

# Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

## March 30, 2014 Lent 4A

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.  
"Eyes Wide Open"  
Text—John 9: 1-41

**A dramatic reading in 3 acts of scripture woven with sermon/commentary and song.**

### **PROLOGUE:**

Most weeks, at this point in the Sunday liturgy, the Gospel procession would have lined up during the singing of our sequence hymn and come out among you in the aisle. But not today. Today, instead, there was just some milling around here in the chancel. This was not done just to confuse you. There is a purpose.

You see, every three years, we come to an observance of Lent where each Sunday's Gospel text is exceedingly long. Today, in fact, it is the entire ninth chapter of *John*, all 41 verses. So, I have exercised some artistic license here. Today we will present this reading in three acts—the reading of scripture by multiple voices, interwoven with the sermon. Each act will end with the our singing a single verse of a related hymn.

Please take out the blue inserts in the bulletin, because you have roles to play, too. You can see the places where the congregation takes on the parts of the neighbors and the Pharisees—sometimes women or men only, sometimes this side or that side of the church.

One other thing to go over is the final hymn. In my haste to get a copy Terri, since it is not in our hymnal, I neglected to include the last line. So, we need to have a brief rehearsal of this good old Protestant hymn—the first verse only. It's on the last page of the blue insert.

*Verse 1: Open My Eyes That I May See*

1. O - pen my eyes, that I may see glimps-es of truth thou  
 2. O - pen my ears, that I may hear voic-es of truth thou  
 3. O - pen my mouth, and let me bear glad-ly the warm truth

hast for me; place in my hands the won-der - ful key  
 send - est clear; and while the wave-notes fall on my ear,  
 ev - ery-where; o - pen my heart and let me pre-pare

*Refrain*

that shall un-clasp and set me free.  
 ev - ery-thing false will dis - ap-pear. Si - lent - ly now I  
 love with thy chil - dren thus to share.

wait for thee, read - y, my God, thy will to see.

All right, then. We are ready. All of the characters are present. We have the Narrator, Terri. We have Jesus, read by Marsha. There is the protagonist, the unnamed man born blind, Bill. We have parents, neighbors, and Pharisees. The Gospel lesson today has to do with restoring sight. It begins with a physical miracle, wonderful in its own right. But, like last week's story of the woman at the well, there is more than one level of meaning. This becomes a lesson on vision and

sight in a broader sense— how all of us have obstructed vision and how we can all be blind to what goes on around us whether we are distracted by doubts or rules or unrelated details or whether we are simply unwilling to see.

Let us begin, then, as Jesus and his disciples leave the Temple. They have narrowly escaped being stoned by the religious authorities who accused Jesus of having a demon because of the audacity of his teachings.

## **ACT 1—JOHN 9: 1-12**

Narrator: As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him,

Disciples (Men): Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

Jesus: Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

Narrator: When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him,

Jesus: Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.

Narrator: Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask,

Neighbors (Women): Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?

Narrator: Some were saying,

Neighbors (Women Eagle Side): It is he.

Narrator: Others were saying,

Neighbors (Women Pulpit Side): No, but it is someone like him like him.

Narrator: He kept saying,

Man Born Blind: I am the man.

Narrator: But they kept asking him,

Neighbors (All Women): Then how were your eyes opened?

Man Born Blind: The man called 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.

Narrator: The neighbors said to him,

Neighbors (All Women): Where is he?

Man Born Blind: I do not know.

## *Commentary*

This is but one of a number of healing stories in our Gospels, several of them involving the restoration of sight to one who is blind. In the others, there is dialog between Jesus and the one needing healing. Usually that one cries out to Jesus who asks what is wanted. The healing act varies— it may involve Jesus' touch or may simply be a declaration that the healing has taken place.

But in this story, there is no dialog. The Man Blind from Birth sits among many beggars in the Temple courtyard accustomed to being ignored, not noticed, or even abused. When Jesus and the disciples come upon him, he *is* noticed, and becomes the object of a discussion about sin— an object lesson, if you will. A common belief in those times is that disability is connected with sin, either a person's own sin or the sins of the parents visited upon the children. Jesus denies that either the man or his parents are at fault and takes advantage of the situation to use the blind man as a means of revealing God's work within Jesus. As light of the world.

He takes the common elements of mud and saliva, makes a paste, and applies it to the man's eyes, then instructs him to go to the sacred pool to wash it off.

