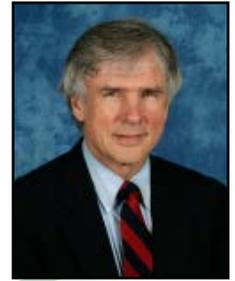




# Hear the Word

from Pastor Timothy T. Weber



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send

## Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 26, 2017

### Poking Holes in the Darkness

John 9:1-41

Not long ago, I was on the verge of killing at least one or more innocent people. Seems strange, but I didn't realize I was such a danger. There were warning signs, now that I think about it, obvious warning signs. But I kept on going, oblivious to reality, because I was determined. I was trained to be determined, caught up in my own little world in which I could justify anything...until, one day, my weapon was taken from me. On that day, I went for an eye exam accompanied by my wife to make sure I wouldn't lie. When I couldn't see anything on the eye chart except the biggest letter, I was told gently and firmly that I could not drive anymore. Essentially I was blind, big cataracts in both eyes. I had been fumbling around the world, driving a weapon called the car, trying to hide my handicap, minimizing my disability, pretending to see when I could not. My pride ruled my mind and heart and behaviors. We can lie to ourselves so easily, can't we, endangering ourselves and others around us? I surrounded myself with the moat of deception, until the day when the doctor put a dagger through my illusion. Thankfully, the miracle of cataract surgery in both eyes awaited. It is quite amazing how we can live in our self-made delusions for such a long time, trapping us in a darkness we don't even recognize. How in the world can God deal with us when we spend so much energy hiding and defending ourselves from any invasion, including God's attempts to get our attention?

Robert Louis Stevenson, the famous Scottish writer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spent his childhood in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was in poor health during much of his childhood. One night his nurse found him in his bedroom, his nose pressed up against the frosty window. "Come here child," she said, "you'll catch your death of cold." But he wouldn't budge. He sat mesmerized, watching a lamplighter slowly working his way through the dark night, lighting each street light along the way. Pointing to him, Robert said, "See, look there, there's a man poking holes in the darkness." Poking holes in the darkness. This is the heart of the Gospel. This is the life of Christ. This is the power of the Spirit. This is worship. This is baptism. This is our mission. Poking holes in the darkness. And it is theme of our gospel today—John 9.

This is a story about a man born blind without the miracle of ophthalmology. But another miracle that will disrupt his world is about to unfold, and this man is completely unprepared, as we often are in the face of a miracle. John begins the story with these words, "As he (Jesus) walked along, he saw a man blind from birth." This unnamed man is not only blind, he is a beggar whose life is very constricted, sitting outside the Temple gates, asking for alms, day after day after day, living off the charity of those visiting the Temple. Our routines can keep us stable, but can also put us to sleep so that we learn not to anticipate anything new. Accepting what is might be sound advice sometimes, but it can also be an anesthesia, putting us to sleep and numbing us from listening to the voice of God

calling us into a new adventure. Sometimes we have to be shocked and disrupted so that we dream new dreams, see new visions, hear new sounds. For this blind man, this was another ordinary day. Although he couldn't see, he was seen, and—as God is inclined to do—his whole life is about to be disrupted.

When things change dramatically for you, when taken by surprise, when upended, in the midst of trying to recoup your safety and security, at least ask yourself what God might be up to in your life. How is God seeing you, approaching you, in the midst of your complete unawareness. God wants to poke holes in your darkness, even small pin pricks, enough to let you know there might be another path, another way, so strange, so unfamiliar, so dangerous..but a path that will make all things new. The man doesn't seek Jesus; Jesus seeks him, uninvited. Listen for the knock on your door. Pray that your heart may see what your eyes and ears and reason do not.

