

## A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Gaining Sight*

John 9

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The gospel story begins, “As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.” Immediately, we note the juxtaposition between Jesus who sees, and the man who is blind. This kind of contrast, this apposition between seeing and not seeing, is going to be woven through this whole story, sometimes in surprising ways. Those who see and those who don’t see, or can’t see, or refuse to see. Seeing works through layers in this story: the literal layer—a man born blind is given sight; and the spiritual—seeing as perception, understanding, and even faith. And when it comes to faith in Jesus there are those who see, even if they don’t fully understand; there are those who want to see and strain their eyes to find light in the darkness; and there are those who refuse to see. These are all different ways people relate to Jesus, and they are all here in this story.

This story is right in the middle of John’s gospel, chapter 9 of 21, and it’s right in the heart of John’s gospel message. This is not a random sighting of a man who is physically blind. In this one man, Jesus sees the essential human condition he has been sent to heal. The fact that the man is ‘blind from birth’ symbolizes that this blindness comes with the territory of being human. One person’s physical blindness is a symbol of a universal spiritual opaqueness (John Shea, Year A, 130).

One of you told me that you remembered this story from Sunday School when you were a child, a long time ago. The teacher told the children this story about a man born blind as a symbol of how we are all blind in a way. Jesus is the light who comes into the world to help us see God, opening our eyes of faith. I thought that was a pretty smart Sunday School teacher. And a pretty smart student to remember that lesson all those years later. This is a story way beyond one man’s physical condition and the wonderful thing that happened to him. This is a story about all humanity, even all creation. John’s gospel, remember, opens by echoing the creation story, “The Light has come into the world and the world has not overcome it.” And John’s gospel ends with “blessed are those who do not see and yet believe.” So, we can see that a story about a blind man coming to sight told right in the middle of this gospel story puts his story in the heart of the gospel message which brings light to the world and sight to the spiritually blind. Jesus heals him by making clay and smears it on his eyes, recalling Genesis 2’s creation story of the first human from the ground, *Adam* from *adamah*, and highlights the new creation that this story represents and which the gospel brings to life. This is a creation story of light dawning on the world writ on one man’s life.

Of course, no man is singular, and neither is he. His healing by Jesus unleashes a comedic flurry of speculation and anxiety. First, he has friends who can’t seem to figure out if the seeing man in front of them is really the guy they knew blind yesterday. While they debate right in front of

him, he's standing there like, I'm not the antihero here: "Hi. It's me. I'm not the problem. It's you."

Then, he has parents who want nothing to do with any of this. When asked about what happened to their son, they say, "Don't ask us. We're not the problem. Ask him. Go ask him for yourself." And finally, he has religious authorities in his life who interrogate him relentlessly. "Who did this to you? What did he do? Who is he?" They really, really want to get to the bottom of this. But actually, they don't; they don't want to get to the bottom of what has happened. They want to get to the end of Jesus, and they want to use this man's healing as a way to rid themselves of him. So in his life, this man born blind has those who want to see but can't; those who see but look away; and those who could see, but squint their eyes, smush their eyes closed lest they see and become Jesus' disciples. It's all here in this one story.

It's all here in every story. And maybe in some way or another in every one of us.

There are parts of me that look wide-eyed at faith's mysteries and delight. I think of the times in my own life when God has seemed so very close, closer than a breath, and I think of the testimonies of those whose lives have been changed, sometimes in an instant. I think of the man I baptized years ago who'd been in a terrible car accident that shook him to his core. He was still in his neck brace on the day of his baptism, but he wouldn't hear of waiting.

And there are parts of me that can be skeptical of outrageous claims in the name of Jesus. Those of us who grew up in the era of tv preacher-healers peddling their tear-soaked handkerchiefs to our grandmothers for \$19.99 plus shipping and handling can be a little jaded. When does wise discernment with healthy skepticism degrade into cynicism? It happens. I want to be wise; I don't want to be cynical. Cynicism is the cheap path of the lazy. Discernment is the long road of the wise. Cynicism is closed off to wonder; discernment hopes for the good and beautiful to also be true because if it's not true, it's neither good nor beautiful. I think we can sympathize, perhaps, with the Pharisees here, to a point. Their skepticism about the healing can serve the cause of truth. Or it could have if it weren't laden with cynicism. They didn't want to see even what was in front of their eyes. They wanted to be blind. And so they got what they wanted. The man born blind was given sight. The people born sighted and trained to be enlightened chose spiritual blindness. One commentator on this story puts it in clear terms: If people do not respond to the light, the light becomes judgment on their lack of response. Avoid Jesus as light; meet him as judge. (Shea, 139).

