

Show us, Jesus how you define blindness

Lent 4 - Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Responsive Reading: Psalm 23

Please note the suggested **ritual** at the end of the sermon as well as **The Voice Scriptures** at end of this paper.

There are various reasons for blindness. Too often we are **blindly comfortable** with our situation. In the World War from 1914-1918 oculists were kept busy on eye-tests for soldiers. Glasses were provided when required but many of them were thrown away. The men were so short-sighted and so accustomed to a blurred vision that they felt uncomfortable in a clear world. If a whole army were short-sighted and refused glasses, it would mean instant defeat.

There is the **blindness of prejudice**. The scientist Galileo, from 1580 to 1640, upset the scientific world & the religious world with his discoveries. For example, his telescope made discoveries that threatened to upset all theories previously held, so Christendom opposed him. One bishop refused to look through his telescope and see what Galileo had seen. He was will-fully blind & did not want to see the light.

There is the **blindness of belief**. The captain of the Titanic refused to believe the ship was in trouble till water was ankle deep in the mail room. Only then was it apparent the multi-layered hull had been pierced and the unsinkable ship was going to sink. Ships that could have arrived before the great ocean liner went down weren't summoned until it was too late. This is much like a Trump supporter that my sister has related to, who simply believes everything Trump proclaims. This is not wise. The Creator gave us the capacity to discern.

There is the **blindness of fear**. The sympathetic and inquisitive old lady at the seashore was thrilled by an old

sailor's narrative of how he was washed overboard during a gale and was rescued after having sunk for the third time. "And, of course," she commented brightly, "after you sank the third time, your whole past life passed before your eyes."

"I presume it did," the sailor agreed. "But being as I had my eyes shut, I missed it."

We have this **conundrum about being blind**. The famous agnostic Thomas Huxley was once lovingly confronted by a very sincere Christian. This believer stressed to Huxley that he was not in any way impugning Huxley's sincerity. Nevertheless, might it not be possible that mentally the great scientist was color blind? That is, some people cannot see traces of green where other people cannot help but see it.

Could it be that this was Huxley's problem; that he was simply blind to truth that was quite evident to others? Huxley, being a man of integrity admitted that this was possible, and added that if it were, he himself, of course, could not know or recognize it.

There is the **blindness of expectations**. In *The Invisible Gorilla*, Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris conducted an experiment at Harvard University that became infamous in psychology circles. Their book *The Invisible Gorilla* popularized it. You may be one of the millions of viewers who made their Selective Attention Test one of YouTube's most-watched videos. The researchers filmed students passing basket-balls as they moved in a circular fashion.

During the short film, a woman dressed in a gorilla suit walks into the frame, beats her chest, and walks out of the frame. The sequence takes 9 seconds in the minute-long video. Viewers are given specific instructions: "Count the number of passes by players wearing white shirts."

Of course, the researchers were not interested in their pass-counting ability. They wanted to see if the viewers would notice something they weren't looking for, something as obvious as a gorilla. Amazingly, half of the test group did not. How is this possible? How do you miss the gorilla in the room? **Seeing is tied to expectations.**

Our story about Jesus and the blind man, with his friends, parents and religious leaders, is one of the most fascinating events in the Bible. It makes us think about what we see, hear and believe – and the dynamics of how that occurs. Sometimes we just can't see. Other times we just are not geared up to notice or see. And at times, we see, but just don't buy in to what is in front of us. There are many barriers to being able to see - unable to take in a new concept, mental barriers, biases, and so on.

This event starts with the **disciple's bias**. The man was blind – so someone sinned? It's tied in to the phenomena of blaming the victim. The disciples ask a question that reflects a narrow theology of God's justice. The assumption is that if people suffer, then they must have done something bad to deserve it. In the case of a man born blind, it had to be something done in the womb or something done by the parents or even the man himself.

As so often happened – Jesus' response is totally unexpected. "He is blind so that the deeds of God may be put on display. I am the light of the world." This sets up this fascinating story of blindness and faith. Jesus, as is his pattern all through the gospels, answers unexpectedly, and in the process, gives us the key to understanding the rest of the passage:

The man's blindness gave Jesus the opportunity to demonstrate the power of God. When we are willing to trust God instead of dwelling on our losses, God will use our tribulations and trials to bless us and use us as a witness of faith to others.

But Jesus' disciples could not see the potential. All they could see was the obvious: A poor beggar, blind from birth, with assumptions of blame and sin. They are the first group in this story who were blind. But way too often, in many ways, so are we.