In verse 2, Jesus' disciples join in the drama as they ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Amazing--this was their first response—whose sin caused this blindness. In front of them stood one who had never seen the light of day, one whose life languished in begging, one whose future seemed dark like his eyes, one who begged for mercy...and instead of seeing this person, the disciples wondered who sinned, this man or his parents. They left their hearts on the ground and rushed to their heads wondering about an idea, common in Judaism, that sin and sickness were linked. This idea and many like it have been the subject of countless debates and discussions through the ages. We wonder about it as well, sometimes asking what we did wrong to deserve what happened to us, chained in guilt as we review what we could have done to stop the accident, the crime, the death. Some drown in remorse, regret, over past misdeeds and mistakes, slowly decaying in the scum of guilt over the years. The disciples wondered who caused this blindness. Like us so often, they were trapped in the problem, locked into the past. They obsess about who did it rather than being captivated by what is next. We waste so much time, chewing on our rap sheets instead of energetically embracing what can be done, what is next, what might be. It is so easy to lock out the God of all hope from our little picky argumentative worlds. The blind man was not awaiting a diagnosis about his sin history. We humans easily slap labels on people, distancing others from ourselves, in part so that we are not bothered by the suffering before us. The disciples diagnose and then distance from the flesh of the blind man who stands before them. Jesus has a different bedside manner, bending down with the blind man instead of drifting into the discussion of sin. Jesus is ready to poke a hole in this man's darkness. The light of the present outshines the dingy darkness of the past. Jesus sees what is, not what has been, making this clear as he proclaims that who sinned is not the point; the real point is not what has happened in the past, but what new thing may be born in the present. The surprise of God is about to spring forth as Jesus claims "I am the light of the world."

The minor miracle of sight changes this man's condition, but the major miracle of light changes this man's life. Our conditions might come and go, healing may be present or absent or partial. Sight addresses the condition. But the light of Christ addresses this man's life. There is a minor miracle and a major miracle. He invites both the blind man and essentially the blind disciples into a new world of light, an alternative reality in which there are many reversals—the old leap forth, the unforgiven taste the joy of new life, the poor have a seat at the table, the sick are renewed, new dreams awaken from sleep, what was pronounced dead now rises in new life, and massive holes are poked in the darkness. These reversals are the light of the world, the miracle beyond all miracles.

As Jesus stands before the blind man, only one thing is required—open your heart to what might be. The blind man has no map, no guarantee, no certainty. Only the simple invitation—rise up and follow me. In our times of need we often require so much of God—a roadmap, a plan, a particular outcome, a delivery we determined. In the book of Job, Job's friends come to him with a engineering map of how God works, what God wants, and how to get out of his suffering. Ultimately, Job throws all this away and faces God in the whirlwind full of awe and wonder and mystery. God is truly an insurrectionist, demolishing our hunger for control and summoning us into the grand vistas of faith

of unseen ventures, paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown, and beauty as bright as the sun. For us these moments in our lives can be laced with great disappointment. We grieve what we are losing. What is to come is yet to be. All this is not easy. We rest on the vision of faith, not our sight. This blind man is about to leave his familiar life, everything he has known, in exchange for an uncertain world. God doesn't want our plans. God desires our hearts. And this God is not in the habit of consulting the HR department so that all that is done is politically and politely correct.

Thomas Merton noted that God writes with crooked lines—fasten your seatbelts and trust the ride on the God express. The disruption of this man's world continues in a strange fashion. Jesus spits on the ground, mixes his saliva with the dirt making a pile of mud, spreads the mud on the man's eyes, and then directs him to wash himself at the pool of Siloam. Seems like the antics of a three year old in the sandbox. The dirt, the spit, the mud seem nothing like a miracle in the making. So often it seems we only have dirt and spit to work with, nothing more. The journey of faith is marked with odd, disappointing, unremarkable, and seemingly dead end experiences—enough for any one of us to question the existence of God. This man could have pulled the plug then and there as we are likely to do when our lives don't make sense. The journey of trust frequently tests the depths of our patience and, as Paul writes in Romans, when our sighs are too deep for words, the Spirit will help us take the next step, because we are unable. This blind man stays with it, goes to the pool, washes himself, and his eyes begin to open slowly. Little holes are poked into his darkness. He senses something new is arising.

But our life in Christ, secure as it is, is always being tested. The Pharisees, the religious police of the day, hear the news of new sight, but not with delight. Quite the contrary, they were incensed. They were the official regulators of rules in the Jewish community, dedicated to keeping the people in line with holy principles and they took their job very seriously. Mountains of micro rights and wrongs formed a tight web of obedience that defined the people. Violators were to be judged harshly. You see in verses 13-17, they begin an inquisition because this healing on the Sabbath violated the golden Sabbath law. The former blind man was interrogated—who did it and when did he do it? Behind the questions were accusations of defiance and disrespect—the impudent, insurrectionist Jesus, with no respect for the codes of conduct, defied God's Sabbath law, the Pharisees authority, and declared himself to be of God. Jesus was a sure threat to their airtight system.

