

Up Close and Personal:
Jesus and the Blind One(s)
Isaiah 35:4-7a, and John 9:1-41

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Isaiah 35: 4-7a NLT

⁴Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you.”

⁵And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. ⁶The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland. ⁷The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.

Introduction: As the scripture is read, pay attention to how hearing/seeing and light/dark are themes in this passage.

John 9 The Message

¹⁻²Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?”

³⁻⁵Jesus said, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world’s Light.”

⁶⁻⁷He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man’s eyes, and said, “Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “Sent”). The man went and washed—and saw.

⁸Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, “Why, isn’t this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?”

⁹Others said, “It’s him all right!”

But others objected, “It’s not the same man at all. It just looks like him.”

He said, “It’s me, the very one.”

¹⁰They said, “How did your eyes get opened?”

¹¹“A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ I did what he said. When I washed, I saw.”

¹²“So where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

¹³⁻¹⁵They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. The Pharisees grilled him again on how

he had come to see. He said, “He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see.”

¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “Obviously, this man can’t be from God. He doesn’t keep the Sabbath.”

Others countered, “How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?” There was a split in their ranks.

¹⁷They came back at the blind man, “You’re the expert. He opened *your* eyes. What do you say about him?”

He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸⁻¹⁹The Jews didn’t believe it, didn’t believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, “Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?”

²⁰⁻²³His parents said, “We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don’t know how he came to see—haven’t a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don’t you ask him? He’s a grown man and can speak for himself.” (His parents were talking like this because they were intimidated by the Jewish leaders, who had already decided that anyone who took a stand that this was the Messiah would be kicked out of the meeting place. That’s why his parents said, “Ask him. He’s a grown man.”)

²⁴They called the man back a second time—the man who had been blind—and told him, “Give credit to God. We know this man is an impostor.”

²⁵He replied, “I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind. I now see.”

²⁶They said, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

²⁷“I’ve told you over and over and you haven’t listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?”

²⁸⁻²⁹With that they jumped all over him. “*You* might be a disciple of that man, but we’re disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from.”

³⁰⁻³³The man replied, “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It’s well known that God isn’t at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

³⁴They said, “You’re nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!” Then they threw him out in the street.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

³⁶The man said, “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.”

³⁷Jesus said, “You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?” ³⁸“Master, I believe,” the man said, and worshiped him.

³⁹Jesus then said, “I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind.”

⁴⁰Some Pharisees overheard him and said, “Does that mean you’re calling us blind?”

⁴¹Jesus said, “If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you’re accountable for every fault and failure.”

PRAY

Have you ever experienced true darkness? Sure, we have all experienced power outages. But I mean a total lack of light of any kind? On a summer vacation to Yellowstone, we ventured to Lewis and Clark Caverns in Montana. While on the guided tour of the largest limestone caverns in the Northwest, the guide brings the group to the center of the largest “room”. After completing his/her educational talk, s/he says that he wants us to experience the darkness, so hold on to your partner/child or whomever.

On a signal, the lights were extinguished. Our group? Silent. The darkness? Complete. So complete I could not see my hand in front of my face. No ambient light at all, lest it be the glow of a wrist watch. No shadows, nothing. We were enveloped in utter, total darkness.

I do not doubt that this simulates what it must be like to be blind. However, those lacking sight rely heavily on their other senses. In this instance, the blind man *hears* Jesus before he *sees* him. Mind you, this man did not seek Jesus out. He did not ask to be healed. It is Jesus, who takes the initiative.

The disciples voice what was a common assumption at the time, and in some sense is still present today. Their question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (v.2) has at the core, yet other questions: Why do people suffer? Does sin have anything to do with it? Is there any connection between sin and suffering?

Jesus responds: Neither he nor his parents sinned. What?? They are not sinners?? Yes, all of us are sinners. No, there is not a cause-effect correlation between specific sins and specific suffering, or in this case, disability.

When HIV/AIDS was first devastating the gay male population, there were some (pastors, even) who declared that this was God's judgement on homosexuality. I think Jesus' response to that would be the same as it was to the disciples. (Furthermore, it ignores the fact that on the African continent, HIV/AIDS is a heterosexual disease!) Today perhaps there are those who might think similarly about COVID19—that it is in some way God's judgment of sinners. I think Jesus would disagree.

No, Jesus says, the person's disability is not related to sin. It is an occasion for God's gracious power to be revealed! Made known, made manifest.

Jesus makes a paste with saliva and mud, applies it to his eyes and sends him to the Pool of Siloam to wash it off. He does so, and in the process, he is given sight. That's really when the excitement ramps up! Then in rapid succession, the blind man becomes the center of attention, being compelled to tell his story not once, or twice, but three times! The details do not differ—it's his story and he's stickin' to it. But the audience changes.

First, the neighbors question him. Next, they take him to the Pharisees who also interrogate him. Thirdly, the Pharisees call in the man's parents, who are also examined. Finally, the Pharisees recall the man again, for a second time.

