

## **WHEN BLIND MEN FACE THE LIGHT**

**John 9.1-38**

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Last December I went up to the North Carolina mountains for three days of solitude at the beginning of Advent. I'm a bit of a hermit, so I packed up a box of books, and my schedule for each day was a reading list and stoking the fire every 30 minutes. An intended three-day retreat extended to five days after a foot of snow covered the region. I didn't mind the additional solitude and reading time, as I was becoming pleasantly acquainted with some new friends in the communion of saints through their books — T. F. Torrance and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, to name a few. Enriching as those hours were listening to the wisdom of marvelous teachers, I also felt inclined to bear witness to the beauty of creation and the splendor of winter all around me. Just before I left I had thrown our camera in the car, so I decided this would be a great moment to try my hand at photography, which I've always wanted to do.

As I finished an hour's walk, there were a few pictures in particular I couldn't wait to upload. When the pictures uploaded, I was mildly disappointed that some of my favorite scenes were much smaller. My memory recalled that the field of vision had been wider when taking pictures, but the camera didn't lie. I had cropped the field of vision without even knowing it. There was only one explanation for the diminished image: my eyes had not been trained to see through the lens I was given.

As the disciples walk with Jesus outside of the Temple in Jerusalem, it becomes apparent that their eyes have not been trained to see the world through the lens that Jesus has given them — the Kingdom of God. They happen upon a man who was blind from birth and their question reveals their diminished vision:



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“Who sinned? his parents or the man himself?” One question, two options, an entire life diminished, trimmed, and reduced. But Jesus sees a cropped picture — a prescribed frame much too small for a man born in the image of God. Their frame cut out the possibility for the in-breaking Light of God.

Jesus and his disciples are looking at the same man, but the disciples’ frame for the blind man’s life is limited by the parameters of the old order of creation. What are the parameters of the old order of creation? “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”<sup>1</sup> A man blind from birth must be some expression of divine retribution. This logic of the old order controls the disciples’ conversation. It is a conversation, no less, happening from a safe distance where one can speak *about* the blind man without speaking *to* him.

Jesus does not accept the logic of the old order of creation, with its diminishing parameters, nor does he keep the objective distance that this “theological” conversation observes. Jesus cannot stay stationary and continue this theological debate. He is the Light of the world, and it is the very behavior of light to be in motion, to cast out darkness wherever it may be found.

Within the past 150 years scientists such as Albert Einstein have devoted a tremendous amount of study to the properties of light. Through the work of theologians such as T. F. Torrance, we see that Einstein’s scientific work related to light has many places of correspondence with Christian theology. Einstein discovered that light has a unique status in our universe because of its constancy. The more that Einstein and other scientists studied the properties of light, they discovered that light is never stationary. Light is always in motion.<sup>2</sup>

Those patterns of motion in creation have their origin in the mind of the Maker. When the Creator comes to earth to re-create his world, the Light of the world will be known through the persons He illuminates. What is the nature of light? To cast out the darkness. The world was created when the Creator separated light from darkness in the beginning. When darkness invaded human hearts and subjected creation in weakness, the Creator entered his creation to dispel darkness so that a new creation might begin.

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1 See Matt. 5.28 (English Standard Version).

2 T. F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 98.

This is precisely what John wants us to experience as we hear the story of a man blind from birth receiving his sight. Whether in the first century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this healing is a signpost for all to see, directing us to the heart and mission of God; that is, God's greatest desire is the restoration of everything and everyone He has created. The mission of Jesus is a new beginning, a new creation. All we must do is recognize that we have no light in ourselves. And that is why this blind man is the perfect candidate for the in-breaking of God's divine Light.

Because Jesus is the Light of the world, and because the nature of light is motion, we see Jesus move. He turns away from a static, stale conversation and faces this living, breathing son of Adam in a dynamic encounter. Observe how Jesus heals this man. It seems bizarre — a combination of Jesus' saliva and dirt applied as a putty of mud over his eyes. Why does Jesus heal this way? Perhaps we could answer this question with another question: when is the first time we see God with his hands in the dirt? "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."<sup>3</sup> And with his hands in the dust of Jerusalem's ground, Jesus reveals his unity with the Creator God *as the Son of God*, who begins a new creation. St. John Chrysostom said that the Creator who brought together worlds out of nothing could have restored sight with any material (e.g. mud).<sup>4</sup> But Jesus chose this manner of healing to show that He was making all things new — the blind will see, eyes will be opened to behold the glory of God. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."<sup>5</sup>

It seems so odd that we aren't given the name of this blind man given the length of this story, but make no mistake, no square inch of John's Gospel is accidental. John is too much of an artist to overlook details. There is a reason that John doesn't tell us the name of the man born blind, now healed. We've seen John do this before: remember the unnamed woman that Jesus encounters at the

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3 Gen. 2.7 (ESV).

