

*Sight or Insight?*  
Fourth Sunday of Lent  
March 2, 2008  
Rev. Susan J. Morrison

**John 9:1-41**

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

<sup>8</sup>The 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?” <sup>9</sup>Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” <sup>10</sup>But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” <sup>11</sup>He 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.” <sup>12</sup>They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

<sup>13</sup>They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup>Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup>Then 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.” <sup>16</sup>Some 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. <sup>17</sup>So 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.”

<sup>18</sup>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 <sup>19</sup>and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” <sup>20</sup>His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; <sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. <sup>23</sup>Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

<sup>24</sup>So 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.” <sup>25</sup>He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” <sup>26</sup>They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” <sup>27</sup>He 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?” <sup>28</sup>Then they reviled him, saying, “You are Jesus’ disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup>We know that God has spoken to Moses, but we have no idea where this Jesus comes from.” <sup>30</sup>The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup>We know that God does not listen to sinners, but that if

people are devout and obey God's will, God listens to them. <sup>32</sup>Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup>If this one were not from God, he could never have done such a thing." <sup>34</sup>They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

<sup>35</sup>Jesus heard that they had driven him out, he sought out the healed one and asked, "Do you believe in the Chosen One?" <sup>36</sup>He answered, "And who is this One, that I may believe?" <sup>37</sup>Jesus said to him, "You are looking at him, and the one speaking with you is he." <sup>38</sup>The healed one said, "Yes, I believe" and worshiped Jesus.

<sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "I came into this world to execute justice so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." <sup>40</sup>Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" <sup>41</sup>Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

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Throughout Lent, we've been meeting people in the Gospel of John who have been touched by Jesus in his ministry. These encounters have been invitations for us to consider how Jesus has touched our lives and how he might yet touch us with his Spirit.

Two weeks ago we stood in the shadows during a nighttime visit by a religious leader named Nicodemus and we were reminded of our need to be born of the Spirit again and again and again. Last week we were on the road with Jesus, traveling from Judea to Galilee and our journey took us to Samaria and to a woman by a well. There, Jesus did not hesitate to challenge the accepted patterns of discrimination in his day so that living water could be offered and received. We were reminded that we are called to the same kind of courage to be true bearers of living water in our own Samarias. Today, we are led to a man born blind sitting beside the road.

Milo Thornberry points out that unlike Nicodemus who came to Jesus with his questions and unlike the Samaritan woman who was drawn into conversation by Jesus, here there is no indication that the blind man made any request of Jesus. Once again, Jesus risks his reputation by interacting with a blind beggar. Like the Samaritan woman, this man is considered unclean and it would have been an offense for a rabbi to touch an untouchable.

It all begins with Jesus' disciples inquiring of Jesus who had sinned? this man or his parents, since he had been born blind. That was the conventional wisdom of the day. One's health, wealth and well being were tell tale signs of one's spiritual well being. If someone was sick or had a leprous skin disease, or the crops failed or there was a drought, it meant that someone had sinned. The Hebrew scripture made it clear that "the sins of the parents are visited upon the children and their children's children." People in Jesus' day believed that God punishes the wicked.

Unfortunately, the question of sin causing illness or catastrophe is not simply from the first century. Not infrequently have I heard the question "What did I do to deserve this?" from persons who were seriously ill or to whom some personal catastrophe had happened. And this question, "What did I do to deserve this?" is often followed by "Surely God won't give me more than I can handle." This theology assumes that God causes sickness or catastrophe and we somehow deserve what God hands out.

But the God of Jesus Christ doesn't work that way! In one brilliant moment, Jesus challenges this long held belief about the nature of God. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus rejects out of hand the notion that sin has caused the blindness. Instead, he says, this man's blindness, like everyone's own circumstance, situation, or condition, is an opportunity for the works of God to be revealed.

For me, this reversal of theology is the heart of the whole story about the man born blind. Jesus performs a miracle of giving a blind man sight. But he performs an even greater miracle of giving us insight into the true nature of God. Think about what Jesus' words do to our understanding of God.

What an insight! Never again can we blame God for causing bad things to happen. Bad things will happen and they will provide the opportunity for God to companion us, encourage us, inspire us, and even to transform us. Every difficult situation in life provides the opportunity for the works of God to be revealed.

