

Fourth Sunday in Lent

BLESSED WITH EYES TO SEE

John 9:1-41

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Analysis by James Squire

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, 7saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8The 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?" 9Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11He 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." 12They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

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

18The 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 19and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21but 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." 22His 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. 23Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

24So 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." 25He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27He 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?" 28Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." 30The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32Never since the world began has it been heard that

anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” 34They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

35Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” 36He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” 37Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” 38He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. 39Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” 41Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Author’s Note: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Our ability to identify with this question is rapidly disappearing. More and more the pertinent question is: “How can God allow people to be born blind or with other birth defects? What kind of God is this, anyway?” We still harbor the disciples’ question, but when it is about to come out of our mouths, we stop short of saying it because it is a sentiment whose time has passed. It would appear that the happiest approach is the one that celebrates blindness as a new form of lifestyle—making lemonade out lemons, we might say. & nbsp; Such a modern mindset makes it difficult for us to connect with this part of the story.

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him,” Jesus responds. Jesus’ explanation hardly makes us feel better about God as Creator. Apparently the disciples did not have that problem; they lived in a world where God’s actions were not questioned on

moral grounds. We for our part find comfort in the ambiguity of the text, since it does not explicitly say that God caused the blindness, only that he allowed it to happen. Still we face the daunting question: Would you rather have a God who sanitizes life—and then expects you to clean up your own messes, or would you rather have a God that can render all brokenness obsolete by his own stunning act of love?

DIAGNOSIS: The Proud Are Blinded by the Light

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Who Is the Blind One?*

We see what we want to see. The disciples saw a sinner or the descendent of a sinner (v. 2). The neighbors saw a pretender (v. 9). The Pharisees saw a troublemaker or a dupe (v. 16). His parents saw an independent person who no longer belonged to them (vv. 20-21). They all fell short of seeing a miracle and a healing—a blind man who can now see. The metaphor is ripe for the picking: just who are the blind ones in this story? Would that it were that easy. “If only you were blind,” says Jesus. What we see is o ur sin (v. 41), even if we don’t see it as such. A pity. Seeing sin for what it is, is half the battle. The “light of day” won’t last forever (v. 4).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Who Is the sinner?*

We see what we want to see, not only with our eyes, but with our hearts. The disciples saw punishment (v. 2): somebody must have sinned. The neighbors saw trouble and social upheaval (vv. 12-14)—better check with the authorities. His parents perceived a threat to their own well-being, and not without good reason (v 22); they are unable to stand by their son boldly, but instead stood silently and let him fend for himself. The Pharisees saw

their power and position being usurped (vv. 16, 28-29, 34). So their true colors come out stunningly in this story: “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” What they heard was an indictment of their own faith, which could only properly come from God, or more precisely in their case, the High Priest, the only one authorized to speak for God; anyone else who dares to speak for God, even a prophet, is automatically discredited. Yet, they have no answer for the simple fact that Jesus did what all agreed a sinner cannot do—open the eyes of the blind (vv. 30-33). When we resort to pulling rank in order to evade the real issue, we show our own hardness of heart.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Who is the judged?*

“I came into this world for judgment,” says Jesus (v. 39) to the formerly blind man. The Pharisees have to eavesdrop to even be clued in on this. As if to dismiss them out of hand, Jesus is conversing with the man they had ridiculed, and when they interrupt to say, “Did we hear that right, you’re calling us blind,” Jesus responds, “Well, now that you mention it, you don’t even have that excuse going for you. You are in your sins with your eyes wide open.” (Gee, aren’t ya glad ya asked?) The Pharisees still have no answer for the man born blind who, according to them, was “born entirely in sins,” who can now see, and who simultaneously gained his voice as well. They on the other hand are left with no respect for their position in the kingdom. The glory of God manifests itself in this man of lowly stature who becomes the center of attention, and there is nothing the Pharisees can do about it. It is when we think we are of primary importance that we find out just how puny we really are.

PROGNOSIS: The Humble Are Sighted by the Light

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Judge Is*

Judged for Us

Actually, the glory of God comes to full fruition when this Jesus, who dismissed the Pharisees, finds himself “lifted up” (John 3:14) on the Cross. The critic is himself judged, sentenced, and executed. In the interlocking trials that animate John’s gospel, it is Jesus who the hammer of justice falls on, not the Pharisees, or any of the other sinners who traditionally feel Jesus’ heat. This is counted as God’s glory. The puny Pharisees have their day in court and seem to prevail, only to see stubborn Pilate insist on crowning Jesus as the King of the Jews (not just a wannabe). More importantly, Jesus has the last word from the empty tomb, rising up after being lifted up. Then what is made puny is the judgment of the law itself. Sin and death have been rendered impotent, and all who believe in Jesus have been saved (John 3:16).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Healing Brings Faith*

Behold the change in outlook of the blind man! To everyone else, he was a subject for gossip, but to Jesus, he was someone to be healed, and he heard Jesus’ command and followed it. Blessed are those who know they are blind and trust in the Light that enables them to see through the eyes of faith. Jesus touched this man and inspired immediate belief in him. He did not know who Jesus was at first, but all he really wanted to do was find him so he could believe in him. He had zero questions about the mechanics of the miracle that Jesus performed or any ecclesiastical protocols Jesus might have violated. To him the issue was cut-and-dried: I was blind and now I see.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Faith Brings an Eye for Truth*

Blessed are those who believe because they have the eyes to see the Truth when it is made plain to them, rather than subjecting it to the Pharisees’ equivalent of an IRS audit. How ironic that

Jesus is but a bit player in this story. The most active figure in terms of dialogue is the formerly blind man, this one who has no status whatsoever with the religious authorities, and yet his encounter with Jesus emboldens him to speak bluntly about that which is now patently obvious: Jesus must be from God, otherwise how could he do this? We cackle along with the blind man as he mocks the comical attempts by the Pharisees to rationalize the miracle into something illicit. Blessed are those whose voices once were puny, but now are made bold and strong where the Truth is concerned.