

Blindness and Sight, Darkness and Light

I first preached a version of this sermon in 2002 at a Mennonite Church in Didsbury, Alberta, at the invitation of my friend Ken From. A variation was preached at Agassiz Christian Reformed Church in May, 2014. A sub-theme is “Law and Grace”. We must ever relearn freedom. We must ever relearn grace.

[NOTE: Please read John 9, preferably in *The Voice* translation.]

It is good to be here. We have worshipped on occasion with you folks, and have appreciated doing so. We have always been warmly welcomed.

Introduction

I used to have a saying on my e-mail postings:

The human walk... begins in slavery and ends in freedom, and [its] point of progress at every moment is faith.

It is from a book, *Faith's Freedom* by New Testament theologian Luke Timothy Johnson. More quaintly, the King James Bible says:

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity...¹

The Voice translation reads:

For I was guilty from the day I was born, a sinner from the time my mother became pregnant with me.” (Psalm 51:5) That is the slavery into which we are born. The journey we are on is towards *freedom*, or in the Biblical image so often also used, towards *sight*, towards *Light*.

John Chapter 9 is about a man born blind from birth. The widespread assumption was that this was somehow the man's or the parents' fault, believed so in part because of misapplication of the above verse. But according to Jesus it was not worth speculating about. Fact is, the man was blind. Fact is, after the encounter with Jesus, the man sees. Wow! It is life-changing encounter with Jesus that leaves the person's world forever altered. *If it does not, one must wonder if one really sees at all, if there ever was a real encounter at all...*

The Setting: John's Gospel

American author Reynolds Price, in a book entitled *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, writes:

The Gospel of John is the most mysterious book in the New Testament... (p. 38)

Set against ancient world literature, he adds:

And if two thousand years of pious handling had not dimmed both John's story and its demand, his Gospel would still be seen as the burning outrage it continues to be, a work of madness or blinding light. Its homely but supremely daring verbal strategies, the human acts it portrays and the claim it advances— from the first paragraph—demand that we make a hard choice. If we give it the serious

¹ NOTE: This has nothing to do with “original sin”! It is not an ontological category, rather a psychological one. An outstanding book on this is James Alison's (1997) *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*. The term “original blessing” while trendy does not get to the depths of the issue.

witness it wants, we must finally ask the question it thrusts so flagrantly toward us. Does it bring us a life-transforming truth, or is it one gifted lunatic's tale of another lunatic, wilder than he? (p. 39)

One might of course ask that of all the Gospels.

In fact, if the *Gospel* at times does not positively *sizzle* in our hands as “burning outrage”, like the proverbial hot potato we can't let go of yet can't hang onto without some burning sensation, then we need to go back and read and reread the Gospels with a renewed sense of expectant discovery. That goes for the entire Bible... *The Bible is the most renewable and renewing literary/spiritual/hot potato resource known to humanity!*

Five Movements

There are five movements to the story of John 9, like a Five Act Play:

1. the initial encounter with Jesus of the blind man;
2. the healing, and immediate questions by townspeople of the former blind man's identity;
3. the encounter with the Pharisees;
4. the encounter with the man's parents;
5. and the final reprised encounter with Jesus.

First Movement

In the first movement, Jesus, with his disciples, encounters a man born blind from birth. The disciples with him, drawing on common belief, attribute the man's blindness to previous sin.

The attempt to account for the physical condition is lost on Jesus. No attempt at an explanation involving judgment of anyone will do. Evil exists. All explanations apart from what God has done in Christ will not suffice. Put differently: An agonizing question the Bible never answers *theoretically/theologically* is “**Why?**”... in response to evil. Yet this very question is devastatingly posed by Jesus on the cross: Matthew 27:46

Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani—My God, My God, **why**... have You forsaken Me?

This could be an utterly *atheistic* cry. The biblical answer to that heart-wrenching scream is not a mild and comforting piece of theology our pastors learn at seminary, but is found in the shattering and spectacular demonstration of Resurrection! Famed author of *Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien invented a word for this in “**On Fairy Stories**“ called *eucaastrophe*, meaning the “ultimate turn for the Good so that everyone can live happily ever after like in the best fairy-stories”. He calls the Resurrection the *eucaastrophe* of the Incarnation. In turn he claims, the Incarnation is *eucaastrophe* of human history! Wow and wow again! He nails it.

So Jesus utterly sidesteps speculation about origins of evil in favour of just accepting the way things are with this man, as Jesus also did later at the Cross. Then Jesus proceeds from there to work a miracle, of which in turn the *eucaastrophe* miracle God works for the cosmos is the Resurrection. Jesus is, after all, the Light of the world!

Quite simply, Jesus changes the man's blindness to sight through a straightforward physical act of rubbing mud on the man's eyes. This was not an unheard of act in the ancient world. And it worked!

Patrick

By the time Patrick was 12, he was an alcoholic, and both his parents were dead of violent causes. They had clearly sinned first! And while Patrick had sight, he had little else going for him all his life, least of all love.

I first met Patrick in jail, and usually only reconnected when he landed back inside. His whole life was taken up with living in downtown Vancouver, panhandling, getting caught in petty crime, landing in jail especially in winter (to stay warm and fed), getting out, and repeating the process all over again the next year.

Now Patrick wouldn't harm a flea! But one day, he was charged with murder, and, according to his gifted lawyer, he was going down! A native guy was dead, and Patrick, who was native too, "admitted" to an undercover cop that he had done the deed. He even showed all the *karate* moves he had done to take the guy out before killing him. Only one problem. Patrick was bragging big-time. Only another problem, he didn't know karate or much of anything else but pain and sorrow. He wouldn't harm a flea. And in this case, he hadn't hurt anyone, as his lawyer convincingly demonstrated to the Judge. I was one of the character witnesses. Patrick was acquitted.

About a year later, Patrick was stabbed downtown. He lived for a time at our place upon release from the hospital. But he soon moved on.

Most of the time, Patrick lived behind a garbage bin downtown. He could never keep a job, could never settle into an apartment even. We tried numerous times helping him out with both.

One night, Patrick phoned us while out. He had met a runaway kid he explained, and wanted us to talk to her.

That began an interesting number of visits by phone, and later at our house, from **Evelyn Lau**, now a famous Canadian author, whose first book, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*, became a bestseller, and later a movie. We still occasionally stay in touch with her.

Patrick connected us with many other interesting people while we knew him. He was, in his own way, a peacemaker, even evangelist, while in the midst of his own great life pain.

Some years ago, his lawyer and we lost touch with Patrick. We conjecture that his liver finally gave out (he had been warned about his alcoholism), or that another knife attack did him in, or....

We miss Patrick. We learned from him much about wanting peace for others, when he had so little himself... Even in the midst of Patrick's own darkness he strove towards the Light.

Second and Third Movements

In the second and third movements of the story, the townspeople and Pharisees wade in. On the one hand, Jesus was closest to the Pharisees in theological belief. On the other, in the way in which they are encountered throughout the Gospels, they appear forever at odds with Jesus, repeatedly hung up on the "rules".

Not least in this story.

So here is something to chew on: read the Bible as a *Book of Rules*, and true spirituality is “ruled” out; and our own spirituality is dead in the water. The Bible is emphatically *not* a **Rule Book** rather a **Grace Book** where “*grace and truth*” (one of the grand themes of the Gospel of John) are the gem stone setting for the *jewel* called *Law*, the “*perfect Law of Freedom*”, as James puts it (1:25).

Jesus in our story had done the healing on the Sabbath. The rules were evident. No work – not even a healing!

– is to be performed on the Sabbath. *Now just what is Jesus doing, breaking the “rules”?*

I think we all identify with the Pharisees if we look from a larger perspective. Not just in our faith, though perhaps too often there too. But in our understanding of how things ought to be. Just when we think we have life figured out about how things are and work, life’s “rules” as it were, too often something comes out of nowhere to throw us off. It just doesn’t fit with how the world should be, we know. And we can become terribly upset. Come to think of it, “rules” often do not work about many areas of life. Try to live by such expectations and we’ll often come up short.

This healing for instance. It just was not the way things should happen, not in God’s world. The Pharisees just knew. They’d read the Book of Rules, the Book of Moses, the Talmud – so they thought! So rather than adjust to new Light from as it turned out, the Source of all Light, the Light of the world, the Pharisees – and we too often – in response lock ourselves into our own darkness, into our own “rules” about how things ought to be: at home, at work, in society.

Following is a brief story about life’s “inexplicables” that just shouldn’t happen to anybody, especially Christians, but all too often inexplicables do...

Wilma Derksen

Wilma Derksen’s Christian Mennonite faith world was fairly safe and certain until November 30, 1984. Some may know her story. Wilma’s daughter set out to walk home from school Nov. 30, 1984 in Winnipeg, after her mother had told her on the phone she could not pick her up that day. Wilma tells this story in her book, *Have You Seen Candace?* Candace was not seen alive again by her family. She had been kidnapped, and left to freeze to death in an abandoned shack, after horrible mistreatment.

Suddenly, Wilma and her family were confronted with a whole different reality about the world. It was now out of control. Inexplicable. Alien. It broke all rules of normalcy.

This is the common lot of crime victims, of war victims, of all victims the world over, those to whom horrific events happen utterly beyond their control. This is the experience of those who cannot account for life the way it “should” be, the way the “rules” (we just know!) lay it down.

There are many further twists to Wilma’s family’s story. Not least: Wilma became a noted victims rights and Restorative Justice advocate. Thirty years later, it is far from over. It has not been easy. The man charged and found guilty of her daughter’s murder on appeal has just had a new trial granted. This is unimaginable pain. She and family most recently became a chapter in Malcolm Gladwell’s *David and Goliath*. They have been overcomers despite it all, against all odds.

More: September 11

We all lived through a safe-world-shattering phenomenon September 11, 2001. We have heard repeatedly that the world, at least for us North Americans, forever changed after that day. We know the horror stories too well from the Trade Towers collapsing, and with them collapsed as well the safe worlds of thousands of immediate families – and multiplied millions of big city dwellers the world over.

We know less well the collapse amidst the rubble of Afghan family worlds as a result of American retaliation bombings and military activity that continues. Something that is so massive the Americans for years spent approximately 1 billion dollars a month to execute since the Iraq bombings began. We are blithely ignorant of the daily man-made desecrations wreaked upon fellow humans the world over, often at the instigation of, or with support from, the West. A little glimpse to help us “see”.

Afghan Stories

Howard Zinn, retired noted American historian and writer, reflected on 9/11 thus:

Every day for several months, the New York Times did what should always be done when a tragedy is summed up in a statistic: It gave us miniature portraits of the human beings who died on September 11—their names, photos, glimmers of their personalities, their idiosyncrasies, how friends and loved ones remember them.

As the director of the New York Historical Society said:

The peculiar genius of it was to put a human face on numbers that are unimaginable to most of us.... It's so obvious that every one of them was a person who deserved to live a full and successful and happy life. You see what was lost.

I was deeply moved, reading those intimate sketches—A Poet of Bensonhurst... A Friend... A Sister...Someone to Lean On... Laughter, Win or Lose...” I thought: Those who celebrated the grisly deaths of the people in the twin towers and the Pentagon as a blow to symbols of American dominance in the world--what if, instead of symbols, they could see, up close, the faces of those who lost their lives? I wonder if they would have second thoughts, second feelings.

Then he shifted to Afghanistan, where many times more civilians have died since the beginning of the retaliatory bombings than died in New York and Washington September 11. This apart from the “Shock and Awe” slaughter of tens of thousands of Taliban and Al Qaeda troops in Iraq, many little older than children, for whom the slogan “I Love New York” had no meaning.

His article chronicles several additional stories. Here is a brief sampling:

From a hospital in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, reported in the Boston Globe by John Donnelly on December 5 [2001]:

In one bed lay Noor Mohammad, 10, who was a bundle of bandages. He lost his eyes and hands to the bomb that hit his house after Sunday dinner. Hospital director Guloja Shimwari shook his head at the boy's wounds. ‘The United States must be thinking he is Osama,’ Shimwari said. ‘If he is not Osama, then why would they do this?’

The report continued:

The hospital's morgue received 17 bodies last weekend, and officials here estimate at least 89 civilians were killed in several villages. In the hospital yesterday, a bomb's damage could be chronicled in the life of one family. A bomb had killed the father, Faisal Karim. In one bed was his wife, Mustafa Jama, who had severe head injuries.... Around her, six of her children were in bandages.... One of them, Zahidullah, 8, lay in a coma.

In the New York Times, Barry Bearak, reporting December 15 from the village of Madoo, Afghanistan, tells of the destruction of fifteen houses and their occupants. “ ‘In the night, as we slept, they dropped the bombs on us,’ said Paira Gul, a young man whose eyes were aflame with bitterness. His sisters and their families had perished, he said.... The houses were small, the bombing precise. No structure escaped the thundering havoc. Fifteen houses, 15 ruins.... ‘Most of the dead are children,’ Tor Tul said.

Another Times reporter, C.J. Chivers, writing from the village of Charykari on December 12, reported “a terrifying and rolling barrage that the villagers believe was the payload of an American B-52.... The villagers say 30 people died.... One man, Muhibullah, 40, led the way through his yard and showed three unexploded cluster bombs he is afraid to touch. A fourth was not a dud. It landed near his porch. ‘My son was sitting there...the metal went inside him.’ The boy, Zumarai, 5, is in a hospital in Kunduz, with wounds to leg and abdomen. His sister, Sharpari, 10, was killed. ‘The United States killed my daughter and injured my son,’ Mr. Muhibullah said. ‘Six of my cows were destroyed and all of my wheat and rice was burned. I am very angry. I miss my daughter.’

What do we have to say to these people, so suddenly shattered by inexplicable new realities? Do we even think about these innocent civilians so removed from us? Whether the stubborn blindness of the Pharisees, or the agonizing wrench of victims the world over, the world seldom matches our certainties. We must be open to adjust our understanding if we truly want to “see” aright in this world. This is an issue of faith, and openness to faith.

Fourth Movement

In the fourth movement, the parents are brought into the picture.

They are fearful of the authorities, and for good reason. Their entire social and cultural comfort zone could be destroyed if they are thrust out of the synagogue. Like being suddenly deported to an alien land and culture. So they deflect all questions back to their son, other than verifying that he is indeed their son.

One can only imagine the alienation of the son, since the parents seem far more taken with fear than the sudden joyful turn of events in their son’s life. Are they not so like us in our fear, in our (too often) blindness?

The authorities however tell the newly seeing man that the healing could have nothing to do with Jesus, who was an obvious sinner. With the authorities’ inability and refusal to “see” Jesus, in the words of Bishop Lesslie

Newbigin one can see that

Here is the most vivid explication in the whole Gospel of the statement that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness neither comprehends it nor overcomes it (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, p. 123).

So the religious authorities try to terrorize everyone else into blindness. Isn’t this so ironic: that religious leaders reject the very Light shining on them?! While the Light is not intended to bring judgment, rather healing and wholeness, by our very reaction to it, choosing to remain in the darkness or choosing the Light, we all nonetheless as they close-up with Jesus, pass judgment on ourselves. No one, including religious leaders, is exempt.

However, for the man healed of blindness, much of the theological/ethical stuff simply passed him by. And, perhaps because he all his life as a blind person had experienced life as an outsider/"deported one", he cuts to the chase about any fear of being yet further "deported", further rejected, and says simply, *If this man is a sinner, I don't know. I am not qualified to say. I only know one thing: I was blind, and now I see* (verse 25).

There is ever something profoundly simple about the choice of faith to embrace Light over darkness. Yet the implications are life-changing. Another immense irony: *the blind man gets it, and ends up doubly seeing! – both physically and spiritually!* But not the religious authorities.

In further interaction with the authorities, they elicit some theological reflection from the former blind man at last. This healed man knows now that Jesus is "*from God*" – one of those profound theological insights the Gospel of John was written for, according to chapter 20. The authorities throw him out of the synagogue upon his confession of that faith. The blind man has learned that Jesus is not only a man, but a prophet. He has begun his double journey of sight. He begins to follow the "*True Light who shines upon the heart of everyone*", who had now entered the cosmos, according to the Prologue of John's Gospel. There is still more to come. But first, another reflection.

Glenn Flett

Glenn had spent several years committing robberies with violence, until one day he and a partner shot a man dead during a Brinks Armoured Truck robbery. Through Christian friends inside and outside the prison, Glenn eventually chose to follow Jesus. Changes happened remarkably quickly. But a supreme test came after a woman, a Christian pastor, was brutally murdered. She had been a grandmother figure to Glenn through all his criminal years. She had loved him unconditionally. By a strange twist of circumstances, the man who murdered her ended up in the same prison as Glenn, and finally, in an English class he was teaching! Glenn was a "wheel" in the prison, had a lot of power, and could have called in favours. He could have had this guy killed. Not only did he not do this, but ultimately helped him successfully apply for and obtain parole. Glenn's new love for Jesus helped him embrace the man who had murdered the most accepting person in his life at that time. He chose light over darkness.

Glenn developed his new-found faith significantly through an M2/W2 volunteer couple who were then and have remained very supportive.

A further remarkable turn was reconciliation with one of the murdered man's daughters. They now present together widely their story of reconciliation.

Today, Glenn also serves Christ and the cause of justice by reaching out to ex-prisoners through a government funded program that helps them reintegrate into society. It is called L.I.N.C.: Long-Term Inmates Now in the Community. He tells his story widely, and is well-known in the larger criminal justice and Restorative Justice communities.

Fifth Movement

In the fifth and final movement of the “play” that makes up chapter 9, Jesus goes to find the healed man. In that he is “Everyman/Everywoman”, we see in this a reminder that Jesus is ever looking for us. “*For the Son of Man came to seek and to liberate the lost* (Luke 19:10).” This is a pursuit that never ends throughout our lives. Jesus unrelentingly is “**THE HOUND OF HEAVEN**”, as the brilliant 19th-century poem by Francis Thompson puts it.

The blind man now seeing is just waiting to know what to do in response to Jesus. Readiness to faith has been awakened. The willingness just needs a direction, faith, its object.

The blind/then seeing man began with understanding Jesus to be a *man*, then moved to a new insight that he was a *prophet*, finally, there is a response of worship to Jesus as “*Son of Man*”. Judgment has been at work. But notice it all revolves around *seeing and not seeing*, not around issues of *guilt and innocence*. Not surprisingly, the Pharisees discover that they have been judged already, just because they have failed to recognize the Light.

Debbie Morris

*In 1993 Sister Helen Prejean wrote **Dead Man Walking**, then a movie followed, about her work visiting men on Death Row in the State of Louisiana. One of those was Robert Willie, truly a sad case of humanity. He was executed Dec. 28, 1984.*

One story Prejean did not tell in her book was of another of Robert Willie’s victims. Debbie (Cuevas) Morris and her boyfriend were kidnapped at gunpoint by Willie and his partner, recent escapees from Angola State Prison in Louisiana. About two nights before the kidnapping, the two convicts had also kidnapped, raped, and violently murdered Faith Hathaway. It was for that that Willie was eventually executed. Then they kidnapped 16-year-old Debbie Cuevas and her boyfriend. Both, remarkably, survived!

*In 1998, Morris published a book which tells of the ordeal, entitled **Forgiving the Dead Man Walking**. In the concluding paragraphs of the book, she raises the question of justice. She writes:*

I’ve seen mankind’s idea of ultimate justice; I have more faith in God’s. And even God seems to put a higher priority on forgiveness than on justice.

Then she makes this startling comment:

We don’t sing “Amazing Justice”; we sing “Amazing Grace”. (pp. 250 & 251)

God’s judgment, says Morris, in a cosmic paradox, turns out to be his mercy, his grace, his forgiveness. Because Light has come into that very cosmos!

It takes us to the end of the book to discover that Morris’ understanding of justice is that it is in fact, mercy, grace and forgiveness – the antithesis of punitive Law! That is her conclusion, the victim of a terrible ordeal of kidnapping and rape. She sees while other religious and not religious folk fail to see.

Life in the end is all about gift, all about the gift of sight, the gift of Light. It is a paradox of judgment. If we are judgmental, we fail to see the world shot through with grace. If we fail to take hold of God’s grace, we stand judged already. Such is the nature of Light, such is the nature of Jesus in the world.

Conclusion

Bishop Newbiggin ends his study of this story with these words:

Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

If it is “the Jews” whose actions illustrate this fact, it is only because they are the representatives of us all – as Paul insists in Romans 2 - 3. Every achievement in “making sense” of the world, insofar as it succeeds, creates a claim to “see” which is threatened by the coming of Jesus who overturns all the “wisdom of this world,” all the systems which are extrapolations from the experience of a world turned in upon itself. The coming of the light must always threaten every such system, for it can only be received in the simplicity of a child, in the simple gratitude of a man who says “One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” This kind of “seeing,” this “wisdom from above” (James 3:17), begins and ends in worship, for the true light can never be a possession but only and always a gift (*The Light Has Come*, p. 124).

Blindness and sight, darkness and light. They are the central themes of this story today. Let us choose, again, today to walk in the Light. Let us renew again, today, our commitment to follow Jesus.

Amen.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, in John’s Gospel, Chapter 8, you said:

I am the light that shines through the cosmos; if you walk with Me, you will thrive in the nourishing light that gives life and will not know darkness.

Please shine your light in us today. Please strengthen our walk with You, so that we “*will thrive in the nourishing light that gives life and will not know darkness.*”

Amen.

Blessing from Luke 1:78 – 79:

May a new day dawn upon you.

May the Sunrise from the heavens break through in your darkness.

May those who huddle in night, those who sit in the shadow of death,

Be able to rise and walk in the light.

May you be guided in the pathway of peace.

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