

JOURNEY TOWARDS SEEING, BELIEVING & ACTING

4 Lent – March 2, 2008 Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Our Lenten Journey continues today with the Gospel of John. We are still moving towards Jerusalem, the Cross, and the Resurrection. But today we will stop once again in one of my favorite Gospels ... John. John presents us with the theme of light and darkness today. This part of the Gospel is referred to as the “Book of Signs”. It contains seven miracles, including the one today.

What John tells us is that Jesus Christ is the light in a darkened world. But the miracle of one man’s being healed is not about his blindness only. It’s a story about our blindness as well. For the healed man, there is a miracle that leads to seeing ... that leads to believing ... that leads to acting. Our Lenten journey invites us right not to journey towards seeing ... for all of us.

To begin this journey, we have to recognize and admit that we are blind. Next, we must understand that it is Christ who gives us sight. Jesus is the one who offers the miracle of restored physical and spiritual sight. What is it going to take for us to see God’s miracle at work in our lives? What is Jesus leading us towards? What miracle are we being invited to be part of today? Let’s see what clues John offers today.

What we have is another story of Jesus encountering someone. Do you remember two weeks ago? Jesus encountered Nicodemus. He has troubling seeing. But don’t worry ... he’ll come around. Nicodemus will appear twice more in John. If you want to rush ahead, go read the rest of John’s Gospel today! Last week, it was Jesus and the unnamed woman at the well. She sees ... she believes ... and she goes to share it with others! Now, today, we have yet another encounter. It’s an unnamed blind man, born blind ... he will see ... he will believe ... and he will share what has happened to him too.

Let’s look at the text. Right away there is something different that happens. From the outset, John is sharing a story with us that will have transforming effect. “As he walked along, he (Jesus) saw a man born blind from birth ...” Okay, here we go! Already there is a difference. Jesus SEES THE BLIND MAN. The first step is not the blind man asking or reaching for help ... it is Jesus seeing the person in need! That’s how it is with us, Jesus sees us first!

How many times have we walked or driven by someone in need? What about the homeless, the sick or the desperate? I know what happens. We make excuses. We’re too busy to stop and help. We say to ourselves that someone else will help, or that if they really wanted help they could find it.

Two weeks ago, my wife and I visited our daughter in NYC. She bought us tickets to a Broadway show (you know you have arrived when your child starts paying the bills!). We were waiting outside the theater, waiting for the doors to open. There was a younger woman, dressed in shabby clothes mingling with the crowd. She held a hand made sign, complete with misspellings. It said in so many words, please help me. She looked Eastern

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European. At first, I tried to ignore her. I kept seeing her walking around the crowd. No one was seeing her.

I thought how fortunate it was for me to be there that night. I was with two people that I love and are very important to me. But my gaze kept coming back to her. I saw sadness in her countenance. I reached in my pocket and took a \$10 bill out. I walked over and gave it to her. She smiled through broken teeth and said in broken English, “God bless you.” Was this a miracle, for me? Was it one of those moments when I saw, like Jesus did?

Now I think of our ministry with St. Paul’s ... and the people who see the hungry in Camden week after week. I think of the dozen or more people I came across in the parish hall yesterday stuffing lunch bags for the children at Kids’ Alley Café. I think of the IHOC men’s shelter guest we housed, fed and hosted for two weeks. For all of you that helped with these people, thank you. For the rest of us, what are you going to do? The first step is always seeing the need. We have to look and not ignore others.

Now, let’s go back to the text. What happens next? Jesus changes the rules ... again! The disciples see him eyeing the blind man and they rush right in ... to forming a committee to discuss the theological ramifications of the encounter. Isn’t it just like us? We see a problem and we form a committee to discuss the issue. The disciples asked who sinned? Whose fault is that this happens? Jesus stops them. It’s not about sin. There was an old way of thinking, it persists with many today, that if one is sick, or poor, or in a bad way ... they sinned and are being punished by God. Jesus dispels that notion.

Isn’t it just like us, the way the disciples act? We want to know ... it becomes a way of avoiding action. We talk things to death rather than acting with compassion. The disciples, and too many of us, want to talk and talk and talk ... probably in the hope that the problem with either go away, or that someone else will take care of it.

