

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for March 22, 2020 ~ Lent 4A

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

For the writer of the Gospel of John, miracles and signs are not so much in response to human need as they are a means of revealing the divine nature of Jesus. The story of the man born blind (John 9:1-42) does this. It also reveals something important about our human nature.

For instance, there is the man himself. We don't know his name, but we know that he was born blind and sat at the temple gate and begged. From a man resigned to his handicapping condition, he was without warning propelled into the world of vision. We see how he grapples with his new identity and the response of those around him. We witness the awakening of his faith.

And then there are the disciples. They wanted to know about the relationship between sin and sickness. What Jesus told them in response was that the man's blindness had nothing to do with his or anybody else's sin. The disciples were more curious about the theological issue than the human misery. The man for them was more of a spectacle, a curiosity, than he was a person.

There were the man's friends and neighbors who at first couldn't believe he was the same person. His parents were afraid of the religious authorities and so they said, "He's on his own."

And, there were the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the city. They could not appreciate the joy of this man's good news because they were so concerned about the fact that one of their laws had been violated; who was the man who dared to heal somebody on the Sabbath?

Where do you fit in to this story? Can you identify with the man born blind or do you better identify with the disciples, the neighbors, the parents, or the Pharisees? The Light of the World, Jesus Christ, is here this morning, hoping to bring inner illumination, enlightenment, to each of us and to us as a community of his followers. Will we let him do it? Or will we be more concerned with other matters? As we think about whether or not to let him enlighten us, there are several things I'd like to point out.

Just because you don't expect to be enlightened doesn't mean it won't happen to you.

For Joseph C. Sardler, stumbling over his dog's dinner dish and falling headlong down his basement stairs was nothing short of a miracle. You see he tripped over the dog dish because he was blind, but after cracking his head against the wall during the tumble, he could see again. Sardler said, "It's a miracle, that is all I can say. I just thank God for giving me my sight back."

Sardler was thirty-two years old and had been blind for six years due to optic nerve atrophy. When his sight was restored, he spent the rest of the night without sleep, looking at the things he had been missing, including the five-year-old daughter he had never seen. "I have been going out and trying to gather everything in and thanking God for what happened," he said. "I've been looking at the flowers, the trees, the heavens, just anything I can take in with my eyes because it's the most precious thing there is."

He hadn't expected ever to see again. He'd quit hoping for the restoration of his vision. But when it happened, he had a new appreciation for all the things he had not been able to see before. The same thing might be said for the man in the gospel story.

And, it's true with us on the spiritual plane. We worship so often not expecting anything to happen. Often it doesn't. But just when we stop expecting light to flood our souls, something happens and we're never the same again. We have a new perspective. Because that happens more often than we know, it is important to keep coming back.

And, just because you are enlightened doesn't mean that all your problems are solved.

In 1983, during the week between Christmas and New Year, we had a hard freeze in Houston, Texas. A pipe burst in the ceiling of the main corridor at the church I was serving and nobody noticed it for days because the office was closed most of that week. When it was discovered, we had quite a mess on our hands.

The contractor came with carpenters, electricians, and sheetrock people and the repairs took about a week. On Friday, at the end of the day, I had to come to the nave for a few minutes and as I did I spoke to the workmen about how nice the new ceiling and light fixtures were. Several of us had already commented that the increased light revealed things about the paint on the walls we hadn't expected to notice. I had been thinking that when the ceiling was repaired the hallway would look nice and fresh and inviting for our children and their parents. It had not occurred to me that after four or five years of daily wear and tear it might be time to repaint the walls. When the new lights were turned on, there was no more hiding it.

On the way back to the office, one of the workers stopped me, reached into his hip pocket, and pulled out a wallet from which he withdrew a \$5 bill. As he handed it to me he said, "Pastor, I want to be the first person to make a contribution to get these walls painted. They're a mess!" Just because light comes to our souls doesn't mean all our problems are over. There will be flaws and unmentionable things in the corners and crevices that that could exist before because of the darkness. Now they are exposed to the light and we have to do something about them. But thanks be to God, there are resources of sanctifying grace to enable us to do something about those problems.

And, just because you can see Jesus doesn't mean you will automatically believe in him.

The man born blind did not immediately recognize who had healed him or confess him as the Messiah, God's Anointed One. We witness an unfolding development of his faith during the story.

The Pharisees certainly didn't believe in Jesus, even though they were able to see. In fact, the incident tells us that the man who had been born blind had better vision than the Pharisees who were supposed to be the ones who had a clear vision.

Growth in discipleship, the sanctification of our lives, takes time. It is not reasonable to expect that someone on a street corner can hand us a pamphlet explaining the four spiritual laws and a prayer to pray as we accept Jesus as our "personal Lord and Savior" and our faith will suddenly burst forth as fully mature. We have to be patient – with ourselves, with God, and with one another – just as Jesus

was patient with the man born blind. Yes, Jesus lost some of his patience with the Pharisees. They frustrated him because they were the experts and yet they could not see. But remember there were Pharisees who came to believe in Jesus, probably far more than we know or imagine. We do know about Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and Saul of Tarsus, whom we know as St. Paul the Apostle.

We all need those eye opening experiences in our lives that cause us to see things beneath the surface that change us. Recall our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning concerning the anointing of David as king (I Samuel 16:1-13)? We are told that while we look on the outward appearance, God looks deeper. God sees what is in the heart. So, you might say that enlightenment is seeing things through the eyes of God.

There was a time when comedian Bob Hope was presenting an award to a gentleman by the name of Charlie Boswell, an outstanding blind golfer. Blind people learn to play golf by listening to the sound of an apparatus placed at the hole toward which they are driving.

When he got to the podium, Bob Hope couldn't resist kidding a little bit. He said, "Blind golfer, huh. I'd like to play you sometime." Charlie Boswell said, "Mr. Hope, I would love to play you a round of golf." Bob Hope said, "I only play for money. I like to have a little bet on the side." Boswell told him that was fine with him. So Bob Hope asked him, "What kind of handicap?" "Even up," was Charlie's reply. "What time," asked the comedian? And Charlie Boswell said, "Midnight."

That was funny, but Bob Hope later said that it had a serious "eye opening" lesson for him as well. He saw a bit more just what it might be like to be blind and still enjoy life.

What are your blind spots as you look out of your spiritual eyes this morning? Will the Savior open your eyes a little wider?

St. Richard of Chichester is probably best known for a prayer he taught us to pray and it seems very appropriate in light of today's gospel. The Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester is, "Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray: To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly." Day by Day, let this be our prayer; that the The Light of the World, Jesus Christ, will open eyes wider and wider to behold the hand of God at work in our lives and in the world around us.