This set the stage for a **second blind group** – those who had known the blind man for years – the neighbors. They were not sure they could believe their eyes. We have all had a similar experience. We've labeled someone because of their past and can't believe how successful they are today. That wild youth is now a mature and responsible adult! But that cannot be! Maybe this is why school reunions are so popular. To see who failed and who succeeded. And often it's hard to accept.

The friends and neighbors couldn't believe their eyes. They were stuck in the past, where the man was blind and knew his place. They could not see the evidence of God's transforming miraculous love. They were blind, and, in many ways, and so often, so are we.

The friends and neighbors sent for help. They called in the experts – the religious authorities – those who are supposed to understand such mysteries. They sent for the Pharisees. But you can guess what's coming. They are also a **blind group**.

They questioned the man, and he told them the same thing he'd told everyone else: "Jesus put mud on my eyes, I washed, and I see." Simple as that. But things are never that simple for religious authorities. They questioned him over and over: What did he do? How did he do it? Nothing he said fit their preconceived notions.

And then it came out: The miracle just so happened to have been performed on the Sabbath. Whoops. You weren't supposed to do any work on the Sabbath. That included healing. It also included kneading, which is what Jesus did to make the paste, the mud. They seized on the technicality that you can't work on the Sabbath so Jesus must be a sinner.

It's interesting how the issue of sin keeps coming up.

How often do we see, or we ourselves, divert attention to something that diminishes an event – even a miracle? How often do we try to find a loop hole, with the intention of blaming or shaming the people involved in something? How often do we pick at a mistake and miss the broader event or issues? How often do we simplify an issue so we can point our fingers? The complexities of justice for Indigenous People is one example as we see in the uproar with blocked pipelines and railroad tracks versus economic and job needs.

So the Pharisees tried to force the blind man to denounce Jesus. They put pressure on him to denounce Jesus. They insulted the former blind man. They said, "Give glory to God. We know that this man Jesus is a sinner." Notice they used religion to try to persuade the formerly blind man. But he would not budge. His testimony was eloquent in its simplicity and directness. He said, "I don't know if he is a sinner. One thing I do know: that though I was blind, now I see." (John 9:25)

The Pharisees were stuck: God's Law was clear. They couldn't see beyond the black and white, right or wrong, rules and regulations of the Torah. They were blind to the fact that God's grace and forgiveness and mercy are unrelenting and unconfined. This did not fit into their preconceived notions. And it made Jesus look good. It was proof he was who he said he was. So they sent for the man's parents.

Who **chose to be blind, fearful and spineless** in front of the religious authorities. When asked about their son, they replied, "We know this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees, we don't know; or who opened his eyes, we don't know. He is of age. Ask him. He will speak for himself." (John 9:19-21)

You'd think the parents would have come to their son's defense a little more and been over come with joy. Instead, they passed the buck.

Why? John says, "His parents said these things because they **feared the Jews**; for the Jews had already agreed that if any man would confess Jesus as Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue." (John 9:22)

To be put out of the synagogue was serious business. It's excommunication! But it's not just being allowed to worship. If you lost your seat in the synagogue, you would no longer belong to the community of people of God. We could say the man's parents were blind by choice. They put on blinders rather than testify to the power and presence of God. They were paralyzed by a real fear of the religious leaders and of the consequences of telling the truth. Instead of standing tall and bearing witness to the power of God, they ducked their heads in the sand. But how much can we really blame them? They were the ones who choose to be blind, and, so often, so are we as fear rises up in us.

In frustration, the Pharisees finally gave up by expelling the once blind man from the synagogue. Notice how blindness can lead to cruelty. And the theme of sin kept coming up.

But the former blind man eloquently and in wonder responded to, witnessed to, the well educated religious leaders: "Isn't it ironic that you, our religious leaders, don't even know where Jesus comes from; yet He gave me sight! We know that God does not listen to sinners, but He does respond and work through those who worship Him and do His will. No one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of any person blind from birth. This man must come from God; otherwise, this miracle would not be possible. Only God can do such things." (30-35)

In turn the Pharisees angrily replied. "You were born under a cloud of sin. How can you, of all people, lecture us?" Even after checking this man's history and healing, they

still stayed blind. Lashed out in meanness.
Refused to see.

Jesus heard what happened to the former blind man, so he deliberately looked him up & asked: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

The man replied, “I want to believe, Lord. Who is He?”

Jesus responded: “You have seen His face with your new eyes, & you are talking to Him now.” The man with sight replied, “Lord, I do believe” and bowed low to worship Jesus.

