

## Open the Eyes of My Heart

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This Sunday marks the 4th Sunday of Lent, and as previously announced, we are celebrating Disability Awareness Sunday. Lent is a period of reflection, repentance, and renewal. It is a time for us to reflect on, repent for, and renew our relationship with God and our neighbors to strengthen our faith and love. In this context, embracing diversity and inclusion in our community is not only an issue of justice and hospitality, but also a spiritual discipline and a testimony to our faith.

The peace in the garden was destroyed when we consumed the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Our relationship with God was disrupted due to our distrust and disobedience, and in turn, our relationship with each other was broken. Additionally, we think we can discern what is good and evil in our lives. As a result, we frequently judge all circumstances and readily condemn situations or events as evil when they appear bad to us. But the prince of peace was sent to the world to restore the peace around us.

Today's reading is about the healing of a man born blind by Jesus, who not only restored his physical sight but also opened his spiritual eyes. While this may seem like a simple healing story at first, it carries a deeper meaning of seeing the world through God's perspective and recognizing the divine in all things. To be in the presence of God means to see the world as God sees it, filled with holiness.

Both texts today challenge us to see in a new way and look beyond surface-level appearances. When it comes to diversity and inclusion, the story of the blind man encourages us to see beyond differences and recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person, created by God. It invites us to celebrate the beauty and richness of diversity in our community as a reflection of God's creation.

In John 9:1-2, the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This question reflects a common belief during that time that disabilities were a result of sin, either of the person with the disability or their parents. This attitude contributed to the stigmatization and exclusion of people with disabilities in society. This belief was not limited to Jewish culture, as other ancient societies also saw disability as a form of punishment or divine retribution. Unfortunately, we cannot say this tendency has been eradicated in modern societies.

As you know, I am privileged to have a son with Down Syndrome. Almost every day, I feel joy when I witness Gaon's behaviors and expressions. However, when I received a notice from the doctor that my newborn baby appeared to have Down Syndrome, I was utterly shocked. I couldn't tell Juyoun, who was exhausted after giving birth, about it. Instead, I went to my car and cried out to the Lord in prayer. As I prayed, I asked God what wrongdoings I had committed. I reviewed my missionary works in my mind, seeking any flaws that might have angered the Lord. Yes, I automatically thought that the baby with a disability should be a punishment from God. I had never condemned other people with disabilities in that way, but deep down, I must have also held that kind of preconception.

For several days after my son's birth, I continued to reflect on my past behaviors seeking my sin. About a week later, I received a phone call from my brother-in-law, who is a pastor in the United Methodist Church serving in the north Alabama conference and happens to be the second elder brother of my wife. He was also shocked by the news and, with a heavy heart, he shared the "bad news" with a prayer group of pastors in the region. He expected sincere comfort, but instead, he received cheerful encouragement. "Wow, congratulations, they are privileged with the child. You know, a baby with Down Syndrome is adorable and such an angel. You are blessed."

My brother-in-law was delightfully amazed by their unexpected responses and shared their reactions and blessings with us. His report shocked me and somehow changed my perspective. "It might not be God's punishment. It would be God's blessing." This new way of seeing the situation opened up new possibilities and hope for our future. The "bad news" became "possible" good news. It was a good start towards changing my mindset.

In today's story, the healing power of Jesus transforms hopelessness into hopefulness and then into reality. The story begins with a question about sin or wrongdoing. However, Jesus responds by saying that neither the man nor his parents sinned, rejecting the notion that his disability was bad news. Jesus explains that the man was born blind so that God's works could be revealed in him. With this simple response, Jesus changes the bad news into possible good news and declares himself as the light of the world.

Upon hearing Jesus' words, the blind man must have felt a mix of confusion, hope, and wonder. He may have been told for so long that his blindness was a punishment from God, leading him to live in a state of hopelessness. However, Jesus challenges this belief and sees his blindness as an opportunity for God's work to be revealed. When Jesus declares himself as the light, the blind man may have felt a spark of hope that he had never experienced before. He may have been filled with wonder at the possibility of a new way of seeing and experiencing the world around him. Jesus' responses help the man move from a state of hopelessness to hopefulness.

The healing of the blind man is not just a shift from hopelessness to hopefulness, but also a shift from hopefulness to reality. Jesus applies clay to the man's eyes and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Despite the potential for doubt, the man trusts in Jesus' words and acts upon them, allowing the hope in his heart to become a tangible reality in his life.

When the man encounters Jesus again, he confesses his trust and belief in the Son of Man. Jesus then makes an interesting statement, saying "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind" (v. 39). This statement can be seen as a message of hope for those who are blind or marginalized, and a warning to those who believe they have everything figured out.

The phrase "those who do not see" can refer not only to physical blindness but also to spiritual blindness or ignorance. Jesus came to bring hope and healing to those who are blind or lost, offering them the opportunity to see the world and themselves in a new way.

On the other hand, "those who see" may become blind, meaning that those who think they have all the answers and are closed off to new possibilities may miss out on the true meaning of life and God's purpose for them. This speaks to the dangers of arrogance and complacency, which can lead to a lack of faith and trust in God's plan.

In the story of the anointing of a new king of Israel, we can see how God chose David as the king of Israel instead of his older brothers, who looked more impressive. But God told Samuel not to judge by their appearance or height. Here, appearance doesn't simply mean our outlook; it represents the standards and criteria that we, who believe that we know good and evil, easily use. We are apt to judge and predict people's actions and situations of both ourselves and others with factors such as outlooks, education level, age, health, financial capability, and number of features. Additionally, we are quick to focus on our own or others' shortcomings and incompetence. But today, the Bible firmly reminds us that "the LORD does not see as mortals see ... but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Repeatedly, God has taught us that if we only focus on surface-level aspects of life, we will miss the true significance. To truly understand what matters in life and death, we must delve deep. We need to learn to see the world in a new way, with the eyes of faith. This requires us to let go of our own notions of what is right and instead submit to God's perspective of the world and ourselves.

God sees what we cannot see with our own eyes. So, from God's perspective, we are blind. However, our sinfulness and rebellion against God prevent us from admitting our disabilities. We don't want to be seen as people with disabilities, and so we deny our blindness. This is similar to the Pharisees who asked Jesus, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus responds by saying, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (v. 40).

As we celebrate the 4th Sunday in Lent and Disability Awareness Sunday, we must first embrace our neighbors who are ignored and in need of our love and care. Additionally, we must embrace our spiritual disabilities. We need to ask God for help to let go of our tendency to judge based on appearance and to open the eyes of our hearts to see the world and ourselves through God's eyes. The Lord will guide us on what we should do. When we hear our Savior's voice, we will be filled with hope. If we work and practice according to the Divine urge, possibility and hope will become our reality. Our disabilities will become blessings. In this sense, we are privileged to have disabilities.