

## 3/19/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

O God, we thank you for this time and this place where we can gather together to listen, to question, to consider, again, the challenging words and actions of Jesus. We bring our prayers to you as part of our worship – gratefully acknowledging that you walk with us through whatever each day brings.

We pray for those whose health is a concern. For those who may be anticipating procedures or appointments and for those who may have received results that were not what they had been hoping for. We pray for your comfort and companionship, God, for your presence and steady love. We pray also for families and loved ones who are caretaking, helping to discern next steps and doing their best to offer love and support. Give them wisdom, patience and trust.

We pray for the Faith Ex class as they continue to move through their learning and exploring. We ask for your Spirit to guide each one on their journey. Give them open and wise hearts and minds. We thank you, God, for mid-week sessions that have happened this spring and we pray for your continued blessing on those important times of learning and fellowshiping together. Thank you for each person who attends, for the teachers and leaders, for those who prepare, serve and clean up after the meals. Thank you, God, for the ministry that happens during mid-week.

This morning, God, we join the prayers of many who seek justice for the Apache people – and more broadly, for the earth. We acknowledge the injustice done to the Apache and all the indigenous people of this land in the process of colonization. We think specifically of the sacred site of Oak Flat, the most holy worship site for this group of people. For the sake of greed and making money this site would be destroyed. O God, we know you as the Creator of this Earth and all its people. We know that when you created, you declared it “good”. We pray that somehow, by the power of your Spirit, hearts would be softened, eyes would be opened and your justice would be served.

Be with us – and with all who are worshiping you now – as we continue in this service. May your Holy Spirit move among us with gentle power, to give what is needed so that we can be loving reflections of your light. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### PRAYER OF DEDICATION (ADAPTED FROM VT 1014)

O God of light and dark,

You withdraw from our sight so that you may be known by our love.

Help us to surrender our certainty to faith.

Let our offerings express our faith and love.

Amen.

## LEARNING TO SEE – PASTOR CALEB YODER

John 9:1-41

I don't know what it is like to be blind. Like most people I rely greatly on the sense of sight.

Years ago, I once woke up suddenly blind in my left eye, which also had growing pain – the result of a staff infection that had reached my eye from the bloodstream. Most of the vision came back, though I still have a permanent blind spot in that eye.

I remember the sense of panic, when it seemed overnight like the sight I relied on as my connection to the world could suddenly be taken away.

A positive experience also comes to mind:

In high school, when I was on that trip to the Ozarks, our leader led us into an extensive cave system. At a certain spot, we all flipped our lights off. It was pitch black, the most complete darkness I can remember. It was impossible to see my hand just inches away.

We sang a hymn in the dark, the harmonies echoing off the cave walls.

I was still holding my flashlight, so there was no need to fear. Yet such complete darkness felt thick and tangible. It was a humbling experience, realizing how helpless most of us become without light.

In Jesus' day, to be blind was stigmatized and put you at the margins of society.

There was little work that blind people were able to do, so frequently they would have to resort to begging, which was the case with the man in John 9.

Beggars were expendable people who often lived outside the city and entered during the day to beg.

Not only did blindness bring poverty, it was also stigmatized. People rightly believed in God's justice, but that meant that suffering and affliction had to be explained in terms of God's justice.

People assumed an affliction like blindness must be the result of sin. This view was difficult to maintain when someone was born blind.

Some rabbis argued that it was the sin of the parents or grandparents that caused it, citing the verse about God punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third or fourth generation. Later tradition said that it was possible for an unborn child to sin in the womb.

The disciples question gets at these explanations, when they asked, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

You can imagine the sense of shame this man and his family carried. Furthermore, people thought of a person's eyes as emanating light – unless you were blind. A blind person must be full of "darkness," so they were suspicious, regardless of whose sin originally caused blindness.

Jesus took a different view. This suffering was not the result of someone's sin. It was not punishment from God.

Jesus responded with compassion. Jesus made mud with his own spit. (Spit was thought to have healing powers in that culture). Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mixture and told him to wash it off in the pool of Siloam.

The writer mentions that Siloam comes from a Hebrew name similar to "sent," giving us a clue that this man will end up becoming sent as a witness to Jesus. All the events in this story take place in the vicinity of Jerusalem, where Jesus had come during one of the yearly festivals.

The man regained sight, which in would give him a new lease on life. But this whole act messed with people's theology.

First the people of the city who knew him as a beggar were confused. "Was this the same guy who was born blind?" they wondered. The man said he was. He explained how Jesus had given him sight.

In the next scene, the Jewish leaders question the man. They have the problem. This turn of events doesn't fit their theology.

If this man's blindness was the result of God's just punishment, how was it right for Jesus to take that away? Furthermore, Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, and his actions violated their interpretation of Sabbath-keeping.