Then Jesus announced: “I have entered this world to announce a verdict that changes everything. Now those without sight may begin to see, and those who see may become blind.

At this some Pharisees who overheard Jesus asked, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

Maybe, finally, some eyes were beginning to open when Jesus delivered another confrontative punchline: “If you were blind, you would be without sin. But because you claim you can see, your sin is ever present.”

So this event tells us of four groups who are all blind for a variety of reasons. The disciples were stuck on the mundane level, unable to see the big picture. The friends, were stuck in the past, unable to recognize the transforming power of God’s love. Then the majority of the event centers around the religious leaders, the Pharisees, stuck in the Torah, unable to think outside the box. Last we have the parents, stuck in their fear, unable to speak out.

Each represents us in some way. And as so often in the Bible, and in history, the underdog, the weak person, the social undesirable becomes the hero, the model of faith for us.

And I suspect as people at the time shared with each other about this event, with their questions, their wonder, they responded as we do to comics today who bring truth to situations. Often they offer a clearer view of

the news then the news media does. Their humor cuts through the fluff.

And at times they are simply mean to get a laugh

I urge you to read this chapter from John again, out loud, and pretend you are hearing the story for the first time – with all its ironies and twists and turns, and how the blind man is the only one who really sees, and finds faith.

Plus, the Good News is, it isn’t a shame to be blind, to have doubts and fears and questions. In the eyes of faith, blindness is a virtue. Jesus’ only words of condemnation were to those who claimed to see, but don’t really. Who should have seen and proclaimed it. To the rest who are humble, Jesus was patient and forgiving.

For example, Mark says, “But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed & scattered, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36)

What stands in the way of knowing God’s love is not blindness, but self-deception and lack of courage. When you think you are strong ... when you think you are righteous ... when you think you have sufficient faith & understanding to make it on your own ... when you are caught in biases and prejudices... when fear overcomes you... when you value your comfort too much to be open... that’s when you and I are sure to come up short in our Creator’s eyes.

Only as we are willing to humbly fall on our knees & rely on the mercies of God will we ever know the peace of God’s grace & love. We are constantly invited to look, see, stop and listen for the “the salvation of Yahweh, which he will work for you today.” (Ex 14:13-14)

When we are willing to confess our blindness, our lack of understanding and faith, our dependence on the mercies of God, then God will open our eyes and show us the way.

Jesus looks at inner attitudes, not external appearance or social position. The disciples were blind because of church teaching about sin and their own assumptions. The neighbors and friends were blind because they were afraid to be vocal that the man was blind before his healing. The parents avoided being responsible witnesses to the truth. The church leaders are blind to their sins and so easily pass judgment on others. All of their empty words could not save them.

The blind man only had to say, "I believe." Those options are given to us today also. We have to say, "I believe," so Jesus can show us where we are blind. Then the anointed one shines on us and we have eyes to see how grateful we should be for an everlasting powerful, loving Savior.

Ritual of response for this week

Make a gratitude list of the gifts God has given to you by writing them down.

Consider how God would like to call it out even stronger in the days ahead.

Consider what you want God to help you see more clearly, or be healed of some blind spot in believing God *can* use you.

Lent Four Voice Scriptures

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Eternal One (to Samuel): How long will you mourn over Saul? I have rejected him as king over *My people* Israel. Now take your horn, fill it with oil, and depart. I have selected a new king for Me from among the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem.

Narrator: The Lord has yet another mission for Samuel.

Samuel: How can I do that? If Saul hears *I am anointing a new king*, he will kill me!

Eternal One: Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Eternal One." Invite Jesse to that sacrifice, and *when he arrives*, I will show you what to do. You will anoint for Me the one I show to you.

Narrator: Samuel did as the Eternal One had told him, and he went to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came out to him, *unsure of what business he had there*.

Elders (trembling): Do you come in peace?

Samuel: ⁵ Yes, in peace. I have come to sacrifice to the Eternal One. Sanctify yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.

Narrator: And Samuel consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice as well. When they came, he noticed *the eldest son*, Eliab.

Samuel (to himself): Surely this is the one the Eternal One will anoint.

Eternal One (to Samuel): ⁷ Take no notice of his looks or his height. He is not the one, for the Eternal One does not pay attention to what humans value. Humans only care about the external appearance, but the Eternal considers the inner character.

Narrator: ⁸ Jesse called *his son* Abinadab and brought him to Samuel. Samuel looked at him.

Samuel: The Eternal has not chosen him either.