The man born blind is the main character in this story. So we turn our attention back to him. Jesus saw him and so do we. He represents a creation birthed in blindness as it were. The words "Let there be light" gave the world sight and the beginning of life. This guy. He's so great. Someone noted the other day that blind people often get ignored. Sighted people will talk to other sighted people right in the presence of blind people, even about the blind person, but not talk to them. The experience of blindness is often isolating as well. We might imagine, then, that no one has asked this man his thoughts about anything in a long time. But now they do, and, oh, does he have some opinions and things to say. I love this guy. He gets bolder and

bolder. And his sight, his spiritual vision I mean, penetrates more and more the unseen mystery of the grace that is all around him and the One through whom it came. This is a conversion story playing out before our very eyes.

Who is Jesus to this man?

In verse 11, he is “the man called Jesus” who made mud, anointed my eyes, and healed me. I don’t know where he is or who he is. He is simply a man whose name is Jesus.

After interrogation by the Pharisees about all of this, they asked the man “What do you say about him? In verse 17, he responds, “He is a prophet.” A prophet was a respected and perhaps feared messenger of God in those days. For him to say, “He is a prophet” means he is beginning to see some things, beginning to put some pieces together. He’s beginning to see Jesus as more than “the man Jesus.”

The progression continues. As the Pharisees press on him further, his vision becomes clearer. Ironically their opposition sharpens his vision. Jesus isn’t just a prophet who speaks for God, in verse 33, he says, “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” Jesus is not just *for* God but sent *from* God. This was too much for those who could not see. At this, he was cast out of the synagogue and back on to the streets from which he came.

It's then that Jesus makes a beeline for him. He finds him, out there, alone again. And I remember that from Sunday School when I was a child. When a person is suffering, Jesus makes a beeline for them. That’s what my teacher said. That’s the exact word I was told: A beeline. Jesus comes to us when we are suffering. All around the world those who pray the daily office in monasteries and prayer groups in morning prayers, pray for this with the words of Psalm 71, “O Lord come quickly to me. Come help me.” O Lord, make a beeline for me. The day of prayer opens and closes with those words. O Lord come quickly. Come help me. We pray that for ourselves and for all people: in your suffering, may God come to you, may God draw near to you. May you know a God who makes a beeline for you.

Jesus finds the man. And asks, “Do you believe?”

“Tell me who to believe in,” he replies.

Jesus answers, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.”

You see and you hear. That is enough.

“Lord,” the man replies, “I believe,” and he worshipped him.

Now he sees. Now he sees everything.

To this man, over the arc of this story: Jesus is a man who healed, a prophet speaking for God, a holy one sent from God, The Lord, The Son of Man, and worthy of worship. His is a story of faith, the story of faith coming alive. Faith can come in a flash of blinding light, or at the burning bush, but sometimes it dawns like the early morning, sometimes like Easter morning. Sometimes faith comes to those who not only see but want to see further and clearer than their eyes can show them. They want to see with a penetrating gaze to the truth of the world

and so they pray prayers like, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” “Lord, come quickly to help me.” Or “Lord, I want to see, help me see.”

This is a story of faith at the heart of the Gospel. And it is an invitation to each of us to faith, from wherever we are beginning. To embrace what we can see now and trust God to open our eyes to see beyond what we can see now. Sometimes it seems no one around us can see what we can see, but faith is penetrating the veil of what we can see with our eyes and seeing the truth of all things, seeing the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

May we open ourselves today to the light of Christ. May Christ’s light shine on you and through you. May your spiritual vision be enlightened. May your faith be bolder. May you whose eyes are wide open find Jesus come near to you. May your eyes be open to see him; may your lips say a faith born in you: Lord, I believe. I worship you. To you, Lord, I lift up my soul. My God, I put my trust in you. I worship you.

Thanks be to you, my God. Amen.

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