We Are Not Blind, Are We?

We do not know the man’s name.

This blind man is a beggar; that’s about all that a blind man can be. Every day, he is there, near the temple propped up against a wall or sitting cross-legged on the pavement. So it has been for many years, all his life, really.

Seldom does anyone actually speak to him. He is talked about, however. And he hears much more than people realize. Even when the streets are crowded, the blind man has the ability to filter the sounds. Thus, he knows that most people refer to him as “that man.”

Amid the din of street commerce, he can hear the children: “What’s wrong with that man’s eyes, Mama?” And after a muffled shushing by the mother, the child will ask again, “But why can’t he see, Mama?”

And there are other voices, too, less innocent, and more insensitive: “Mend your ways or you’ll end up like that poor fellow over there!”

The beggar has heard such things all his life. And so, on this particular day, as he crouches at the curb, the blind beggar pays no particular attention as someone poses the question:

“Rabbi! Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Indeed, the beggar himself has often wondered about this, what he could have done, back in that time of which he has no memory at all. What could he or his parents have done that would cause him to be what other people call “blind”?

And so, on this day, when he hears the question about his blindness, he thinks nothing of it until, he hears another voice.

“Neither this man nor his parents have sinned…He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed…. “

And with that, something warm touches the beggar’s face. At first he draws back, and he wonders who this is, and why they are touching his face. And then he hears the same voice. “I’m going to put some mud on your eyes…”

And then the blind man feels the wetness as Jesus spreads spittle and dirt upon the his useless eyes. Surely it is a bit uncomfortable, but the tone of Jesus’ voice is reassuring.

“Do you know the way to the pool that is called Siloam? Go there and wash this off.”

And so, the beggar places his left hand against the wall, and stretches his right arm out in front of him. As he has done thousands of times, he begins to trace his way along the street. He counts doorways and curb stones, edging along down the familiar streets to the spring-fed pool.
By now, the mud has dried and drawn uncomfortably tight upon his eyelids. And so, the blind man eagerly cups the cool water and begins to wash his face.

And as he does, something seems...different about the water. He cannot quite tell what it is; but there is more to the water than the way it feels on his face. There is a lot of water there in the pool. He comprehends that in a way that he has never before.

Indeed, as the beggar turns his face toward the surface of the water, there is something there! If he did not know better, he would say that it is a man's face. He has felt faces before, especially his own face, and all the features are there now, in the water, nose and mouth, ears and eyes and hair. For the first time in his life, the beggar looks at himself! Ha! He laughs!

Gradually, the man realizes that the sounds around him are different, too. Dogs barking, carts going by on the street, women talking by the pool. He can turn his head toward a sound, and there is more than just the sound.

Well, this is all wonderfully confusing! You see, the beggar has never known what it means to see. And now that he does see, he doesn't know quite what to make of it!

And so, as he leaves the pool, his steps quicken. He wants to find this rabbi named Jesus to thank him. But of course, the beggar does not know what Jesus looks like. And when he asks others where Jesus is, the one called "the light", they look at him strangely.

He hears people questioning. "Isn't that "that man", the one who sits over there and begs for money, the blind one?"

And another answers, "No, it can't be him. This man can see! He just looks like that man."

The beggar turns and says, "No, no, it is me. I am that man. Rabbi Jesus made mud and put it on my eyes! Now I can see! Don't you see?"

At some point, a Pharisee comes up to him and takes him to stand before a whole group of Pharisees, gathered in a large room. And they ask the man to tell them his story.

And so the beggar begins to tell about what Jesus has done. One of the Pharisees interrupts him. "How could this man have given you your sight? He made mud on the Sabbath. That is work and that makes him a sinner!"

Then, someone suggests that the man had not really been blind. And so, they sent for the man's parents so they can be questioned.

When the man and woman finally come in, at first they are startled to see their son there. They immediately notice how different he looks because he looks at them. And his eyes glisten, for he has never seen them before this moment.

One of the Pharisees says, "This son of yours claims that he used to be blind. How is it that he now sees? He wasn't really blind, was he? This is just a trick of some kind, isn't it?"

The parents look at one another questioningly. They do not know whether to be afraid or joyful, but the father speaks carefully, "This is our son. He was born blind. But we do not know how it is that he now sees. He is of age. Why do you not ask him?"
And so the Pharisee dismisses the parents and looks again at their son. “Tell the truth now. We know that the fellow Jesus is a sinner. He could not have healed you.”

“I do not know. I only know that now I can see!”

And he says to them how remarkable it is that he was blind, and now sees, yet all that the Pharisees want to do is accuse the one who healed him.

“If Jesus were not from God,” the beggar says, “he could not have done this.”

And with that the Pharisees are enraged. They drive him out, shouting at him “You sinner! You were born blind for your sin. How dare you lecture us!”

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What does it mean to see?

It is a fact of life: our expectations often influence our perceptions. In all of us there is a tendency to see and hear what we expect or want to see and to hear.

Or as futurist Joel Barker might put it, we adopt paradigms, through which we filter information, accepting only that which is compatible with our expectations.

You know, Samuel goes to the family of Jesse to anoint a king. Now, I don’t know how a king is supposed to look. If it were up to me to pick one, I’d say Sir Lawrence Olivier looks like a king; Woody Allen does not!