4 St. John Chrysostom, "Homily LVI," in *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 14, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 200-203, reference on 202.

5 John 1.5 (ESV).

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well. When a name is withheld, we're meant to see the universal, representative nature of these characters. Like the woman at the well, we are all adulterers by means of the idolatries within our hearts. Here a man born blind is presented to us so that we will recognize the truth he represents about every person: we are all blind.

So now we also find the reason that this passage is read in the Lenten season. When we read this story in Lent, we particularly notice the Pharisees, blinded by their self-confidence, discipline, and devotion to the Law. Pharisees are convinced that because they have been given the light of the Law, they see the truth about God more than others. The whole project of the Pharisees was to build a system of rules so that they would never transgress the Law of Moses. In a sense, they built this fence around the Law to eliminate any blind spots within their souls. But the desire to protect themselves from a blind spot through *their own effort* was itself a blind spot. Jesus plainly declares to the Pharisees later in John 9.41 that "because you say 'we see,' your guilt remains."

Could you go home this week and ask the person who knows you best, "What is the most obvious blind spot in my heart?" If you cannot ask that question, you are shutting out the Light of God. But in the presence of a gentle brother or sister and the merciful Spirit of God, entering that conversation may plunge you into the Pool of Siloam. It seems silly to have mud on your eyes and walk into a pool. But that's the step of faith. Who wants to ask, "What are the blind spots within my heart?" The person who wants to see; the disciple who is tired of walking in the dark, who is desperate for God's new creation; the one who desires mercy, healing, and cleansing. Your brother or sister is a gift to you to help you see the Light of God breaking through darkness, healing our blindness, and making all things new.

In the fall of 2005, my Sunday morning routine was to travel a circuit around Gateshead, England, leading between two to three services at two to three different churches. After three weeks of this routine, I noticed a small man, not even 5 feet tall, walking the same roads I was driving. About fifteen minutes into the first Sunday service I would see this man find a seat in my church, his face reddened by the brisk northeastern winds. A few hours later I would see him at my final morning stop, church no. 3, sitting quietly, a lone worshipper in his pew. During tea time following the service, I introduced myself. "Alan's my name," he

said. When I saw Alan up close for the first time, it became apparent he suffered from several physical afflictions. Whether his condition was a complication from birth, I cannot be sure, but clearly his condition diminished his height, disfigured some facial features, and left him legally blind. Gateshead is a vertical city. And every Sunday morning a blind man was navigating her steep ascents to find his way into worship.

By November my Sunday routine had changed a bit, and I would pick up Alan on my way to services. One of the first things Alan shared with me was how old he was. "I'm 20,700 days old, Jack." For those of us still on an annual calendar, Alan was in his 50s when I met him. But then he told me that everything changed for him in 1986. The Spirit of God moved in Alan's heart, giving his life a new beginning. That's when Alan's feet began pounding the pavement, climbing Gateshead's streets. If I thought I was something special, I learned quickly that Alan wasn't coming to see me. On Sundays he would worship at one of my churches, but by the time Sunday came around, he had already been to Mass at the Catholic parish church on Saturday night *and* Wednesday evening. When I dropped him off on Sunday, he would be headed out that evening for another worship service not my own. I wanted to make a difference in the churches I served. But Alan just wanted to worship — a lot. That little blind man was moving toward the Light of Jesus more than anyone I met in Gateshead, myself included. The steps he numbered each week equaled the days of his life, and with every step a blind man was teaching me how to see. When I think of Alan now, I pray, "Oh for a pure, fervent heart to worship the Lord."

I began these reflections with a story about what happens when I trust my own vision — beautiful images are left out. But it's right to close with a story about what happens when God guides our vision. Many of you are celebrating what is becoming known among American Anglicans as "The Miracle of Jericho."<sup>6</sup> For those of you who haven't seen this video, a cameraman captured footage of a dramatic performance of a Gospel scene on a sunny day in Jericho. The performance took place on a hillside overlooking the Jericho valley. Ten of our congregation's members were present at this site. A singular vertical beam of light wasn't perceived by anyone present, but that light beam appeared in the

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6 Brad Root, "The Miracle of Jericho," <http://www.anglicanchurch.net/?/main/page/211>

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final edited footage, intersecting a Jericho road in the shape of a cross. No eyewitnesses, the cameraman included, saw the vertical beam of light with their eyes at the moment of filming. But when our eyes are fixed on the Gospel, God breaks through with his heavenly Light and our eyes are opened. The Gospel story being performed on the video? Another story of Jesus healing a man suffering from blindness.

The Light of the world has come. While it is still day, let us face the Light so that he may heal our blindness and reveal the glory of his love, manifested by the Light of the Cross. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.