Narrator: ⁹ Then Jesse brought *his son* Shammah in front of *Samuel*.

Samuel: The Eternal has not chosen him either.

Narrator: ¹⁰ Jesse walked seven of his sons in front of Samuel, *and each time*, Samuel refused them because the Eternal One had chosen none of them.

Samuel (to Jesse): ¹¹ Are all your sons here?

Jesse: All but the youngest. He is off keeping the sheep.

Samuel: Send for him, and bring him here. We will not sit down until he arrives.

Narrator: ¹² Jesse sent for the youngest son, *David*, and he came in *front of Samuel*. He was a handsome boy, with a healthy complexion and bright eyes.

Eternal One: Rise and anoint him, because this is the one.

Narrator: ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn filled with *olive* oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the Spirit of the Eternal fell strongly on David and remained from that day on. Samuel then left for Ramah.

Ephesians 5:7-14 The Voice (VOICE)

Narrator: ⁷ So don't be persuaded into their ignorance; and don't cast your lot with them ⁸ because, although you were once the personification of darkness, you are now light in the Lord. So act like children of the

light. ⁹ For the fruit of the light is all that is good, right, and true. ¹⁰ Make it your aim to learn what pleases our Lord. ¹¹ Don't get involved with the fruitless works of darkness; instead, expose them *to the light of God*. ¹² You see, it's a disgrace to speak of their secrets (so don't even talk about what they do when no one is looking). ¹³⁻¹⁴ When the light shines, it exposes *even the dark and shadowy* things and turns them into *pure reflections of light*. This is why they sing,

Awake, you sleeper! Rise from your grave, And the Anointed One will shine on you.

John 9:1-41 The Voice (VOICE)

Narrator: John and many people in his community are Jews. As a son of Abraham, his criticism of certain Jewish leaders is not a criticism of a whole people. He's not stereotyping or making generalizations. "The Jews" he remembers in this passage are a corrupt group of power brokers who conspire against Jesus with the Romans to have Him crucified and who later have John's own followers expelled from the synagogue. Their behavior may be compared to the behavior of those Israelites condemned by Old Testament prophets. Prophets have the duty—Jeremiah said he had "a fire in his bones" (20:9)—to speak for God and condemn hypocrisy and unbelief wherever it is found, especially when it's found close to home. That's what John's doing when recalling this event.

9 While walking along the road, Jesus saw a man who was blind since his birth.

Disciples: ² Teacher, who sinned? *Who is responsible for this man's blindness?* Did he commit sins that merited this punishment? If not his sins, is it the sins of his parents?

Jesus: ³ Neither. His blindness cannot be *explained or* traced to any particular person's sins. He is blind so the deeds of God may be put on display. ⁴ While it is daytime, we must do the works of the One who sent Me. But when the *sun sets and* night falls, this work is impossible. ⁵ Whenever I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.

Narrator: ⁶ After He said these things, He spat on the ground and mixed saliva and dirt to form mud, which He smeared across the blind man's eyes.

Jesus (to the blind man): ⁷ Go, wash yourself in the pool of Siloam.

Narrator: Siloam means "sent," *and its name reminded us that his healing was sent by God.* The man went, washed, and returned to Jesus, his eyes now alive with sight. ⁸ Then neighbors and others who knew him were confused to see a man so closely resembling the blind beggar running about.

Townspeople: Isn't this the man we see *every day* sitting and begging *in the streets*?

Others: ⁹ This is the same man.

Still Others: This cannot be him. But this fellow bears an uncanny resemblance to the blind man.

Formerly Blind Man: I am the same man. *It's me!*

Townspeople: ¹⁰ How have your *lifeless* eyes been opened?

Formerly Blind Man: ¹¹ A man named Jesus *approached me and* made mud from the ground and applied it to my eyes. He then said to me, "Go, wash yourself in the pool of Siloam." I went and washed, and suddenly I could see.

Townspeople: ¹² Where is this man *who healed you*?

Formerly Blind Man: I don't know.

Narrator: ¹³⁻¹⁴ The townspeople brought the formerly blind beggar to appear before the Pharisees *the same day Jesus healed him,* which happened to be on the Sabbath Day. ¹⁵ The Pharisees began questioning him, looking for some explanation for how he could now see.

Formerly Blind Man: He smeared mud on my eyes, and I washed; now I see.

Some Pharisees: ¹⁶ God can't possibly be behind this man because He is breaking the rules of the Sabbath.

Other Pharisees: How can such a lawbreaking scoundrel do something like this?

