

Can't See, Don't See, Won't See

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday in lent, March 14, 1999. Scripture Lesson: John 9:1-41.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The story of the man born blind has been loved by Christians from the very beginning. The story is found pictured on the walls of the Roman catacombs more often than any other Biblical story. Early Christians loved this story of the man born blind. They identified with the man born blind. They saw their own faith development mirrored in the life of the man born blind. The man progressed in his understanding of Jesus:

from a mere man,

to a prophet,

to one worthy of following,

to one "from God",

to one who should be worshipped.

Slowly the man born blind came to see more and more clearly who Jesus is. How has your view of Jesus and your commitment to him progressed over time?

The story of the man born blind was closely associated with the sacrament of baptism. Remember, in the early days of the church most people were baptized as adults. They turned from pagan gods to the God made visible in Jesus. They came to see in Jesus who God really is. In the early church, the Lenten season was a time where people prepared to confess their faith in Jesus and be baptized. Those preparing for baptism studied and meditated on the Old Testament Scriptures that had to do with the saving aspects of water. They read where, **in the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters** at the dawn of the first creation. They read that God washed away the sin and wickedness in the world by the power of the waters of the **flood**. Later, they read that **God led the Israelites on dry ground through the waters of the Red Sea** and delivered them from slavery in Egypt. As Easter and the day of their baptism approached, **the Gospel of John was opened and the ninth chapter** was read, the story of the man born blind and how Jesus told him to go to Siloam and wash. And the man went and washed and

received his sight. At baptism, so the early Christians believed, Jesus comes to live in our hearts, and we begin to share in the life of God. Heaven is opened to us, and we're made able to see divine realities. Like the blind man healed by Jesus, we cross from darkness to light.

Christians still believe that Jesus opens blind eyes. We're blind to so many things. Bob Dylan sang, nearly 40 years ago, "How many times can a man turn his head, Pretending he just doesn't see?" There are so many things we refuse to see, we turn a blind eye. A woman is sexually abused as a child by a trusted male, a father, a step-father, an uncle, maybe even a minister. Her mother knows what's happening but she turns a blind eye and pretends that she just doesn't see.

Last week I finished a book I was reading for our monthly discussion group. *Racehoss: Big Emma's Boy*, the true story of a man who was the son of a prostitute, was physically abused throughout his life, spent 17 years in Texas prisons. My eyes were opened to another world. The book was one of the crudest books I've ever read but I believe Jesus opened my eyes to see a part of life that I'd turned a blind eye to. Jesus is opening my eyes to see what a privileged life I've lived. And to whom much is given, much is required.

Some of you may remember the great sixties band, *The Who*. They wrote the first rock opera called *Tommy*. *Tommy* is the story of a young boy who, at the age of four, witnesses his mother's lover attacking his father. In self defense, his father shoots the man to death. They tell Tommy, "You didn't hear it, you didn't see it, you won't say nothing to no one every in your life." Those words have tragic consequences for Tommy. He's left deaf, dumb, and blind. A lot of people are left spiritually blind to God because of some senseless tragedy in their lives. A loved one dies. Divorce. Sexual abuse. Alcoholism. And they can't see God.

But Jesus opens blind eyes. ^{Music Man. These were birds on the hill but I never saw their wings} Last week I received a phone call from Jill Townsend, a sophomore at Franklin and Marshall College. She was concerned about the expressions of hate found on campus last week. Someone had scrawled racist and sexist messages throughout the halls of a campus dorm on Monday. I believe that Jesus has opened the eyes of Jill and a lot of us to see the presence of racism and sexism. And I believe Jesus opened the eyes of those 300

students and faculty who marched last week against hate. Their eyes have been opened by Jesus. Not everybody may recognize Jesus as the one who opened their eyes. Whether or not it was Jesus, once they were blind to the presence of racism and now they can see. Christians, though, believe that Jesus is the one who opens our eyes to see the world as it really is.

The blind man washed and received his sight but he didn't immediately see clearly who Jesus was. Jesus opens blinds eyes, but none of us has 20/20 spiritual vision. Our eyesight isn't perfect. We don't receive 20/20 vision all at once. For most people there's a process. We grow to see things more clearly as we follow Jesus and learn more about who he is. Remember the scene from the Harrison Ford movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Indiana Jones is searching for the lost Holy Grail that Jesus used at the Last Supper. He has to step out in faith over a chasm where there's no visible means of support. In faith he takes the step and as he does he sees what had been unseen. And his foot comes down on a bridge that takes him to the other side. We gain acuity of vision as we take risky steps of faith.. like going with us to Dungannon, Virginia this summer to rehab a house, or inviting someone to the Women of Faith conference, or simply sharing your faith with a neighbor or inviting them to church. Our spiritual eyesight improves as we walk faithfully.

And that leads me to the conclusion. We need to grow in Christ. We need to exercise our faith so that our spiritual eyesight will improve. Catherine Marshall, in her book *Meeting God at Every Turn*, wrote: "Christians do not arrive at any goodness or maturity all at once; our life is always a walk. Even on the straight stretches, for me there had often been such heavy fog that I had to go forward believing that Jesus was with me leading the way... I saw that whenever I had come to Jesus stripped of pretensions with a needy spirit, ready to listen to him and to receive what He had for me, He had met at my point of need... With Him, a seemingly dark and desolate future becomes a joyous new life."

Decide today to make the most of every opportunity we're given to improve our spiritual eyesight. Respond quickly to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, so that we can see Christ more clearly at work, at home, and in the world.