

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

**John 9:1-41**

**March 19, 2023**

**Fourth Sunday of Lent**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**A GOSPEL ITINERARY FOR LENT: THE POOL  
“Believing is Seeing”**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Thank God for the Duke Eye Center in Durham, North Carolina! And I mean that literally. Our daughter, Natalie, was born with a severe eye disorder that could have resulted in blindness in one eye if left untreated. Soon after she arrived in our family, an optometrist referred us to the Duke Eye Center so she could be evaluated by a pediatric ophthalmologist. After three eye surgeries when she was an infant and toddler, Natalie’s eyes were healed.

Thank God for Dr. Edward G. Buckley who operated on Natalie’s eyes! And I mean that literally. Although I wasn’t in the operating room when Dr. Buckley performed the surgery, I’m fairly certain he didn’t spit on some dirt, make mud, and smear it on our daughter’s eyes. Just the same, Dr. Buckley used his surgical gifts and talents and his passion for his calling to restore her sight.

Since that happened a long time ago, I wondered if Dr. Buckley is still practicing at the Duke Eye Center. Sure enough, I found him on the center’s website, including a brief video in which he describes why he chose to practice pediatric ophthalmology and what’s it like to examine a child’s eyes, especially a very small child. In the video, Dr. Buckley says, “With kids in ophthalmology, you really have to have their full cooperation in order to do the exam. If the child does not want to participate in an eye exam they close their eyes (here he squeezes his eyes closed very tightly) and we’re done for the day.”<sup>1</sup>

Imagine Jesus saying something similar after he healed the man born blind: “With the neighbors, the Pharisees, some of the Jews, and the parents, when it comes to seeing and believing, you really have to have their full cooperation in order to do the self-examination. If they don’t want to participate, they close their eyes (here Jesus squeezes his eyes closed very tightly) and we’re done for the day.”

Didn’t some of the neighbors squeeze their eyes shut very tightly when they said, “No, it’s not him, but someone like him,” and asked, “How were your eyes opened?”

Didn’t the Pharisees squeeze their eyes shut very tightly when they said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath. We know this man is a sinner. As for this man, we do not know where he comes from. Surely we are not blind, are we?”?

Didn’t his parents squeeze their eyes shut very tightly when they told the Pharisees, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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”?

When you read from the Gospel of John, it's good to remember that you must hear what he says on at least two different levels. John uses lots of symbols and double meanings in his stories in order to make his theological points and, as he himself tells us near the end of his gospel, “that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

That is certainly true in today's story about a man born blind receiving his sight. One blogger puts it this way: “For John there is seeing – without understanding or believing – and there is seeing – discovering a truth that goes deeper than the eyes or the mind, into the soul, and leads to a believing that is more than signs or miracles, but a connection with the person of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Did you notice that in the aftermath of regaining his physical sight, the man born blind slowly sees more and more? He discovers a truth that goes deeper than the eyes or mind, a connection with Jesus as he grows more bold in his realization and proclamation of who Jesus is.

His neighbors asked him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” and he answered, “**The man Jesus** made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

The Pharisees said to the blind man, “What do you say about him?” He said, “He is **a prophet**.” Again the Pharisees said, “We know that this man is a sinner” to which the man replied, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” When the Pharisees said, “As for this man, we do not know where he comes from,” the man responded, “**If this man were not from God**, he could do nothing.”

Jesus asked the man, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” and he answered, “Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” To which the man replies with a confession of faith, with his words and his actions: “**Lord, I believe**” and he worshiped him. With his eyes opened, the man sees that the man Jesus who made mud, spread it on his eyes, and told him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam is the Son of Man, the Lord.

We use the idiom “Seeing is believing” to say that when something unlikely is witnessed, the truth of its occurrence or existence can no longer be doubted. But, numerous scripture passages from the New Testament seem to contradict that familiar saying when it comes to believing. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The apostle Paul wrote, “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7) and “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:24-25) Why, even in the gospel of John we read about the risen Lord Jesus telling Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

And yet, also throughout John's gospel, believing is seeing! The man born blind is a good example. In her comments about this story, Anna Carter Florence observes, "Notice that the man born blind cannot describe his conversion moment to anyone's satisfaction, but he *can* tell the difference it makes. 'All I know,' he tells the authorities, 'is that I was blind, and now I see!' This is a better tactic, because now he is talking about things others can see and hear for themselves. They knew him before; they can see him now, and clearly, he is no longer blind! So let description of the before and after be the thing. Once I saw the world like this; now I see it like this. Once I believed this; now I believe this. Once I lived in a place that I now see was blind to certain things. Now my eyes are opened, and here is what I see and know! These are the stories the church needs to hear."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, we also use the saying "turn a blind eye to," usually when we ignore something that we know is wrong. According to dictionary.com, "this expression is believed to come from the siege of Copenhagen in 1801, in which Lord Horatio Nelson, second in command of the English fleet, was ordered to withdraw but pretended not to see the flagship's signals to do so by putting his glass to the eye that had been blinded in an earlier battle. His attack led to a major victory."

