

Psalm 130  
John 9:1-41

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

March 9, 2008  
Fifth Sunday of Lent

## “All I Know Is . . .”

The blind man answered, “I do not know if he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” *John 9:25*

Does your faith ever seem stuck in neutral? The healing of the man born blind helps us see that faith is a journey.

Nothing is ever quite what it seems in John's Gospel. Knowing and seeing, in particular do not mean what we commonly give them to mean. Our story of the man born blind in John 9, is a perfect example. The one who progressively really comes to “see” Jesus is the once blind man. Meanwhile, religious leaders, who should see Jesus for who he is, the Son of God, spiral into blindness.” Spiritual “seeing” has nothing to do with ocular vision in John but faith that leads to ever deeper *knowing*, not ‘knowledge’ but *Aaahhh...!* We see this faith journey growing in the miracle/parable story (all miracles in John are also deep parables), as a journey of understanding of the once blind man. Look at how he progressively refers to Jesus.

At first the blind man does not ask for anything, he just sits there with his beggar's bowl. Neither does Jesus ask him anything. In pure silence he simply makes clay from spittle and dirt to cover the man's eyes, then tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Which he does. There's no recorded conversation beyond that; just silence—the place where faith is usually formed. After his blindness is cured from washing in the pool, he refers to Jesus simply as “The man called Jesus.” Later, speaking to the Pharisees, and realizing Jesus is more just a man, he speaks of him as “a prophet”—one who speaks and acts for God. Later, he takes a step further, seeing what the still blind Pharisees cannot grasp, “If this man were not from God,” he says, “he could do nothing.” Finally, when Jesus reveals who he is, the man believes. “Lord.” he says, “I believe!” and he falls at Jesus' feet and worships him.

No matter how far along we are in our faith journey, these are the contours of our journey, too. Always behind each new step in faith, lies the heart's same response, the same voiced experience which each has to discover personally. The same experience that cannot be packaged or held in the hand: “All I know is, once I was blind, but now I see.” It's like trying to convince your children of something they've yet to experience. They have to experience it for themselves.

I grew up in the church and heard a lot about Jesus, but for years I had no more contact with experience of God than the feeling of my knees on the kneeling cushion in our Anglican village church. God was someone to greet on the way in to church then park at the narthex door with the little burgundy hymnbook they handed me each Sunday. For ten years from age sixteen, when I joined the Royal Air Force in 1963, until I was twenty-five, I left God on the wardrobe shelf in my parent's house, with all the other bric-a-brac of youth. If you had asked me what I thought about Jesus back then, I'd probably have said he was a man, like others, but a good man—much as the man born blind said.

Some of you have heard me speak in times past of a deeply personal moment of encounter that I had with God back in the winter of 1972. I was a Cruise Officer at the time, at home on medical leave from the QE2, waiting to go into Greenwich Naval Hospital in London to have my tonsils removed. It was one-o'clock in the morning, with all the earth about me lost in sleep, and I was sitting in my dad's old wing chair, reading the last paragraph in the last chapter of a book of sermons by Peter Marshall. The book was called, *Mr. Jones Meets the Master*, and Jane, whom I had met on the cruise before flying home, had given it to me. It was a sermon called “The Touch of Faith,” about the woman who had been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years, and could find no healing. In that culture it made her a social pariah, as one unclean. She believes that if she touches the

hem of Jesus garment, a healing power would flow from him. At the end of the sermon, Peter Marshall encourages the hearer to reach out for that same power, to make that same contact with the transforming presence of Almighty God, as the woman had done.

I remember laying the book in my lap and thinking about it briefly. There wasn't anything pressing in my life that needed healing (beyond my tonsils), though I did have a desire for that soft vibrancy of faith that I had seen in Jane. So this rather cerebral, quietly British young man bowed his head in an unaccustomed moment of private prayer, and said inwardly, honestly, "Sure, I'd like that, God; that would be really neat." It sounds almost flippant now, but I wasn't being flip. I was sincere but without craving, yet suddenly aware that here was an invitation that I had never been extended before. And with barely a hesitation a voice spoke to me with exquisite clarity. It wasn't the sort of muted voice like the voice of conscience or inward soliloquy that we all are familiar with. It was a voice with quiet yet commanding authority, the way a policeman might speak who had just pulled you over for some mysterious infraction, and stands, oozing authority just above your left shoulder. It was not the voice of an old or a young man. It was a voice without noticeable accent, firm, precise, slightly terrifying yet full of benevolence. I know the tension between those must sound incongruous, but it's true. The one who spoke didn't demand or insist, but asked me a question to which I was called to respond in the conduct of my life. That moment absolutely changed my life. It was radical and transforming. It changed the way I thought and encountered the world and its people. Ever since I have known that God is completely real and present. I had touched the hem of God's robe, I had heard God's voice. I couldn't explain the experience. There wasn't any evidence to box up. But if you had asked me back then, I would likely have said, "All I know is, once I was blind, but now I see."