Ah! But now the miracle happens ... Jesus ACTS! He spits in one hand, picks up a handful of dirt in the other, and mixes them together. That reminds me of mother’s salvia ... have you ever been the recipient of mother salvia? It’s been used to remove dirt, heal wounds, and comfort a cry. Think of it, Jesus uses his spit ... but there is something sacred in what he uses. He mixes them and applies to the blind man’s eyes. But it doesn’t stop here ... Jesus starts it but he tells the man to wash in the pool at Siloam. When the miracle comes our way ... we have to respond in order for the fullness of it to take effect.

Jesus offers, the blind man responds ... and the miracle of sight takes place! Jesus is the light, and sight giver! Later, we will hear him tell the healed blind man that he is the one ... and the healed man will believe. A transformation is taking place that will forever reshape this man’s life! That’s what the world of light is all about!

But now we have to grapple with the darkness. It is a stubborn and persistent force in our lives. Why is it that no one gets the miracle? Why is the healing of the blind man lost in the ongoing text? Let’s look at how darkness prevails in our lives. First, there are our neighbors ... you know, the people who live around us. They don’t recognize the man!

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They can't accept that he's been changed. Why can't we see miracles when they happen? What miracles are we overlooking in our lives?

What do the neighbors do? They take the man to the Pharisees. Remember who they are? They are the people who sit in the pews and the ones who stand up in front each week. They are us. But the Pharisees won't accept what has happened. They are possessed by religious blindness. Their rules are more important to them than God's miracle. They objected to what Jesus did ... heal a man on the Sabbath! Remember the old blue laws? This is more than that ... these people interpreted the commandment we read this morning, "Keep Holy the Sabbath", as to mean NO WORK. When Jesus mixed the dirt and spit, applied it to the blind man's eyes ... healed him ... it was not considered a miracle but work!

Could you imagine being seriously sick today, going to the hospital and having people there say they don't work on Sundays? Where have we made our rules, our traditions or our prejudices more important than helping another person? Where do we deny God because something or someone doesn't fit our mold? We utter those standard Episcopal phrases, "We've never done it that way before" or "We're not like those people."

The problem with some laws is they often block out God's revelation. Jesus violated their law, because they interpreted it only one way. Be aware! Our interpretations can be wrong! They are especially wrong when they force us not to help and heal others. Jesus obeyed God's will ... he operated out of love and compassion. The Pharisees operated out of their pride. This is a warning to us! Any time we start saying, "You can't do ... you fill in the blank ..." be ware! It's a trap. What would God want us to do? Maybe some of our rules are wrong. We might do better by asking what the most loving and compassionate thing we can do.

The story doesn't stop there. Now we see the parents of the man involved. What parent wouldn't be overjoyed to see their child healed? But the darkness exists here too. They are afraid. Fear overtakes the deep, emotional feelings. Why can't they celebrate the miracle? The answer is fear.

I believe the biggest problem we face in today's age is fear. Too many people have learned how to manipulate us with fear. Politicians use this tactic to get our votes ... it's not about issues. It's about fear. People tell us things to create in us fear about another. The reality is that we spend too much time in world of fear ... and are paralyzed.

We need to act, rather than to feat. It's time to take a risk. Yes, the cost may be that we fail, or we get burned ... but what about the other times? What about the time we will be the difference that helps God work a miracle ... in our lives or that of others? If we are to put the world of darkness behind us, then we have to see the possibility of the light that Jesus offers us.

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So where and when are we blind? When have we put ourselves ahead of others? When have we ignored the needs of others? When have we been more concerned about the hows and whys rather than acting? Who are we in the story? Where are our lives caught in the darkness? Are we the disciples who don't get it, and just want to talk about it? Are we the neighbors who don't see a miracle and can't accept it? Are we the Pharisees who won't accept it because it didn't happen the approved way? Or are we the parents entrapped by fear? This is the world of darkness and blindness.

The Ephesians passage mentions today that we are to be the children of the light. I think that happens when we can be one who lives in the light and is transformed by it. Our call is to be like Jesus ... to see ... to have compassion ... and to act. Our call is to be like the healed blind man ... to see ... to believe ... to tell others ... and to follow Jesus! This is where the light lies for them and for us!

When we can embrace the light, see and live as Jesus challenges us ... we can start asking, and answering, other questions. How is God at work in our life right now? What might God be opening our eyes to in the world and people around us? Where can we be co-miracle workers by having compassion and acting? We the answers begin to come ... then we will see! Amen.