What is the point of this re-telling? Each time there is a different kind of confusion. The neighbors—who likely have known him his entire life—they are having vision problems. They cannot agree on whether or not this guy is the one they've known or not!

Enter the Pharisees—they are divided. Some believe the healer cannot possibly be from God because he healed on the Sabbath, making that person a lawbreaker/sinner! They do not believe him, so they summon the parents of the healed man. In v.19 they inquire: "Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?" The parents correctly ID the man but offer no explanation for his healing.

The now sighted man is summoned again, and asked again to identify the "impostor"/"sinner". (v.24) "I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind. I now see."

Clearly there is a problem. But the problem is NOT about who healed the blind man or how he did it or that he did it on the Sabbath. What is the problem?

The Pharisees have a hearing problem. By now they have heard the story repeated several times. The now sighted man has been nothing but consistent, repeating his story verbatim, each and every time, to the end that he says to them (v.27) ²⁷“I’ve told you over and over and you haven’t listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?”
(There’s a little irony in that last question, isn’t there?)

At this, the Pharisees take great offense, ejecting him from the temple! Now, Jesus seeks out the healed man for a second encounter. Remember, up until now the man had only heard Jesus’ voice and obeyed him. This is the first time he has “seen” him. In other words, he does not recognize Jesus because he has never seen him before!

Here he comes, up close and personal. Here Jesus engages the one who has physical sight, and who now gains in-sight. Jesus asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

³⁶The man said, “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.”

³⁷Jesus said, “You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?” ³⁸“Master, I believe,” the man said, and worshiped him.

This verse is the climax of the story! This “up close and personal” encounter results in faith, based on Jesus’ self-disclosure as the Son of God. Here we see how the man’s blindness was the occasion for Jesus to demonstrate God’s power. Jesus integrates seeing and hearing with believing. Had the man not been born blind, he might never have “seen” Jesus, but through his healing, he gains both sight and insight!

This is a portrayal of grace: The blindman asked for nothing; he is totally passive. Rather Jesus saw him, sought him, and healed him. The man was totally passive. He did nothing to earn or deserve this; it is purely a gift of grace. Jesus gave him sight and something far more valuable: a life lived no longer in complete darkness, but a life lived in the Light!

John Newton, once involved in the slave trade, later became an abolitionist. He composed the hymn Amazing Grace, likely inspired by the blind man’s confession: “I once was lost, and now am found; was blind and now I see!”

There is something worse than blindness: one may have 20:20 vision but be blind to the Truth (John 14:6), blind to spiritual realities. The Pharisees possess physical sight, however they lack insight. They are blind to who Jesus is; they are deaf to the Good News of God's grace! They fail to "see" God's revelation, in both the healing miracle, and the Healer himself!

So here we are: How are our senses—our hearing and vision—helping us to perceive spiritual realities?

What do you (and I) "see" and "hear" in this passage, in our context today?

Like the man's blindness, perhaps this pandemic could be an opportunity for God's power to be revealed. I don't know for sure. What I do know is this: I don't want to miss hearing what God might be saying, or miss seeing what God is doing. I do not want to be blind to God's gracious activity in the world, and in my life and yours today and in the weeks ahead.

This is where we need to help one another! Let's ask God to reveal God's presence to us: May we keep our ears and eyes, hearts and minds open!

Often on car trips when our boys were young, we would play a game called "I SPY". It's really very simple, and I'd like to suggest a version all of us can participate in.' I SPY is a way of hearing/seeing: it means paying attention, noticing, looking for ways, both small and large, that God shows up!

Here are some examples. I SPY-ed God this week...

...in the tangy taste of a crisp, juicy apple.

...in hearing the harmonious voices of the Seattle Girls Chorale, singing together, each from their own homes.

...in hearing from you about how our deacons are reaching out to you through emails and phone calls, keeping us connected with one another.

...in seeing the ornamental cherry trees' cascading blossoms dancing in the breeze.

...in seeing a young family, with grocery sacks in their wagon, filling the Blessing Box on Wed. afternoon.

...in hearing my 3 ½ year old grandson Caden say: "I yuv you, Nona!"

All of these are a few of the ways "I Spied" God at work this week.

At a time when it is easy to become overwhelmed by the constant onslaught of bad news, we need to focus our sight and senses on experiencing God's presence in the present. This offers hope in the midst of despair, light in the deepening darkness.

These are truths that we can share with others, just as the sighted man could do. He was a witness to God's gracious action in his life. So too we may share with others our "God sightings", offering hope and perhaps even inviting others to be Jesus' disciples too.

1 Peter 3:14b-15 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁴... do not be frightened." ¹⁵But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

My challenge to you this week: Keep a little diary—be on the alert. Try to find at least one "God sighting" each day. Then share those with me and with your family and friends.

May we not be blind to God's grace-filled presence and activity in our world, even today!

PRAY

Benediction

Romans 15:13 New International Version (NIV)

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.