Samuel sees the first of Jesse’s sons, a man named Eliab. And apparently, to Samuel, Eliab looks like a king. He’s a tall, good looking fella. Eliab matches Samuel’s “kingly paradigm.” But God sees things differently; and God has chosen the youngest son, the less kingly-looking David. You see! Samuel was using one paradigm, God another.

Or, a blind man receives his sight. Now, the Pharisees might have been amazed and seen this as something for which to be genuinely thankful. But they choose not to see it that way. Instead they are so influenced by their system of rules that they focus on Jesus’ violation of the Sabbath.

More to the point, here is this miraculous intervention, right before their eyes, but the Pharisees are blind to it. They are bound to their own conceptions of what God “ought” to be like. Surely God would not work on the Sabbath!

You see, the Pharisees have developed an intricate paradigm of righteousness. Righteousness means strict adherence to the rules.

And so, Jesus does not meet the Pharisees’ expectations for a righteous man, let alone for the Son of God. Indeed, he even threatens their security in their own righteousness because he disobeys their rules.

Indeed, Jesus cannot be who he says he is because of the Pharisaic vision of what “salvation” is supposed to be. To accept him would require that they put aside all of the expectations with which they have become so comfortable. They see what they want to see and conclude that Jesus must be a sinner. They refuse to see him as the revelation of God.
And isn’t it true of us as well… that often we would prefer to hold on to our expectations, even if they limit us in our relationship with God and with one another? So often, we would cling to our comfortable paradigms rather than consider that, perhaps, God has something else in mind!

Friends, I tell you, that is the easy path to faith that is, at best, immature and at worst, completely lifeless!

Now, later in this story, the Pharisees are confronted by Jesus himself. And then they are heard to murmur among themselves, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

And perhaps, during this season of Lent, this is a question we need to put to ourselves.

Over recent weeks, we have considered the theme of repentance, repentance of our sin. Well, I think this story defines sin differently from the way we may often understand it. In John’s Gospel, you see, sin is not so much failure in moral conduct. Sin is not the peccadilloes about which we gossip. Sin is not our inevitable failing to toe the mark and obey all the rules.

No, in John’s Gospel, sin is being confronted by the light and remaining blind to it! Sin is lack of belief. And John suggests that the issue of whether we choose to see is most important for us who claim to be followers of Jesus.

Are we willing to put aside our biases and prejudices? Are we willing to do this, not because our biases are politically incorrect, but rather so that we might see the truth that God sees? Are we willing to acknowledge the limitations of our expectations, about God, about others and about ourselves? And are we thereby willing to be open to and trusting of God?

In short, are we willing to see? Or do we instead opt for the apparent comfort blindness, of refusing to see? Do we continue to look through the lenses of personal or cultural influences that may have nothing to do with God’s intentions for us?

Of course, this is not a new challenge, is it? There were the Pharisees and there have been so many occasions where Christians have refused to see, have blindly held to their own wants and expectations, even when so doing inhibited opportunities for enlightenment or enrichment or growth.

The crusades, witch hunts, slavery, fascism, and segregation, the limited role of women, both in the church and in the larger society – all have been defended or pursued fanatically by well-intentioned Pharisees who were, nevertheless, quite blind.

Such things seem absurd to us now. And yet the tendency of substituting personal prejudice and comfort in the status quo for God’s will means that we must be especially cautious. We need to ask ourselves. “Are we also blind?”

You know, on what issues about which we are so sure, are we also blind? As to which people, concerning whom we are so certain in our judgments, are we also blind? Political and social issues, personal relationships and individuals – all are potential blind spots, aren’t they!

You see, an earnest willingness to consider the possibility of our own blindness is an important part of repentance. True repentance includes a decision to be skeptical about oneself. Repentance involves a decision to see; to look at ourselves and at others as God sees us.
Repentance is an intentional decision to put aside all that interferes with our perceptions about God’s people and God’s continuing creation. Repentance is a commitment that we try to see through the superficialities to the heart of one another and to the heart of life itself.

And true repentance includes a willingness to admit that in so many ways we do not see. But it also includes the confidence, that as we look at Jesus, we can see what God intends for us.

As Jesus said, he came into the world that those who are blind may see, that we may see.

Hank Williams used to sing an old gospel song, “I Saw the Light.” Having grown up in Nashville and thus surrounded by country music, I have been accused of having an “I Saw the Light” theology.

And in a way, it’s true, I guess. Surely, there is a choice to be made in life.

Some would call it “Seeing the Light.” Some would call it being born again; some would call it making a decision for Christ; some of us Presbyterians would call it adoption and sanctification; but they are all variations of perspective, looking toward the same end.

Indeed, Lent is a reminder that each of us is faced with a very basic decision. And we cannot be neutral about it.

We either recognize the light of God in Jesus Christ and live trusting in him, or we do not.

Now, it is true, sometimes, like the blind beggar we don’t know quite what to make of seeing! Gaining our sight can be a bit disorienting at first.

But along the way, there are glimpses of the truth of Jesus, the “Light” with which God confronts us, and gives us the choice to see and to trust.

As we continue our preparation for the great revelation of the Resurrection, may we have our eyes open that we, too, may see.

So may it be. Amen.