



THE WILDERNESS... A PLACE OF DISRUPTION

JOHN 9:1-41

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This story is filled with strange disruptions. Jesus and the disciples are walking along when Jesus sees a man born blind begging. I love the fact that he is never referred to as “the blind man” in John’s Gospel. Jesus saw a man. P.S. this man happened to have been born blind. The disciples ask (apparently, right in front of the guy who can hear very well), “Who sinned, the man or his parents?”

It’s an age-old question—Why did this happen? —and there’s no easy answer to it. Jesus answers, “Well, it’s neither. It wasn’t because his parents did something wrong. And it wasn’t because this man did something wrong in the womb. Remember he was born blind.” (John 9:3)

In my time with the young disciples, I asked them to remember a time when they were blindfolded, and everything felt different. Well, when I was a kid about ten or so, I got to visit an underground mine. My memory connected to this story in John. This is how I felt when the guide turned off the lights for a brief moment. When that happens:

- You are oriented only to yourself—the clammy humidity on your skin that occurs far underground, hearing or feeling the beat of your heart.
- You can no longer see anyone else in the group.
- You alone are important; there is no larger picture.
- You are focused on the moment, on safety.

(This may sound a little dramatic, but if you’ve been in a mine like I have without light, you know I’m telling the truth!)

On the other hand, when our Lord gives you sight, your scope enlarges:

- You can see other people.
- Community becomes possible.
- You step with confidence into the unknown.
- You comprehend the landscape, the big picture.

It's not automatic. We're always offered a choice. The religious leaders ask for the fifth time a question using the word *how*— "*How* did he open your eyes?"—we see that they're fixated on method rather than going to the deeper question: *Who* is this healer? The religious leaders even turn against the now-sighted man with disgust that he, a sinner, would deign to tell them how to think about Jesus. You can almost smell the excessive vanity dripping off these affronted powerful types. We know them in our own time. They often get caught offending in just the way they accuse others of sinning.

Did you notice that Jesus is absent for most of this story? He's there at the beginning and heals the man. And He's there at the end when the man will again be denied the dignity and humanity of community. Jesus' absence for most of the story gives the threatened people time to try to find someone who will blame Jesus rather than giving Him credit for a good gift. When He reappears, He perfectly depicts in double meaning the point of His healing: "I came into this world ... so that those who do not see may see" (John 9:39).

When Jesus returns to the story at the end, He pulls out from God's word the deeper meaning of having vision. He enlarges the meaning of the light that God gives so that it becomes a kind of interior seeing. Having vision becomes a way to connect with others.

The healed man doesn't get caught up in the befuddling questions of the religious leaders like whether Jesus is a sinner. The healed man says what he knows to be the flat truth: Jesus healed me. And he is gutsy. He sounds exasperated at the religious leaders when they want to hear it again and he says, "I have told you already, and you would not listen." His vision has brought him a clarity that we might all admire. Vision brings wisdom.

This story has all the people you can find in any group:

- The self-righteous and powerful
- The crowd that wants to watch
- The ones who want to turn a blind eye
- The ones who try to avoid getting involved

The only one who truly receives light is the man born blind. He's the only one who is healed. He's the only one who names Jesus appropriately.

The story of the blind man's healing in John can be recounted in three parts:

1. Jesus comes and heals the man born blind.
2. Everybody is in a tizzy trying to figure out what happened.
3. Jesus comes again to the healed man when the man is isolated again from community.

This movement of events mirrors our world in every age:

1. Jesus came.
2. We wonder what happened and argue about it.
3. Jesus comes to us ... again and again ... with healing.

No one will remain unaffected by this novel coronavirus. Schools have moved online or have closed for now. Those who are able to do so are shifting to working from home. Friday was the first day of Spring, but many of the markers of March are upended—no March Madness basketball or weekly worship or spring break trips. More painfully, visiting loved ones in care facilities is prohibited while they are restricted to their rooms. Whole grocery store aisles are rendered empty by those who are able stock up on paper products and bleach and hand sanitizer. Those already on the edge are being pushed closer to falling off. Families experiencing food insecurity stress about what it will mean for schools to close and the source of their children’s breakfast and lunch with it. The gig economy (code for no health insurance, no paid sick leave, no safety net) is revealing how perilously many of our neighbors, if not us, live.

I wonder, as we shelter in place and find everyday routines disrupted as a result of the spreading COVID-19, how we will react to this crisis? What will we assume and how will Jesus seek to reveal Himself, correct our wrong understandings and bring healing? I’m thinking this crisis might, just might, help us foster greater compassion, solidarity across borders and live into wider inclusion.

We, like Jesus’ disciples, may have been tempted to look at people, if we saw them at all, and assumed their plight was somehow their fault. If we were blind to this truth before, this pandemic might help us to see it now. In the wake of travel bans, school and business closures, event cancellations and market decline, will *our* eyes be opened? Can this crisis become an occasion for our belief in Jesus to alter not only our understanding of others, but our treatment of them? Can this anxious season become an occasion to reveal the work of God in us and among us and through us? It will always remain our choice. We can choose to miss the opportunity to see others with new eyes. But why would we?

BENEDICTION

Numbers 6:24-26 New International Version (NIV)

24 “The Lord bless you
and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.”