

Deep in the Dark

John 9: 1-41

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As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The 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?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He 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.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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.” Some 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. So 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.” The 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 and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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.”

His 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. Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” So 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.” He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He 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?” Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man

were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

Jesus 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.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

The Green Grotto Caves in Discovery Bay, Jamaica are rightly advertised as ‘a journey into underworld charm, a cavern of mystery and adventure’. The labyrinth of mystical underground caverns is surrounded by thick, heavy vegetation and supplied with pristine waters flowing from its secret depths. It is a surreal place to be; to feel the cool dampness in the air as water drips everywhere, to walk hunched or sideways to make your way through the maze of chambers of limestone stalagmite columns and often hearing the countless bats overhead. There are occasional light holes along some of the way to give a small sense of bearing and connection to the outside world. Following a tight, narrow, twisting downward path our guide led us to a subterranean lake – the Grotto Lake – which brought us to the depths of the caves. Here the only light at all was the lantern of the tour guide—until she turned it off. We were in the darkest dark. There was absolutely no sensation of light at all. Pitch black. Jet black. Black as coal.

Even knowing that we were totally safe on this tourist adventure and our sturdy helmets would still protect us from the bats and stalagmites as we tentatively moved around, it was still a disorienting experience. If we were alone, or claustrophobic, or if we could not have trusted that our tour guide would flip the lantern on after just a short time, this could have been a fear-inducing experience.

We became more self-focused because there was nothing else to focus on, became more aware of the clammy humidity on our skin, became focused on this moment because it was so strange and unique. We all became silent, as though adjusting to this blackness took all of our energy. In a dramatic flair it had the feel of since you can no longer see anyone else in the group, you alone are important. There is no larger picture.

It was this dramatic flair that has become the image I have of the blind people in our gospel lesson this morning, the image I have of the neighbors, the Pharisees, and even the young man’s parents. All the people Jesus referred to when he 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.” They could only see from their own agenda, their own needs and viewpoints. Their view alone was important. There was no larger picture.

In Genesis 2, God created Adam, created humanity, from the dust of the ground. Jesus re-created the life of the man born blind with the dust of the ground and his own saliva, yet this is of little interest to those who will not see.

Although John’s gospel is the only one to not include any of Jesus’ parables, this passage reads like a parable with unexpected twists and turns, with nuances to consider, and a strong message at the end. A parable is a tale that illustrates a universal truth.

The neighbors who had known this young man for a while, perhaps some even remembered the day his parents realized that he was born blind, are all in a tizzy. They see the neighbor, certainly a familiar man, but they are absolutely convinced that it cannot be him. The man they know is blind, the man they know is a beggar, the man they know cannot see. This man can see. “Who are you again?” they ask as their myopic question. “It’s me!” he answers. “Well, you look like him, but—no, no, really, who are you?” They look at him and are sure they see someone else. It takes some time to convince them of the truth before they are curious as to how this could have happened.

The Pharisees, the upright religious leaders, grasp tightly and literally to the purity of the law. They measure everything in terms of who is in and who is out, who is upholding the law, and who is defying it. When they see a formerly blind man now able to see, the Pharisees greatest concern is that this was work done on the Sabbath. Jesus, this itinerant, nonconforming preacher and teacher has violated the Sabbath by an action that could have just as easily waited another day. The Pharisees have blinders on as they barely acknowledge the formerly blind man. He is a prop, a tool, much more than a person to them as they can only see an opportunity to make trouble for Jesus.

His parents were caught off guard, nervous and timid as they deflected the questions of the crowd. Awed by what they have seen happen, unprepared to answer their questions, fearful of offending the wrong people with their answers since they would be banished from the synagogue, they throw up their hands and send the people to ask their son. They will not be involved. They do not ask him or celebrate with him or even talk with him. They will not see the one who can now see.

The neighbors, the Pharisees, his parents, all became self-focused because to them there was nothing else to focus on. A young man gained his sight yet the neighbors are concerned with being sure of his identity. The Pharisees concentrate on Jesus the sinner who does not observe the Sabbath. His parents are focused on their place in the community. They were all blind to the light of the world, to the young man who sees now with vision and wisdom. Their own biased visions influenced their questions, their wondering, their discernment and their rejection.

2000 years later we too are asked: what influences our questions, our wondering, our discernment? Do we deny the truth right in front of us, do we put on blinders or deflect what we will not allow ourselves to see when we may not want the answers?

Rumi, the 13th century mystic and poet, helps to give us a perspective:

The world exists as you perceive it.

It’s not what you see, but how you see it.

It’s not what you hear, but how you hear it.

It’s not what you feel, but how you feel it.

Amen.