. "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, I now see."

The chapter then closes with Jesus finding this man because he has heard how cruelly he has been treated. In a manner similar to last week's passage with the Woman at the Well, Jesus reveals himself to the man who he truly is and the man worships him.

What I want to focus on for today's sermon is not what is in today's passage but on what is noticeably *absent* from today's passage. What is noticeably absent is any evidence of *celebration*. A man who was blind can now see! If that's not cause for celebration, then I don't know what is! The community has an incredible opportunity here. They have an opportunity to celebrate the fact that this man, who has for his entire life been marginalized, can now participate more fully in the life of the community. They have an opportunity, but they fail.

Instead of throwing the party of the century and celebrating with this man, they let their cynicism take over. Instead of celebrating the fact that this miracle did happen, they beat a dead horse and try to figure out *how* or *why* this miracle happened. Instead of praising the fact that Jesus gave this man his sight, they judge him for doing so on the Sabbath. Instead of rejoicing that this man is no longer forced to beg for his livelihood, they toss him back and force among one another trying to "get to the bottom" of what happened.

Simply put, they don't really talk *to* the man, they talk *about* him. How often is it that we treat folks with disabilities this way?

What is it, then, that keeps them from celebrating the miracle that has happened right in their community? Fear. Fear has kept them from experiencing the joy that this miracle should have brought them. Fear of change. Fear of Jesus upsetting the status quo. In giving the man his sight, Jesus is upsetting the balance of things where the people at the top stay on the top and people who are on the bottom stay at the bottom. Jesus is bringing to fruition what he says in the Gospel of Luke where "the first will be last and the last will be first." Well, today's story is proof that those who are at the bottom welcome that news much more than folks who have found themselves at the top.

So what is God saying to God's Church today through the wisdom of this passage? I believe that one of the many things today's passage teaches us is this: when God performs miracles among us, when folks who are hurting are healed, let's *celebrate!*

Because when God is moving among us and the Holy Spirit is bringing change in Jesus' name, we can respond in one of at least two very different ways. Fear or curiosity. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. And hate leads to suffering. (Yes, that was a Yoda quote. Don't judge me.). But instead of responding to miracles with fear, we can respond with curiosity. And curiosity leads us to very different things. Curiosity leads us to wonder. And wonder leads us to joy. And joy leads us to celebration.

So today, I'm curious. What would today's passage have looked like if the community around this man had responded with curiosity and celebration instead of fear and anger? In fact, I'd like to give you all a bit of homework. Later today, perhaps over lunch or right after it, sit down with your family or call up a friend and re-write today's passage as if the community responded with celebration, wonder, and curiosity instead of fear. What does this passage look like to you if this had been the course of action? Feel free to send me your revision of today's passage and I'll be happy to post them to Facebook to share with the wider community as we seek ways to increase our social media engagement.

Friends, I'll close with this. To state the obvious, there's a lot of fear in our lives right now. And that's ok and that's understandable. The coronavirus outbreak has affected literally all aspects of our lives and that means change and change brings fear. As we say often here at Beaumont Presbyterian Church, fear is a normal and healthy human emotion. It's what we *choose to do with it* that makes us who we are.

In light of that truth, today's passage compels me to ask myself the following question and I'll hope you ask yourself the same question: in this time of disorientation, in this time of wilderness, where is God moving in my life and in the lives of others and how can I celebrate that? In other words, friends, don't let the fear of this moment blind you to the ways that divine healing is happening all around you.

Here are some examples of where I saw God's healing power at work this week:

- I've seen God's healing power in the ways that this congregation has truly stepped up to the plate to stay connected while we're prevented from gathering physically. In some ways, I feel like we're more connected now than we've ever been in the almost two years that I've been your pastor. Calls have been made, cards have been sent, food has been delivered, prayers have been raised. We're investing and growing in our social media presence and reaching folks who we might not have reached otherwise. And we're being intentional about reaching out to the folks in our community who aren't on social media. We've started using a mobile meeting platform called ZOOM and some of our oldest members have used it to hold virtual meetings, bible studies, and other gatherings. Our Wednesday Women's group will be meeting via Zoom this week. Our BPC book club is meeting this week on Zoom. Folks, I've *never* been more proud of this congregation that I am right now watching y'all go the extra mile to stay connected to one another by the power of the Holy Spirit. And *that* gives me cause to celebrate what God's doing in this community!
- I've seen God's healing power in GleanKY. In case you aren't familiar with them, GleanKY is a non-profit that seeks to end food waste and hunger in our community by working with retailers to put excess produce on the tables of those in the Commonwealth who are food insecure. It was founded 10 years ago by three people, one of which is a very beloved member of our congregation, Erica Horn. On Friday, we held a small press event here at the church building to celebrate the fact that Mayor Linda Gorton has declared March 20th to be "GleanKY Day" here in Lexington. I'm proud of Erica and the work she has done alongside many other BPC members over the years to do the gospel work of feeding folks. That's cause to celebrate and give thanks to God!
- 5:00 P.M. You know what happens every day these days at 5:00 P.M. Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear goes on FB Live with a coronavirus update. He's calm, collected, compassionate, straightforward, and, well, just flat out *pastoral*. Whether you voted for him or not, I hope we can all agree that his leadership in these hectic times is a calming presence amid the chaos. In fact, other states have started to look to Kentucky as an example of how best to respond to a national crisis such as the one we're in now. That's healing, y'all. And it gives us cause to be thankful and celebrate.

So, friends, I ask you: how is God moving in your life in these hectic times and how are you celebrating that with those you love? How is God bringing you healing? It doesn't have to be something grandiose and flashy. It can be something as simple as finding a way to FaceTime with your grandparents or reading a silly book with your children.

But I am going to ask you to share that celebration with us. Throughout the entirety of this coming week, go to our Facebook Page and share with us what you're celebrating this week. When you post on our Facebook Page, use the hashtag #BPCCelebrates to let us know how God is moving in your life.

Friends, let us not make the mistake of the community in today's passage. Let us not allow fear to rob us of the joy that Jesus Christ brings us! Let us celebrate together and ask Jesus to open our eyes to what God is

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doing in our midst. This is always an important thing to do. But it is especially vital when we are in wilderness!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**