The first possible witnesses to the miracle were the man's neighbors. But they get caught up in the details, don't they? How did this happen? Who did it? Instead of rejoicing in the man's good fortune. Perhaps they were suspicious about what looked like a magical act. Today, we would surely be looking for scientific and medical answers. The neighbors are uncertain about his identity, too. "We think it's the same man." "Well, maybe it's just someone who looks like him." That's not so surprising, really. How long had it been since they looked at this blind beggar? Really looked at him? The man, himself, had to testify to his healing. "I am the man," he said. Not, "I am Nathan the tailor's son. Don't you remember me?" Just, "I am the man. A man named Jesus put mud on my eyes and now I see."

## *Verse 1: Amazing Grace*

### **ACT 2—JOHN 9: 13-34**

Narrator: They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight.

Man Born Blind: He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.

Narrator: Some of the Pharisees said,

Some Pharisees (Men Eagle Side): This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.

Narrator: But others said,

Pharisees (Men Pulpit Side): How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?

Narrator: And they were divided.

Pharisees (All Men): What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.

Man Born Blind: He is a prophet.

Narrator: The Pharisees did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them,

Pharisees (All Men): Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?

Parents: We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.

Narrator: His parents said this because they were afraid of the leaders; they had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

Parents: He is of age; ask him.

Narrator: So for the second time they called the man who had been blind.

Pharisees (All Men): Give glory to God! We know that this man, Jesus, is a sinner.

Man Born Blind: I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.

Pharisees (All Men): What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?

Man Born Blind: 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?

Narrator: Then they reviled him.

Pharisees (All Men): You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.

Man Born Blind: Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.

Pharisees (All Men): You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?

### *Commentary*

Enter the Pharisees, the religious authorities, perhaps the same ones who nearly stoned Jesus a short time before. Their first focus is not on the man who now is able to see but on the healer—denouncing him because of his lack of attention to the Sabbath laws. Their logic is simple: a man of God would not break the Law; therefore, this one, this “healer” must be a sinner. But the Man Blind from Birth again bears witness. This time not only to the healing but to Jesus— not a sinner, but a prophet.

The religious authorities switch gears. They question whether he had really been blind at all and go after his parents. They identify their son and verify that he was born blind. But that is all they say. They are afraid, for if they appear to be supporting this sinner, they may be thrown out of the Temple.

So back the Pharisees go to The Man Blind from Birth. He is rightly annoyed at being asked yet again to tell his story. He challenges them— “Why are you asking me this again? Maybe you want to become his disciples, too.” That doesn’t endear him to them, and still they can’t see what is right before their eyes. They drive him out when he testifies even more strongly to his healer as a man of God.

### **ACT 3—JOHN 9: 35-41**

Narrator: And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said

Jesus: Do you believe in the Son of Man?

Man Born Blind: And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.

Jesus: You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.

Man Born Blind: Lord, I believe.

Narrator: And he worshiped him.

Jesus: I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.

Narrator: Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him,

Some Pharisees (Men Eagle Side): Surely we are not blind, are we?

Jesus: If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

### *Commentary*

Jesus, though, does not drive this man out. Nor does he drive out anyone who is willing to believe that God is revealed through him. He turns the tables on sin—disability is not punishment for sin nor is Jesus a sinner for healing on the Sabbath. Instead, it is the religious authorities who are the sinners. They have been given the opportunity to see and understand, yet they are blind to the truth of God's presence and acting through Jesus.

There is a real difference in this story from that of the Samaritans last week. We remember that the Samaritans were willing to believe even the outcast woman who brought the good news to them. They were willing to go to see for themselves—and then, they, too became believers. But here, the neighbors and the religious authorities remain stuck in suspicion, disbelief, and confusion, denying the healer, the healing, and the one healed.

Only the one healed becomes a believer. Each time he tells his story, he understands more fully. He grows in his faith. The first time, he says it was "a man calls Jesus" who healed him. The next time he calls him "prophet." The third is "a man from God." Then he finally confesses Jesus as "Lord," the Messiah.

Where are we? Are we with the neighbors in their suspicion and confusion? Or with the parents in their fear? Or like the Pharisees, are we focused on the right ways to do things, thus missing the miracle? Or are we like the healed man, once blind but now able to see? Do we tell our stories again and again, growing in our understanding and faith as we do so? When we see something anew, are we willing to set aside the old ways of seeing? Can we move on with our eyes wide open? Willing to encounter and recognize the presence of Christ in our midst?

### ***Verse 1: Open My Eyes That I May See***

Amen.