

## **BELIEVE: A Man Born Blind**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, March 19, 2023.

John 9:1-41

I'd like to begin this morning by asking all of you to close your eyes. Sit comfortably. Breathe normally. And gently close your eyes. Take a moment to adjust yourself to the darkness.

Now, imagine that you are blind. Imagine that you were born blind. You've never been able to see with your eyes. Indeed, you don't know what people mean when they talk about seeing things with their eyes. People tell you that you are living in darkness, but that term is meaningless to you as well, because you've never experienced anything else. Darkness? Light? What's the difference? You can feel the warmth of the sun on your face. And people tell you that light comes from the sun. So, you may associate light with the feeling of warmth. But light itself remains a foreign concept. You know what things feel like, sound like, smell like, and taste like. But you don't know what they look like. This is the way you've always experienced the world. You can hear my voice. You can feel the chair beneath you supporting your weight. You can smell the fragrance of the soap or shampoo you used this morning. And maybe you can still taste that last cup of coffee you drank before coming to church. But you can't see. You've always been blind.

As a blind person living in the first century, you have been marginalized by the rest of society. Most people consider your blindness to be the consequence of sin – either yours or your parents'. And there are no social services available to you as a blind person. So you are reduced to begging in order to survive.

Then Jesus comes along. You hear him and his disciples approaching you and talking about you -- a nameless blind man.

You hear Jesus spit on the ground. And then a moment later, you are startled to feel him spreading something cool and wet on your eyes. It smells like soil. It must be mud. Then Jesus tells you to "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam."

You find your way to the pool, you splash water onto your face and wash the mud from your eyes, and suddenly your eyes are opened! OPEN YOUR EYES! Suddenly, your experience of the world is radically different. Is this what it means to see? It will take you some time to know what you are seeing. Your brain has to learn how to make sense of the light images coming through your eyes for the first time. The experience is completely new for you. But you realize that your life has been transformed by the man called Jesus. From him you have received the precious gift of sight.

It's a wonderful story of miraculous healing, but that's just the beginning. This story in the gospel of John is much more about the reactions of others to the blind man receiving his sight than it is about the healing itself. So, as the radio commentator Paul Harvey used to say, "and now for the rest of the story."

Jesus' healing of the blind man causes quite a stir in the community. Jesus has once again upset the status quo. And consequently, the man who received his sight finds himself at the center of a storm of controversy.

When the neighbors and those who had seen the man as a blind beggar see him now as a sighted individual, a disagreement ensues about whether he is the same man or not. "Isn't he the man who used to sit and beg?" they ask one another. Some said, "yes, he's the same man." But others disagreed. "No, he isn't the same man at all. He only looks like the blind beggar." In spite of the man's own insistence that he is, indeed, the same man, the neighbors cannot believe their eyes. They keep asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He tells them what happened. But then they want to know where they can find this Jesus fellow. And that, the man did not know.

It's ironic that the people in this story who have always been able to see with their eyes . . . now can't believe their eyes. They bring him to the Pharisees, and the man tells them the same story. But the Pharisees, too, are divided over what to make of the man's story. Unwilling to believe the man's own testimony, the Pharisees call for the man's parents to tell them what happened. His parents confirm that he is, indeed, their son, and that he was born blind, but they claim not to know how he received his sight. "Ask him for yourselves," they say, "he's old enough to speak for himself." They were afraid to even mention Jesus, because the Jewish authorities had agreed that anyone confessing Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

So, the Pharisees ask the man to tell his story yet again. "Give glory to God!" they say, meaning "tell the truth!" At this point, the question on the Pharisees' minds no longer has to do with the man's identity but with Jesus' identity. Who is this man Jesus who can open the eyes of the blind? Some of them thought that Jesus must be from God to be able to perform such a miracle. But others didn't see how Jesus could possibly be from God, since he healed the man on the sabbath, which was a violation of God's law.

The Pharisees want him to confirm that Jesus is a sinner. But the man answers: "I do not know whether he is a sinner or not. The one thing I do know is that once I was blind, and now I see."

The interrogation continues. They ask the man: "What did [Jesus] do to you? How did he open your eyes?" But the man, having grown tired of the Pharisees' questions, lashes back at 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?" You have to admit, the man's got chutzpah!

His stinging retort puts the Pharisees on the defensive: "You are his disciple. Not us. We are disciples of Moses. We know that

God spoke to Moses, but as for Jesus, we don't know where he comes from."

"Well, here is an astonishing thing!", the man replies. "You don't know where Jesus comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but listens to those who worship God and obey God's will. And never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If Jesus were not from God, he could do nothing."

At this point, the Pharisees are seething. They will have none of this. They will not be lectured to! "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us? Go! Leave us! Get out of here!" They drive him out of their presence.

Near the end of the passage, Jesus finds the man and asks him: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man responded, "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." At that the man confesses his belief in Jesus as Lord: "Lord, I believe." And he worships Jesus.

For the man born blind, seeing was believing. But the Pharisees refused to see. They refused to believe. The Pharisees had their eyes wide shut. They were not open to the possibility that Jesus could be from God. Though they had physical sight, they were spiritually blind. Through their eyes, the blind man was a sinner, pure and simple. From their point of view, his blindness was punishment for his sins. It was his own fault. He got what he deserved. They blamed the victim. But Jesus saw him as a precious child of God. Jesus saw in the blind man a person in need of healing. And Jesus gave him the gift of sight.

What astonishes me about this story is that no one celebrates the fact that the man has been healed of his blindness. An awesome miracle has occurred before their eyes, and instead of celebrating with the man and giving thanks, they give him the third degree. They ask him not once but three times how his eyes were opened,

how he received his sight. The man tells them the truth, but they are not satisfied. They don't see how it could be possible for a man born blind to receive his sight. They keep asking him again and again. In the end, they cast him out.

In his book, *Who Needs God?*, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes that "Religion has to mean more to us than a commitment to ethical behavior, to loving our neighbors. It has to teach our eyes how to see the world."

What enables us to see or not see is the presence of light. Without it we can see absolutely nothing. Just as it's true in a physical sense, it's true in a spiritual sense as well. As Christians, our light comes from the Son (spelled S-O-N) -- God's Son -- Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world. He is the true light that enlightens every human being.

It is by the light of Christ, that we are able to see the world with new vision and clarity. By the light of Christ, the outcast comes into focus as a child of God. The light of Christ helps us to see ourselves and others in new ways and opens up the possibility of transformed relationships.

So, friends, as we continue our journey through the Lenten season, let us pray that the light of Christ would illumine our hearts and transform our lives, just as it once transformed the life of a man born blind. Amen.