

The Man Born Blind

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Lent, March 17, 1996. Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41.

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

Jesus said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." It's appropriate that Jesus should say that he's the Light of the world in the context of healing a man who had lived in darkness from his birth. He had never seen the light until he met Jesus. Jesus healed his blindness. But more important than his physical sight, he came to see who Jesus really is.

Listen to that claim of Jesus again. "I am the light of the world." When I hear those words I think of what happens every Sunday in Eastern Orthodox churches all around the world. It's a wonderful but strange experience for people used to the simplicity of Protestant services. You stand before pictures of saints called icons. There's a picture of Christ seated high on a throne in their midst, symbolizing that Jesus is the source of the lives of all those saints, as well as all of those standing before him in the congregation. At a certain point in the service, a book that contains only the four Gospels is lifted up before the people to signify that the Gospels are our source of the knowledge of Jesus. Everyone stands while a passage is read aloud by a layperson. Although the church is aglow with light, when a passage of the Gospels is read, a person stands nearby, holding a large candle. The candle is held to honor the reading from the Gospels. The candle means that Christ is the light of the world. There's a darkness, a great, deep darkness that envelops our hearts and minds, and Christ has come as a great

light to dispel that darkness that we may live in the light. Jesus said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

But so many men and women today don't think of Christ as the light of the world. They don't think of themselves as being in darkness. We're enlightened people. Our museums and libraries are full of our discoveries. Schools and universities revamp their curricula every year or so because the material becomes out of date. Television shows us the wonders of space walks and close-ups of planets billions of miles away. Many people today feel that they've been enlightened but they don't recognize Christ as the Light of the world.

That's the way it was with our spiritual ancestors who lived in the days of Jesus. They also thought of themselves as enlightened. They knew the true God. Through Abraham they had a covenant, a sacred promise and relationship with God. Through Moses, God had revealed the Ten Commandments and many other laws. The prophets spoke the Word of God to them and promised that God would send the Messiah some day. They looked for the Messiah and waited for his coming. They assumed they would be able to recognize the Messiah on the basis of what they knew. They were enlightened.

And yet our spiritual ancestors made a terrible mistake. They, who knew so much, didn't see the Light of God's Son when he appeared to them. The uncreated Light, the source of all light, the source of all human enlightenment, became a human being and stood before them, healed their sick, comforted their weary,

called their outcasts to his side, and put their children on his knee. But they didn't recognize him. How could they have failed to recognize him? The saddest tragedy is not the blind man who can't see... but the one who can see, but refuses to recognize Jesus Christ.

But we can't condemn our spiritual ancestors without condemning ourselves. How can God keep coming to us and we not recognize God's light in our lives? Just as many people in Jesus' day failed to see in him the Light of the world, we all too often fail to recognize God's light in our lives. This happens to us even when we've made a commitment to follow Jesus. We, too, can very easily fail to recognize who Jesus is.

When Jesus said that he is the Light of the world he was making at least two claims.

First, he was claiming that only in and through him can we see who God is. Christians believe that we cannot really see who God is unless we look at Christ. The God who comes to us in Jesus notices us before we notice him. The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ who works in our lives in hidden ways before we recognize him. The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ is a God who like Christ, goes and finds us when we're not even looking for him.

We can't really see who God is unless we look at Christ. This is something very difficult for Christians living in America to believe. We find it much easier to believe that Jesus is one of many lights, one of many paths to God. But when a Korean, or a Ugandan, or a Tibetan comes to know God through Jesus Christ -

rarely will you hear them speak of Jesus as one of many lights. They are far more likely to say, "Once I was blind, but now I see". Jesus truly is the light of the world - not just a light for Americans.

Secondly, when Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world" he was claiming that he alone can reveal to us who we are as human beings. The Christian story tells of a personal God who created a good world and good people. Tragically, and inexplicably, these human beings turned away from their Creator. Human nature became terribly distorted, so distorted that the image of God is often very difficult to see in human nature. We are not what God created us to be.

What has happen to our human nature reminds me of a song Bob Dylan sang about thirty years ago during the Vietnam War, about a man named John Brown who went off to war. He wrote home to his mother every week at first. Then the letters came less and less frequently, until none at all came. Months passed. Then a letter finally came to his mother -

Saying "Go down and meet the train.
Your son is coming back from the war."
She smiled and she went right down,
She look up and all around.
She did not see her soldier son in sight.
When all the people passed,
She saw her son at last.
When she did she could not believe her eyes.
His face was all shot off,
And his hands were blown away,
And he wore a metal brace around his waist.
He whispered kind of slow,
In a voice she didn't know,
and she couldn't even recognize his face.

Christians believe that "we're all veterans of a lost war. Twisted by our hatred, shrouded in the darkness of our fears, God's image has been distorted in us" (Ugolnik, *The Illuminating Icon*). We are wounded and scarred. We are not what God created us to be. And apart from the light of Christ we can't see who we really are. But Jesus Christ is the light of the world. In his light we see how distorted our human nature has become. But, more than that, we also see in the face of Jesus Christ what God has always meant for us to be and what we shall be by God's grace.

Gracious God, you sent your Son to be the light of the world. As Christ shines on us, may we learn what pleases you, and live in all truth and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen