

the
difference

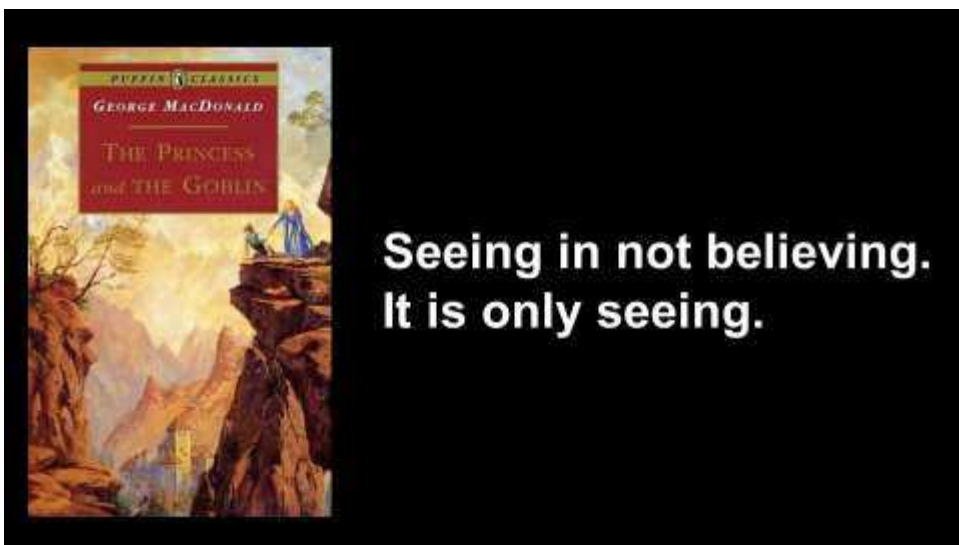


John 9:1-12

Believing is Seeing

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 9:1-12

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People say,
“Seeing is
believing.” Yet
not everyone who
sees believes.
Some people see
with their eyes but
not their minds and

hearts. George MacDonald wrote in his children’s story *The Princess and the Goblin*, “Seeing is not believing. It is only seeing.” Today’s Scripture lesson is a story of paradox. A blind man sees while seeing people remain blind to the things of God. First, the story.

Jesus walks by a blind man begging on the side of the road. His disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” (9:2). It was a common belief that there was a direct cause and effect relationship between sin and corresponding suffering. Either this man sinned in utero (i.e., Jacob and Esau) or his parents sinned to result in his blindness. Jesus dismisses the idea that this man’s sin is the antecedent cause for his blindness. Rather, Jesus says, his disability is about to become the means by which God’s glory will be displayed.

The account of this man’s healing takes two verses to tell. Jesus anoints the man’s eyes with a saliva/clay mixture and directs him to wash in a pool called Siloam; a word John translates as sent. Earlier, in verse 4, John described Jesus as “the sent one of God.” Note the word play. The sent one of God sends a blind man to wash in a pool called sent.

The man’s healing creates no little sensation. The religious authorities, called Pharisees, hear about it and call the man in for questioning. This former blind man tells his healing story. When the Pharisees ask about the identity of

this miracle worker, the blind man speculates Jesus must be some sort of prophet.

In verse 14, John reveals that the man's healing occurs on the Sabbath. This means Jesus is guilty of violating Sabbath law on two counts. First, Jewish law forbids healing on the Sabbath, except when a person's life is in danger. Second, making clay or kneading qualifies as one of the 39 classifications of work prohibited on the Sabbath.

A division of the house ensues among the Pharisees. Some insist Jesus cannot be from God since he is a Sabbath-breaker. Others insist that he must be from God if he has such power to heal people.

Next, they interrogate the man's parents. They confirm their son's congenital blindness but are reluctant to say more. Essentially, they plead the fifth.

The Pharisees call the blind man back for a second round of questioning. "Give glory to God," they say, which in our day would correspond to "tell the truth." "We



know this man is a sinner," they confidently assert. "I don't know whether this man is a sinner," the blind man counters, "but one thing I know for sure: once I was blind but now I see" (9:25).

This story makes for good theater! The Pharisees order this man to tell his healing story a second time. "I told you already but you would not listen. Why do you want to hear

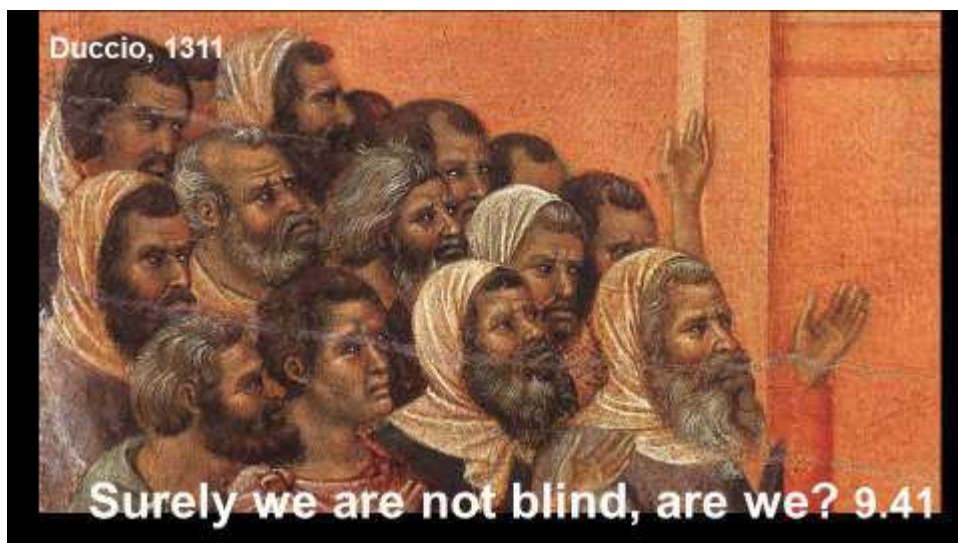
it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” he says (9:27).

Who is conducting the interrogation now? I give the man high marks for going to the mat with the religious establishment.

“We are disciples of Moses,” they claim. “We know God speaks through Moses. As for this man, we don’t know where he comes from” (9:29). Bingo! Their ignorance is now showing. In the end, they fall back on their religious credentials, “You are nothing but dirt. How dare you insult us” (9:34). You can see where this is going. They promptly throw the man out of the synagogue.

Jesus catches up with him. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (9:35). “Son of Man” is Jesus’ preferred self-designation. It originates from the Old Testament book of Daniel. Only the Son of Man has the authority to approach God the “Ancient of Days” (7:12-13).

“Who is the Son of Man?” the man asks. “You’re looking at him,” is essentially what Jesus declares. “Lord, I believe” the man declares and worships Jesus (9:38).



better believe you are blind” (9:41).

The eaves-dropping Pharisees ask, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus answers them in so many words, “You

We began this story with a man born with congenital blindness. First, Jesus restores his physical sight. Second, he leads him to spiritual sight. Yet, look at where the story ends—with sighted people who are blind to the things of God. I tell you, the irony is unmistakable. A blind man sees while seeing people remain blind.

Those who claim, “We see,” in the last verse do not see, after all. They only think they see. Oh sure, they make plenty of confident pronouncements. They regard themselves as people in the know, enlightened people. Notice their parting words to this blind man: “You are steeped in sin. How dare you lecture us?” The man with no religious training comes to see while religious people are blind as bats.

Jesus often asks, “Do you have eyes but fail to see? Do you have ears but fail to hear?” (Mark 8:18). Later in John, Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29).

Jesus’ miracles are signs in John. There are seven such signs in John’s gospel. The healing of this blind man represents the sixth sign. Jesus delivers a man out of literal and figurative darkness and into his light.



Not everyone who sees Jesus’ miracles up close and personal believe in him. The Bible describes faith as the ability to believe even when we do not see with our eyes.

FAITH IS THE
SUBSTANCE OF THINGS
HOPE FOR, THE
EVIDENCE OF THINGS
NOT SEEN. -HEBREWS
11:1

The writer of Hebrews describes faith this way: “Faith is the confidence in what we hope for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:2). Stevie Wonder said, “Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes doesn’t mean he doesn’t see.”

We do not see only with our eyes. We see with our minds and hearts also. In Ephesians, Paul writes, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know the hope to which he has called you” (1:8).

Our brains can incorrectly process what we see with our eyes. Optometrists call it amblyopia or lazy eye. In this condition, our eyes and brain do not cooperate with each other. Jesus issues a lazy eye diagnosis to these Pharisees. It amounts to spiritual blindness.

There are two kinds of blindness identified in John 9. The blind man is afflicted with physical blindness while the Pharisees are plagued with spiritual blindness. The question begs asking: Who is really blind in this story?

Light and darkness run like a common thread through John’s gospel. In the first chapter or prologue to John’s gospel, Jesus is “The true light who shines into the darkness of our world” (1:4, 9). In the third chapter, Jesus concludes his nocturnal encounter with Nicodemus with unsettling words: “Light has come into the world but the people loved the darkness more than the light” (3:18).

The events of John 8 take place during the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot. Each night during this eight-day

festival, enormous candelabras illumine the temple. Since the temple was located on a hill overlooking the city, this light was visible all over the city. Against the backdrop of these candelabras, Jesus announces, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness” (8:12), a claim he reiterates in today’s story (9:5).

Darkness is a metaphor for evil in the Bible. Jesus tells Nicodemus that people “loved darkness more than light because their deeds were evil” (3:19). Evil thrives under the cover of darkness. Scripture also describes darkness as loss. Lost can describe our spiritual condition. Without Christ’s illumination, we live in darkness.

John Newton followed his father’s footsteps and became a sailor in 18th century England. He was the epitome of a drunken sailor, profane and ruthless. He rose through the ranks to become captain of a slave ship bringing Africans to the West Indies to work sugar plantations for British companies. One night, his slave ship, Greyhound, sailed into a violent storm. Newton cried out for God’s mercy. Miraculously, his ship reached the Ireland coast. Newton went to church, received communion and resolved to follow Christ. He resumed his role as a slave ship captain, seeking to make the conditions tolerable for slaves and sailors alike. Yet, he came to hate what he was doing. Eventually, he quit and became a preacher of the gospel that had liberated him. He became an outspoken critic of the slave trade. One person influenced by Newton’s preaching was William Wilberforce, who led the fight to abolish slavery in England.

In 1779, Newton wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*. As



Newton looked back over his life, God's grace had saved a wretch like him. He borrowed a line from John 9, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life?



Today's story is all about seeing. A blind man sees while seeing people remain blind. Only people who acknowledge their blindness see

Jesus. Seeing people, enlightened people, know-it-all-people remain blind to the things of God.

Jesus says to people in so many words, if you admit your blindness, I can help you. If you insist on seeing in your own way, there's not much I can do for you.

Let me forewarn you, Jesus's light is sometimes unwelcome. Jesus brings to light things we would rather keep hidden. Jesus wants to see us free from our prisons of darkness.

Maybe you are lost right now. You find yourselves shrouded in darkness. You may not know where you are going or what is happening. Ask Jesus for eyes of faith. Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. I want to see you.

Jesus invites people to come to the light, his light. He gives sight to the blind. Ask Jesus to give you light. Let Jesus illumine your life.