

John 9: 1-42 Blindness and Sight

The gospel passage from John which I read and the text from 1st Samuel 16:1-13, which I did not focus on seeing—but in a special sense—seeing rightly. The Hebrew passage is the well known story of the selection of David, son of Jesse, to be Israel's next king. The Lord tells the prophet Samuel that Saul has been rejected as Israel's king. His rule is flawed in the Lord's eyes and so God is choosing a new ruler—although the actual transfer of power will not occur for quite a while. God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's seven sons but he is not given a name. So we have a scene where the sons of Jesse are lined up and beginning with the eldest, Samuel looks upon him and comments because of his stature, that he will be the next king. He isn't. In fact, none of the older sons who came to meet with the prophet is the one. The chosen one is the youngest, David, who has been left in the field to tend the sheep. Verse 7 sums up the message of the text this way: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortal see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart." This episode sets the tone for the gospel passage where "seeing" is more complex than physical sight. When reading this passage from John it is clear that is using physical sight in a complex manner to represent something entirely different. This is not a difficult connection for us to make because we also use the word "see" in much the same way. There is seeing—observing—and there is seeing—understanding; just as there is failure to see and failure to understand. Blindness and sight are explicitly mentioned in 24 of this chapter's 41 verses, including the first and last ones. This is a narrative about a healing miracle—the details of which are repeated four times. At the center of the narrative, standing before the healing and eternally after it, is Jesus, the giver of sight and the very light of the world in which true sight becomes possible. The question that stretches across all the Lenten texts is a question about who Jesus is. That is issue underlying this discussion of light and sight and blindness. A secondary topic in this narrative is the question of who is sinful and what constitutes sin. This passage begins with the man's blindness being seen as the consequence of sin. John 9:1-2—"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 rejects this idea and after declaring himself the light of the world he gives the man sight. On the literal plane, Jesus uses his spit and dirt to make mud which he then places on the blind man's eyes and tells him to go wash it off in the pool of Siloam—a pool of water within Jerusalem's walls. The man goes, washes the mud off his eyes and "came back able to see." It is typical of John that this healing happens in a different manner than the healings in the synoptic gospels. In the synoptic narratives, people come to Jesus seeking his aid. So first of all, here the blind man does not ask Jesus for aid or healing in any way. From the discussion of his neighbors later in the passage, he was probably sitting alongside the road begging when Jesus and the disciples walked by. The disciples initiated Jesus' actions with the question about the man's blindness—"was it his sin?, or that of his parents?" they ask. Jesus rejects both suggestions. Instead Jesus tells them this is an opportunity for him to reveal God's healing power—his own purpose to bring light to the world. This encounter forms an illustration in John's gospel for one of the signs of Jesus' identity and is co-related with an "I am" statement where Jesus explicitly explains who he is in verse 5 of this passage: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." This type of open assertion by Jesus of divinity, of

who he is also is absent from the synoptic where Jesus' humanity is more obvious. Despite these open statements, in this narrative Jesus does not just give the blind man sight, like he tells the lame to walk or heals at a distance. Here Jesus makes a mud paste and puts it on the man's eyes and tells him to go and wash it off in a pool. In the synoptic, the healing is a miracle and any audience present is amazed and worshipful. Here, there is no audience mentioned except the disciples at the actual healing, but when the man returns to his neighborhood—the reactions begin. "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?'" That sounds like a reasonable reaction to noticing your blind neighbor can suddenly see. But some denied it could even be the same man, despite his assertion that he was. The neighbors want to know how this happened and he briefly tells them: 'The man 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.'" When the now sighted man tells them he doesn't know where Jesus is, instead of accepting the man's new state, they take him to the Pharisees. At this point the idea of sin is re-introduced, but because it was a Sabbath when Jesus had made the mud, that is all the Pharisees are interested in—work, even healing, on a Sabbath was sin. At the Pharisees questioning, the man again gives the details of his gaining sight. "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.'" This division led them to ask the previously blind man: "What do you say about him?" His response: "He is a prophet." Having heard the man's story and received his testimony, this group then decides to send for his parents because they wanted to join the group who denied he was the formerly blind man and that he really had been blind. The parents affirmed that he was their son who had indeed been born blind. When the Pharisees continued to question the parents, they replied they did not know how he came to now be able to see—so ask him. So they do. The once blind man then asks his baffled interrogators: "Why do you want to hear it again?" Can't you hear his frustration in that question? These interrogators had all heard the story twice; they had checked it out. No matter how you looked at it, this man had been blind and now he wasn't. Yet in the barefaced presence of what looked like solid proof, those stubborn Pharisees refuse to believe that Jesus was anything more than a breaker of Sabbath rules. After all, in their sight how audacious to heal on the Sabbath! Sunday healing was strictly forbidden. To the accusation that Jesus was a sinner, the man replied: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." The previously blind man mistakenly thinks they are questioning him because they might want to be Jesus' disciples. This provokes anger on the questioners' part especially when this now sighted man defends Jesus and asserts that one who can heal can only be from God. Instead of joy because he has been healed, this man is driven out of the community. This leads to the last interaction of the passage when Jesus again seeks out the man. "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 worshipped him." At the end of the narrative, the blind man is not blind, but the neighbors and Pharisees, and perhaps even the parents are. Their narrowness blinds them to what is before them. They are blind not in their eyes but in their hearts—to the presence of the Divine right in front of them. Underneath the surface of this story of a healing miracle is the equally strange

story of their heart blindness. And that is where the narrative ends—with Jesus condemning them indicating for their claim to see when they are in fact blind. Jesus gave sight to the man born blind using mud and spit. Once he had physical sight, he also truly saw—and understood what had occurred was through the power of God. Hearing and confirming this man’s story did not open the heart eyes of those who heard the story. In fact, hearing played a prominent role in the blind man’s healing, for the blind man first responds to Jesus’ voice because he responds by going to the pool of Siloam. This is the beginning of his journey to understanding Jesus. When he first relates to his neighbors what has happened to him his description of the one who did this is “the man called Jesus.” He tells the Pharisees that Jesus is a prophet. When Jesus finds him again, he addresses Jesus as Lord and worships him. The blind man is more than one whom Jesus has healed, he is one of Jesus’ own. Hearing and seeing mean recognizing and are expressions of the relationship between God and ourselves. This text is full of those who like Samuel make assumptions based on the superficial. The disciples assumed the man’s blindness resulted from sin. The neighbors assumed the man’s blindness defined him—when he was no longer blind they did not know him. The Pharisees assumed that any act done on the Sabbath was sinful and could not have come through God. Assumptions abounded. But with the presence of God they were shown not to be based in truth. We are still likely to be like those in this narrative—we make assumptions about others, many of which are based in fear or prejudice. Later in John’s gospel, Jesus will make the connection between hearing and seeing to knowing. The man who was given sight comes to know Jesus through both hearing and seeing—he experienced the presence of the Divine through both. His life was transformed. When we hear the Word read or read it ourselves—we need to leave behind our assumptions and open our hearts so that we can experience what it means to be in the presence of our Lord. Doing this is somewhat like have the mud pack placed on our eyes—we can begin to see God’s presence in many ways. We can see where before we were blind. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.