They want to get to the bottom of all this, all the while viewing everything from the lens of their ideology. Was this man really telling the truth?

They questioned him. Then they questioned his parents. Then they questioned the man again. This man Jesus is a sinner, they say, because he violates the Sabbath.

"But how does he have the power to heal if he is such a sinner?" the man wonders.

While the man's parents deflected questions, their son had the courage to answer honestly about what he has experienced in meeting Jesus.

His willingness to challenge the honor status of the leaders infuriates them: *"You were steeped in sin from birth!"*

All these interrogations are sandwiched by the man's encounters with Jesus.

The first time, Jesus gave him sight with the ointment from his spit. The second time, they have a conversation in which the man gains faith in Jesus and joins the movement.

John's Gospel communicates the truth of the Gospel with vivid images and metaphors like being born again or born from above; flowing, living water; and light.

Darkness often gets a bad rap. At first glance, John 9 seems to reinforce a negative meaning to "darkness" and a positive meaning to "light." After all, Jesus is the "light of the world," not the "dark of the world."

In reality, the passage is more nuanced than that. A man formerly blind gains not only physical sight but also spiritual sight. Those who claim to see don't get it.

Jesus' last statement to the Pharisees at the end is, *"If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."*

The problem is not necessarily about how much you see, but whether you claim to see more than you really do, and whether you are faithful to what you do see.

Jesus challenged the theology of the Pharisees with its gaping blind spots. He challenged their stigmatization of people like the formerly blind man, or the Samaritan woman.

Barbara Brown Taylor in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, argues for greater appreciation for the dark. Rather than having a full-on sunny spirituality, she writes, "I have been given the gift of a lunar spirituality, in which the divine light available to me waxes and wanes with the season."

It's true, the moon is constantly changing in position and shape in the sky. I have often felt the closest to God in the dark, when outside at night, in the relative dark, gazing at the moon, the distant stars, or the vast sky.

We need the contrast between light and dark in order to be able to see. We need the dark in order to appreciate the light, or to be able to see the brilliance of the stars or the Milky Way.

Too much light blinds us. Look directly at the sun and you will damage your eyes.

The dark forces you to pay attention. Pay attention to the light you do have, pay attention to sounds, or pay attention to your body. Sight is not the only way to perceive.

The negative connotation of "dark" has surely played into racism and the stigmatization of dark skin tones. John 9 also raises questions about vision-impairment. Is it "bad" for a person to be blind or vision-impaired? Does such a person need "healing," and what does that look like?

In Jesus' day, folks who were blind were at the social margins and often destitute. The young man was a beggar because he couldn't do other work.

He faced the double stigma of begging as well as being judged as a sinner. Jesus restored this man's place in the community and challenged a theology that views suffering as the result of sin.

While blindness is still stigmatized today, we recognize that this so-called disability is related to living in a world that is built for seeing people. Folks with vision-impairment can be extremely gifted and their other senses are more fine-tuned. There's no reason to say that a person's physical sight needs to be restored in order to be a whole person.

## CONCLUSION

The Gospel is about reversal. Those who think they see are revealed to be blind. Those who do not see come to see and find new life.

The fundamental problem is when we claim to see and have answers that we really don't have.

Faith is not about seeing perfectly or about being bathed in bright sunshine all the time.

Faith is about living with partial seeing.

Faith is surrendering in trust to God in what we don't fully see, and acting in courage according to the light of Christ that we do have.

Again, faith is about being faithful with the sight and perception that God graciously gives us.

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This morning, we would like to invite any of you to participate in a simple ritual of lament and receiving the light of Christ.

We will invite any of you who would like you to come forward and take light from the Christ candle and light one of the votive candles at the two sides of the front.

The light represents the light of Christ that we bring into our experience of brokenness. As you do this, silently name before God whatever is heavy on your heart.

Perhaps it is grief, or a disappointment or loss. As a congregation, we have gone through the challenge of Covid, and still feel the loss and hurt of some members of our church family that worshipped with us a few years ago now no longer here with us.

You may also light a candle thinking of an illness, personal struggle, or fear, perhaps a dark valley you are going through.

It could be harm that you have caused or have experienced. It could be a difficult decision in which you need illumination.

We'll sing together as a congregation during this time. I invite you to come up the center aisle if you like, pick up a candle from one of the baskets by the center table.

Light it with the white Christ candle, and then go to one of the side tables and light one of the little candles, beginning in the back. Leave the candle you used to light it in one of the bowls placed on the nearby pew.

May you be blessed with the light of Christ and know how to share that light.

## BENEDICTION

Go forth and shine, for the Light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord rises upon us.

May the peace of Christ be with you,  
And may the light of Christ illumine your steps