"To turn a blind eye to" also more generally means to ignore or overlook. For instance, when the Pharisees stood firm in their belief, "We know this man is a sinner . . . We are disciples of Moses . . . as for this man, we do not know where he comes from," were they not "turning a blind eye" to the truth standing right before their eyes in Jesus and demonstrated right before their eyes in the blind man receiving his sight? I imagine the disciples who asked Jesus, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" hoped he would say, "Of course not." Instead, Jesus, with an ironic twist of words and meanings, answers, "Yes, you are . . . Now that you say 'We see,' your sin remains." (John 9:41)

There is a joke about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson going on a camping trip. After dinner, they settled down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend.

"Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." Watson replied, "I see millions of stars." "What does that tell you?" asked Holmes. Watson pondered for a minute. "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?" Holmes was silent for a minute, then spoke, "Watson, you idiot. Someone has stolen our tent!"

What do we miss that's right before our very eyes? What trees keep us from seeing God's forest? About what are we so sure we see correctly, that we are blinded to the truth? To what do we turn a blind eye? What keeps us from saying, "I was blind and now I see"? What in the church and in our lives of faith hinders us from saying, "Once I saw the world like this; now I see it like this. Once I believed this; now I believe this. Once I lived in a place that I now see was blind to certain things"?

In a Wednesday morning Bible study years ago (we may very well have been talking about this blind man), Lou Brinkley made a comment that was so profound, I went home and wrote it in my quote journal. Tuesday I remembered what Lou had said and asked if I could use it in today's sermon. When she was a freshman in college, Lou turned in a lab report. When the professor handed it back, Lou saw he had written the following critique: "If you had observed what you saw, you would have seen more."

Isn't that a great summary of this story about the man born blind, the neighbors, the Pharisees, and the man's parents? Only the man himself observed what he saw in Jesus – not just with his healed eyes but in an entirely new way of seeing – and he saw more than he ever expected. In a way, the man born blind is a lot like the Samaritan woman at the well, who went to draw up a bucket of water and received "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Someone this week asked, "Of course we're going to sing 'Amazing Grace,' aren't we? You know, 'was blind but now I see.'" And the answer is, "Yes, how could we not sing 'Amazing Grace'?" But I've also asked the choir to sing "Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord" as a response to the sermon. We sang that as our opening hymn two weeks ago as we stopped at the mountain of Transfiguration and caught a glimpse of Jesus in all of his glory.

"Open the Eyes of My Heart" is not based on this story from John's gospel. The author Paul Baloche, instead, was inspired by Ephesians 1:17-19, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

But Paul Baloche's "spiritual intent" of his song certainly describes the blind man's experience and the hope we can have when our eyes are opened: "The essence of the song is our petition, asking God to open the eyes of our hearts . . . I began to realize that it is not more teaching we need, but a revelation of God and a crying out to him, saying, 'God, open the eyes of my heart. Reveal to me how I might taste and see who you really are so that I might be changed from the inside out. Help me to have a response of gratitude and admiration, and a sense of awe and worship toward Jesus.'"<sup>4</sup>

"Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord, we want to see you."

[Interesting note: As I was writing this sermon, I was listening to different kinds of music on YouTube – John Rutter, Mark Hayes, Dan Forrest. As I was typing the final paragraph of my sermon, a group of bagpipers started playing "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound." What do you think about that?]

***Let us pray: Almighty God, by the power of your Spirit, give us eyes of faith to see clearly your truth and to grow in grace as we see Jesus revealed in your holy Word. Lord, in your merc, give us the clear sight of***

***faith so that we too will faithfully worship and follow Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>[www.dukehealth.org/find-doctors-physicians/edward-g-buckley-md](http://www.dukehealth.org/find-doctors-physicians/edward-g-buckley-md)

<sup>2</sup>John van de Laar, "Seeing and Believing," *Sacerdise* blog, April 26, 2011 at [www.sacerdise.com](http://www.sacerdise.com).

<sup>3</sup>Anna Carter Florence, "John 9:1-41: Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 121.

<sup>4</sup>C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: 'Open the Eyes of My Heart' (Paul Beloche)" at [www.umcdiscipleship.org](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org)