Narrator: The Pharisees were at odds with one another about Jesus and could not agree *whether His power came from God or the devil.*

Pharisees (to the formerly blind man): ¹⁷ What do you say about this man, about the fact He opened your eyes so you could see?

Formerly Blind Man: *I have no doubt*—this man is a prophet.

Narrator: ¹⁸ Some of the Jews suspected the whole situation was a charade, that this man was never blind. So they summoned the man's parents to testify about his condition.

Pharisees: ¹⁹ Is this man your son? Do you testify that he has been blind from birth? How therefore does he now see?

Parents: ²⁰ We can tell you this much: he is our son, and he was born blind. ²¹ But his new sight is a complete mystery to us! We do not know the man who opened his eyes. Why don't you ask our son? He is old enough to speak for himself.

Narrator: ²² The man's parents were a bit evasive because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. It had been rumored that anyone who spoke of Jesus as the Anointed One would be expelled from the synagogue. ²³ So they deferred the thorny question to their son, ²⁴ and the Pharisees called on him a second time.

Pharisees: Give God the credit. *He's the One who healed you.* All glory belongs to God. We are persuaded this man you speak of is a sinner *who defies God.*

Formerly Blind Man: ²⁵ If this man is a sinner, I don't know. *I am not qualified to say.* I only know one thing: I was blind, and now I see.

Pharisees: ²⁶ What did He do to you? How did He give you sight?

Formerly Blind Man: ²⁷ *Listen,* I've already answered all these questions, and you don't like my answers. Do you really need me to

say it all over again? Are you thinking about joining up with Him and becoming His followers?

Pharisees (berating him): ²⁸ You're one of His followers, but we follow Moses. ²⁹ We have confidence that God spoke to Moses, but this man *you speak of is a mystery;* we don't even know where He comes from.

Formerly Blind Man: ³⁰ Isn't it ironic that you, *our religious leaders,* don't even know where He comes from; yet He gave me sight! ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but He does respond and work through those who worship Him and do His will. ³² No one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of any person blind from birth. ³³ This man must come from God; otherwise, this miracle would not be possible. *Only God can do such things.*

Pharisees: ³⁴ You were born under a cloud of sin. How can you, *of all people,* lecture us?

Narrator: The religious leaders banished him from their presence. ³⁵ Jesus heard what had happened and sought out the man.

Jesus: Do you believe in the Son of Man?

Formerly Blind Man: ³⁶ I want to believe, Lord. Who is He?

Jesus: ³⁷ You have seen His face *with your new eyes,* and you are talking to Him now.

Formerly Blind Man: ³⁸ Lord, I do believe.

Narrator: The man bowed low to worship Jesus.

Jesus: ³⁹ I have entered this world to announce a verdict *that changes everything*. Now those without sight may begin to see, and those who see may become blind.

Some Pharisees (*who overheard Jesus*): ⁴⁰ Surely we are not blind, are we?

Jesus: ⁴¹ If you were blind, you would be without sin. But because you claim you can see, your sin is ever present.

Psalm 23

Narrator: is the best known and most beloved psalm in the collection. Surprisingly, it casts humanity as sheep—stupid, helpless sheep. But the long-lasting appeal of Psalm 23 is a direct result of that casting because the imagery is both soothing and accessible.

When he was a boy, King David was a shepherd watching his father's flocks in the hills around Bethlehem. In those days, too, it was common to refer to kings in the Near East as shepherds; but not all shepherd-kings cared for their sheep. Though David tried to shepherd his people well, he knew the truth: the Eternal is the true Shepherd.

In John 10:11 Jesus makes a bold claim. He declares that He is the good shepherd. Immediately His disciples detected the resonance of Psalm 23 in His words. Those of us who follow Jesus today come to know Him as that gentle but strong shepherd who guides us through life if we will follow Him.

Psalm 23

The Eternal is my shepherd, He cares for me always.

He provides me rest in rich, green fields beside streams of refreshing water.

He soothes my fears;

He makes me whole again,

steering me off worn, hard paths

to roads where truth and righteousness echo His name.

Even in the unending shadows of death's darkness,

I am not overcome by fear.

Because You are with me in those dark moments,

near with Your protection and guidance,

I am comforted.

You spread out a table before me,

Provisions in the midst of attack from my enemies;

You care for all my needs, anointing my head with soothing, fragrant oil,

filling my cup again and again with Your grace.

Certainly Your faithful protection and loving provision will pursue me

where I go, always, everywhere.

I will always be with the Eternal,

in Your house forever.