

The Man Born Blind

Fourth in Lenten Series:
Heart to Heart Talks with Jesus

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John 9:1-41

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸The Religious Leaders of the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Religious Leaders; for they had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered

them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”

²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”

³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out. ⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

When I first thought about this Lenten series of sermons which considers these one-on-one conversations with Jesus, I had no idea that

we would literally be separated from one another, trying to reckon with what is going on in the world in isolation.

In today's heart to heart conversation, Jesus announces that he is the Light of the World, and the only one who sees Jesus for who he really is – is the blind man! Oddly enough, given the times that we are in, the healing of this Man Born Blind, isolates him from everyone else around him, except for Jesus himself. You would think that when Jesus healed this man, blind from birth, it would have been met with great rejoicing. For the first time in his life, this human being can see. He can see his reflection in a pool of water, he can see olive branches waving in the wind, he can see sheep being herded over the hillside, he can see little children running down the road. You would think a party might be in store, a celebration of neighbors, friends, and family.

Instead, this miracle results in unbelievable confusion and further isolation. The man's neighbors grow suspicious and report him to the religious leaders. The religious leaders interrogate him. His own parents refuse to speak on his behalf. He is cast out of the synagogue, driven from his worshipping community. Ironically, the miracle itself causes confusion and isolation for the one who is healed.

Like this Man Born Blind, we too are living in a time of unbelievable confusion and disconcerting isolation. News about this pandemic is coming at us fast; it changes every day; we do not know how long it will last or how long we will have to practice social distancing. We have never been this way before.

I imagine that many of you have heard the comparison made of this time we are in to September 11, 2001. In those days and weeks after 9/11 we were also left reeling from an unexpected tragedy. But there is a sharp difference between 9/11 and now. Back then, we coped by coming together. One thoughtful commentary on the difference between then and now put it this way: "The terror now is similar to the terror then, a wicked weave of vulnerability, helplessness and the inability to guess what's next. But there's something crueler at work this time around, a

psychological contradiction and emotional oxymoron that are peculiar to a pandemic. At the very moment when many of us hunger most for the reassurance of company and the solace of community, we are hustled into isolation. To pull together, we must stay apart... ‘Staying home,’ ‘working from home,’ and ‘holing up’ have sweet, nurturing rings when they are voluntary and exceptional. But when the seclusion is compulsory and spans an unspecified progression of days, it is a lonely, claustrophobic and crazy-making condition.”¹

This is indeed a lonely and crazy-making time, and as people of faith, we are being called upon to find ways through the confusion to an assurance that God is with us. Through this gospel’s long and dramatic story, that assurance is exactly where the Man Born Blind can take us, to an assurance that God is with us – with us even in this.

I want to point out two aspects of this story that are particularly relevant for us today. First, the story references a confusion about the relationship between sin and suffering. “Who sinned?” the disciples ask Jesus, this man or his parents? There was an ancient belief that illness was the result of sin. Jesus says, very clearly, this illness is not the result of anyone’s sin. When Jesus acts in the lives of hurting people, suddenly old assumptions are called into question. Jesus says the old notions about the relationship between sin and illness are not as simple as cause and effect; he separates sin from suffering, saying that the tragedies of life are not so easily explained away. Indeed, this man’s blindness becomes a vehicle through which God’s good works are made known.

The second thing to notice about this story is that Jesus is in it at the beginning, and comes back at the end, but from verse 8 to 35, Jesus disappears, leaving the formerly blind man to make sense of his healing for himself.

It is a curious thing that Jesus heals the man and then basically disappears for a while. He leaves the script for twenty-seven verses.

¹ Frank Bruni, “Why the Coronavirus Is So Much Worse than September 11,” New York Times, 3/17/20.

What one biblical scholar says about this is – not only are we called to trust Jesus. We are likewise reminded that Jesus has faith in us. Jesus trusts us, to be left alone from time to time, to figure out how the Light of the World is being revealed.

After being questioned by his neighbors, interrogated by the Pharisees, and left to fend for himself by his parents the formerly blind man is left on his own for a while, until Jesus returns and engages him in a heart to heart conversation again.

This gospel story reminds us of the healing power of God revealed in the person of Jesus, and during these difficult days, it calls us to faith and trust. This story *also* invites us to remember that *God has faith in us* to testify to the healing power of Jesus Christ.

Earlier this week, there was an article in *The Atlantic* about Francis Collins, the Director of the National Institutes of Health. He was interviewed about both the coronavirus and his faith in a time like this. Francis Collins recounted the story of how he moved from being a confirmed atheist, who thought science held the answer to every question, to being a devout Christian. He was visiting a patient in the hospital with advanced cardiac disease. She reminded him of his grandmother. She was nearing the end of her life with a remarkable sense of peace, and she easily shared her faith in Jesus with her young doctor.

In one of those conversations, she looked at Collins in a quizzical way and said, “You know, doctor. . . . You have listened to me talk about my faith, but you never say anything. What do *you* believe? Collins remembers that long-ago moment now saying that her simple, direct question was like a thunderclap. “Like a realization that I could not walk away from, but that was the most important question I’ve ever been asked.”²

² Peter Wehner, “NIH Director: We’re on an Exponential Curve,” *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2020.

Through that question, *What do you believe?* Francis Collins came to the Christian faith. That is the heart to heart question Jesus asks the Man Born Blind, and through their encounter we are being asked the same important question: *What do we believe?*

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. And we believe that Jesus has faith in us to testify to his power to heal.

AMEN.