“New Eyes”

John 9:1-41

Jesus is walking down the road with his disciples. They come across a man “blind from birth.” Seeing him, the disciples ask their master a theological question: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Let’s stop the narrative right here and take note of the human factor. This man is more than a theological case study. He’s a human being, with feelings and hopes and dreams. Because he has been blind from birth, his hearing is probably very acute (as is true of most blind people). Very likely, the man heard them talking with Jesus about him.

How do you suppose the disciples’ question makes him feel? No doubt it’s a question he has heard many times before. Most people assumed, in those days, that any serious health problem or disability was a punishment from God. Blaming the victim was all too common. This man has grown up with all the world telling him he is cursed.

For a great many rabbis of that time, the answer to the disciples’ question is easy. The man has been blind from birth, so it couldn’t possibly be his own sins that made him blind. It can only be the sins of his ancestors.

But Jesus doesn’t provide the typical response, the one the blind man is expecting to hear and that gives him a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach every time he hears it. Surprisingly, Jesus answers, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.”

That’s a break from tradition. The man’s all ears. Then, Rabbi Jesus goes on to say, “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

We shouldn't read too much into that. Jesus isn't saying God is some sort of monster, visiting blindness upon a newborn baby just to create a teaching aid. It's more like he's saying, "Don't even ask that question: just wait and see what happens next."

Next, we come to the part of this story you might call "the ick factor" — the particular means Jesus chooses to restore the man's sight. Jesus spits on the ground and makes a muddy glob, then spreads it on the blind man's eyes.

In the gospels, Jesus uses a variety of methods to heal people. Sometimes it's a touch. Other times it's a mere word. In Mark, chapter 10, Jesus heals a blind man named Bartimaeus simply by saying, "Your faith has made you well."

So, what's with the spittle and the mud? Why does he choose such a primitive medical treatment?

The answer may have something to do with the disciples' question. Sure, they're voicing the prevailing wisdom of their age, but they're also incredibly insensitive to the feelings of the man before them. There he is in the all-encompassing darkness that is his life. He's never known anything different. He's acutely aware of the footsteps of everyone coming up to him. The voices he hears may be mocking or — if he's lucky — kind. It's not unusual for passersby to spit on him — cursed by God as he surely is — on account of his disability.

So, when he hears Jesus drawing up a great wad of spittle, he's expecting the worst. Maybe he cringes, waiting for the insult about to come.

But this teacher does something different. Something unexpected. Jesus uses the spittle to make that wad of mud and gently spreads it over the man's blind eyes. Then he tells him to go wash it off, in the Pool of Siloam.

At this point, the story continues for a time without Jesus in it. That's unusual for John's gospel. The second half of this story is the longest stretch in the entire gospel when Jesus isn't at center stage. John tracks Jesus' story very closely, but the action shifts in this part of the story. It follows the blind man and what happens to him.

John tells us the man does as Jesus instructs, washing his face in the Pool of Siloam. Once he's done, it's as though he has new eyes. For the first time in his life, he can see!

Wouldn't you expect this miraculous news would set off general rejoicing in the land? Not so. Quite the opposite happens.

One feature of most human communities — and not a very positive one — is that they don't adapt especially well to change. In that community, there's a well-established protocol or pecking order, and Jesus has just turned it on its head. Anchoring the bottom of that pecking order, for all his life, has been the man blind from birth. If you wanted someone to spit on, he was your man!

But suddenly, Jesus' miracle has changed all that. And those at the top of the religious pecking order — the Pharisees — are not too happy about it.

These Pharisees are alarmed at Jesus. They're suspicious of his religious reform movement. It's growing bigger by the day. So, they haul the formerly blind man before them for a courtroom-style cross-examination.

The Pharisees have heard how Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath. All they need now is a little evidence to prove it.

Now, if Jesus had simply said to the man, "Your faith has made you well," there would have been no problem. But there was this matter of the spittle-and-mud wad. When Jesus made that simple concoction, he was working. On the Sabbath. *Gotcha, Jesus!*

At least that's what some of the Pharisees think. How could a man who worked on the Sabbath be God's instrument? But other Pharisees looked at what he'd just done for the blind man and asked themselves, "How could he *not* be God's instrument?"

"There was division among them," says John. Maybe the reason Jesus made the mud to begin with — rather than simply saying, "Your faith has made you well" — was to confound the Pharisees!

The religious hardliners won't let it rest. Maybe the whole miracle is a hoax. Maybe the man wasn't really blind to begin with. They pepper the formerly blind man with questions. They ask him who he thinks Jesus is.

"He is a prophet."

That's a powerful claim, linking Jesus with the likes of Elijah and Moses. The Pharisees aren't too happy about that and switch to a new approach. They try to undermine the man's testimony. They call in his parents.

"Is this your son?"

"Yes, it is."

"Tell us how it is he's no longer blind."

"We have no idea. Why don't you ask him?"

They call the man in a second time.

"Tell us this man who healed you is a sinner!"

"Is he? What would I know about that? All I know is I once was blind, but now I see!"

They start to question him again about how, exactly, Jesus healed him. But he says, "I already told you that. Why are you asking again? Do *you* want to become his disciples?"

It's a snarky answer, but you can hardly blame the guy. He has had enough of this. The greatest thing in his life has just happened, and these people are more concerned with a handful of mud than a pair of blind eyes that can now see! "If this man were not from God," he tells them, "he could do nothing!"

Whereupon they drive him from their presence, condemning *him* as a sinner.

It's now that Jesus comes back into the picture. Having heard what the Pharisees did to the man he healed, Jesus seeks him out. Most of the time in the Bible, people come *to* Jesus for healing, but this time the doctor goes out searching for his patient. When he finds him, he asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

"Who's he? Tell me, so I can believe in him."

Jesus says, "You *have* seen him, and the one speaking to you is he."

Under the circumstances, which is more remarkable: the first half of that sentence — "you (this formerly blind man) have seen him" — or "the one speaking to you is he"? They're both miraculous, two sides of the same coin.

The man says: "Lord, I believe," then falls down and worships him.

New eyes. That's what the man gets from his encounter with Jesus. New eyes in the physical sense, and new eyes in the spiritual sense as well.

And what about us? What sort of new eyes do we need?

We're not talking, of course, about bifocals or cataract surgery. We're talking about our outlook on life, the ways we see with the eyes of the soul.

When we look at the people around us, those we encounter every day, do we see them as they've always been … small-minded, petty or otherwise flawed? Or do we see them as God sees them … human children with infinite potential?

When we look at people different from us — people who come from another ethnic heritage, or another religion, or a different sort of community — do we assume certain things about them based on old prejudices? Or do we approach each encounter open to whatever God's ready to show us?

When we look at the physical world around us, do we see it only as a scientist or engineer is taught to see it … a place governed by physical laws alone? Or do we see it as the place where God creates, a place where miracles sometimes happen? Do we hear in birdsong a hymn of praise, and see in the sunset a benediction?

When we call Jesus Christ to mind, do we see him only as a historical figure, a wise teacher, an ethical example, or a superstar who had a lot of fans in his day? Or do we see him as a risen Lord who walks beside us, who speaks to us of love and compassion, and who guides us in the way we should go? Do we see him as our Lord and our Savior?

He can be those things to us, our Lord and our Savior. He *wants* to be those things for us. He seeks us out, as he sought out that formerly blind man. He asks us if we, too, believe in the Son of Man — and if we know the one speaking to us is he.

Do you know that in your own life? Do you really know it, deep in your heart? If you want to know it, then pray to him for the gift of new eyes. For it is a gift he is more than eager to give you.

May the peace of God . . .

#332 – I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say