Years ago, when Holy Trinity was training me up to be a pastor, I gathered together a group of young adults who were head and brain injured. Some had had a stroke; others had been in an auto accident; one had had a brain tumor. Barry Gilks, Susan Edwards, Scott Sayer, and Mike Lynch taught me lessons about patience and hope and endurance as we wrestled and struggled with matters of faith in the midst of their life changing situations. I brought that support group experience with me when I moved to Andover. One of the first people that I met was a young man who had been in a near fatal car accident the night of his senior prom. He was wheel chair bound, unable to speak, learning how to use a computer that would speak for him. How could the works of God ever be revealed in Scott Stephens life? Instead of spending the next 4 years at an Ivy League college where he had been accepted, he would spend a lifetime coping with his massive head and brain injury. Well, here's the end of the story. Scott's father, who was in industrial real estate, sold his business. Scott's mother, who owned a florist shop in Andover, sold her business. They took the proceeds and invested them in building an independent living center for head and brain injured people. They poured their life into helping others who had known such catastrophe. Now, 15 years later, a third house is near completion. Hundreds of lives have been touched by their courageous decision and deeds. Oh yes, the works of God have been revealed through Scott Stephens!

Next weekend I will be in California to celebrate the 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bloom in the Desert Ministries. Since General Conference 2000, I have been active in a reconciling ministry movement called *Church within a Church*. As more and more legislation in our denomination has limited the life and ministry of our gay, lesbian and bi-sexual brothers and sisters, some of us chose to found a movement that would include, rather than exclude Methodists of homosexual orientation. Rev. Kevin Johnson and his partner Mike Shearer were so inspired by the intentions of *Church within a Church* that they decided to found a new church in Palm Springs, CA and name it Bloom in the Desert Ministries. Here's the story behind the story. Kevin is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. He had served several United Methodist Churches in the Chicago area when suddenly, because he was gay and had a partner, his annual conference refused to give him an appointment. Rev. Kev was devastated. He knew that God had called him into parish ministry. He loved ministry and every church that he had served loved him. How could the works of God possibly be revealed to Rev. Kevin Johnson and Mike Shearer, a faithful gay couple that had been turned out of the Methodist church. Here's the end of the story. Kevin and Mike sold their condo in Chicago, packed up their possessions and moved to

California to plant a new church. *Church within a Church* helped to support them as they set out as visionary prophets. Today Bloom in the Desert Ministries enjoys an active membership of about 60 people and will celebrate its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary next weekend. Gay, straight, multi cultural, this congregation provides worship, study and service opportunities to their members. Bloom adopted the following Mission Statement in November of 2006. Here it is: *Guided by teachings of Jesus Christ, Bloom is a community of believers who strive to uplift and heal one another. We gather to worship God, witness our faith in the living of our lives and uphold one another in Christian living. United in our diversity we are inclusive and embracing. We agitate for God's peace and justice in our community and around the world.* This agitation has resulted in school back packs complete with supplies being sent to local 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders who couldn't afford to buy them and to a school serving low income Palestinian children in Jerusalem. Their *Well in the Desert Ministry* feeds working poor and homeless families every Monday noon. Oh, yes, the works of God have been revealed to Kevin and Mike!

In this morning's gospel lesson, a blind man is sitting by the side of the road begging. Now how could the works of God possibly be revealed to this one whom everyone knew had sinned? Jesus gives him his physical sight but more importantly, gives him spiritual insight. Because of what Jesus does for the man born blind and because of the questions about sin that are raised by others, the man born blind gradually sees who Jesus really is. To neighbors, he describes his healer as "the man called Jesus." To the Pharisees who first question him, he dares to call his healer "a prophet." To leaders in his second inquisition, he says his healer is "from God." And finally, reunited with Jesus who identifies himself as the Chosen One, the Messiah, he worships Jesus. The man born blind is not only given his sight, he is given eternal life, he is born from above, he now has that spring of living water gushing up within him, he is filled with the Light of the world.

How might the works of God be revealed in your life? in your situation? What insight can Jesus give you that will transform the way you see life so that instead of being blind to the presence of God, you too will see? What can you possibly build that will offer abundant life to others? Now here I'm speaking metaphorically as Jesus did. I don't literally mean for you to construct a building, but I do mean for you to ask yourself what might be constructed or deconstructed or reconstructed in your life because you have been touched by the love and healing power of Jesus. What risks, what ventures might you take to overcome discrimination and injustice in your community? in this congregation? or in our denomination? or anywhere in God's world?

When it's all said and done, may all of us be able to say, as did John Newton, that brutal captain of a villainous slave ship

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Alleluia! Amen!