In the days and weeks that followed, I was cloaked in a blanket of abiding grace, the way you feel alive and clean and freshly purposed after a hot shower or a sauna. Eventually I bought a green bound copy of the *Living Bible* from a bookstore in Southampton, and I read four chapters a day until I read it completely through in nine months. I started attending worship in a small downtown Baptist church when I was home; I read devotional literature everyday. One in particular I remember was Ellen S. White's *Dayspring*, which totally captivated me. As I write, and go back to that time-worn book on my devotional shelf, I open it randomly, and this is the first thing I read: "Faith endures even when facts contradict. Faith is the inner knowledge of a reality that does not appear outwardly but is received by divine assurance." The whole book, a paragraph for each day, is like that. I probably read this somewhere, early one morning, in the middle of the Atlantic in 1972. I talked to God a lot in prayer.

Over a period of about three years, as I think about it now, while that vivid afterglow of presence lingered, it receded ever so slowly, the way an unthinking child must feel as it's weaned from its mother's breast. After my soul's first embrace of God there seeped out a gradual loss of intimacy, like an infant taking the first faltering steps into the heady realm of independence. Ironically, it was the church that *helped* lead me aside from that real presence, because I found so very few in the church who shared an experience of God. Then came the intellectual explorations of faith in college (which I began shortly after our marriage in 1973). And so began a new searching after God, like one who had let go of a parent's hand in a crowded place, not fearfully, but trusting to find the parent again and in the meantime taking in everything one could. I was not frantic to restore that sense of intimacy, though I did very much want to keep close through all the meandering trails that faith sometimes takes. I wanted to be reunited, to walk beside, but not be carried by.

College, and especially seminary, are tough on tender faith. But that's as is should be. Pastors need to pass through their own wilderness experiences if they are to be in touch with their people's journeys, if they are to be tempered in the harsh places where faith ebbs and flows. There were times when faith lost its horizon for a while, as though the tide of God's presence receded so far that the gray of the ocean and the gray sky merged into one. There were times when I pleaded with God for a second intimate encounter. Oh, I have had many moments that were rich with the presence of God:

moments of sublime contact in worship—a Thanksgiving service here eight years ago, a foot washing with the young people on a mission trip to West Virginia five years ago; the birth of our two girls and, after that dark night of the soul, seeing a recovering Carolyn in the dead of night, and holding baby Ellie for the first time. There were startling confirmations of prayer; acts of overflowing grace in response to some family or personal need; times of clarity of purpose, as when we came here over sixteen years ago; and for me, profoundly, times when I felt that I encountered the mind and the presence of God through the study of Scripture, as new insights

caused me to catch my breath in wonder. Many times I pleaded with God that I might touch that intimate presence once again. But never, ever, ever, have I had another encounter like that winter's night in 1972. It's as though God was saying, "That was only to get your attention, Victor. It's the journey that counts. It's pressing through the crowd and the conflict of the day, and reaching out in faith." That's the way God appears to want it. Still, if you had asked me years later to tell in intimate terms what my faith experience was like, I would likely have said—"All I know is, once I was blind, but now I see."

On every occasion when my soul lost its compass and I wondered if God really, honestly existed, memory and the indelible stain of experience has taken me back to that moment when I reached out and God spoke to me in a voice so clear and compelling.

Analogies are always fragile and tentative, but do you remember at graduation from high school or college, when the academic dean read your full name as you stood, *finally*, at the front of that interminable line, how the whole world in that moment stood perfectly still. That twenty seconds, thirty-six years ago was, in a sense my moment of truth. That heaven sent sound bite was to me the opening of eyes of one born blind. While I never saw anything, "All I know is, once I was blind . . . but now I see."

Amen.