Surely we can identify with the Pharisees. We surround ourselves with all kinds of systems of control. We stick to what we know and defend ourselves against those who would intrude on our security, our esteem, and our managed lives. In all of this, right under their nose, the Pharisees are blind to the blind man's suffering, the gift of new sight, and the new sparkle in his eyes. None of this matters because it is all snuffed out by their insistence that cherished and sacred practices have been violated.

Our polished and well defended positions lead us to be blind to the people before us. Doesn't this sound familiar? Jonathan Haidt in his book "The Righteous Mind" writes that these "positions" of ours "bind and blind" us..."binding us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning." We live in this world, where people are expendable and sacrificed on the altar of our right positions. This is not just national news; we know this battle in our own homes and workplaces where our insistence on our positions leaves no room for the other. We prefer command, not curiosity, and will allow our righteousness to sacrifice relationships. So many personal relationships are bleeding before our merciless beliefs and demands, often never healing as years go by. Do you think that an honest political discussion, even in our community of Saint Andrew's, is possible without the risk of ruining relationships that were intact before? Maybe it's possible. But in this world where rightness is fueled by passion, even the power of the Spirit could meet a fierce test. Jonathan Haidt writes that "empathy is the antidote to righteousness." Partly true. Here, under the cross of Christ, we go a big step further—it is the mercy of Christ, not our weak and often ineffective empathy, that melts our pride and enables us to see the other, no matter who, as child of God. Put your tired empathy into the beautiful mercy of God and let the

Spirit hold and guide you. Let the warm heat of the Spirit melt your frozen mind and soften your hardened heart.

Back to the story. The former blind man is in trial up against the authorities. Witnesses are called including the man's parents (see v. 18 and following). The interrogators want to know was this healed one their son, how was he healed, who did it? The parents answer sheepishly and try to get out of the noose by telling the interrogators "Ask him, he is old enough. He will speak for himself." A crafty move. Create distance. Interestingly, the parents don't seem to be happy that their own son blind from birth now sees. Seems like time for a party. But fear can snuff out the best in us. The parents fear that if they endorse this healing of Jesus, they themselves might be banished from the synagogue, demeaned, cast out. If you have ever been cast out of relationships you invested in and cared about, you surely can feel the parents' fear. Fear binds us all from living courageously in the light. Too often we shrink away into our familiar safe silos because venturing forth, standing up and speaking out, embarking on journeys through the unknown darkness—all this seems too much. Our lives shrivel and shrink when fear governs us. Fear also keeps us from opportunities to live the more courageous and daring life God calls us into—testing our gifts and passions instead of hiding them under a bushel, speaking fierce truth when injustice dominates, befriending those who have been cast out, breaking through the walls of resentment with the touch of peace. Not our weakened will, but the gift of God's courage enables us to poke holes in the darkness that encompasses our world.

This past week, 80-year-old Pope Francis visited the country of Rwanda and its President, Paul Kagame. This was a visit of courage for both Pope and President. Francis begged for God's forgiveness for "the sins and failings of the Church and its members" implicated in the 1994 Rwanda genocide massacres that killed around 800,000 people. Priests and parishioners succumbed to hatred and violence, betraying the light of the Lord for darkness and fear. In the encounter of forgiveness, both the one receiving forgiveness and the one extending forgiveness need the spirit of courage to withstand the power of fear, shame, guilt, and resentment.

Understandably, but sadly, the blind man's parents retreated in fear. However, this former blind man became a surprise. His eyes had been changed—minor miracle. But the major miracle was his life springing forth in courage and joy. We see from verses 24-34 how the Pharisees are grilling this man, seeking to trap him with questions and a web of indictments. Fearless and tired of the trapping game of the Pharisees, this man stands up and speaks out against injustice and the demeaning of his own life. He now insists with fervor to the hostile crowd—"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." The clarity of living in the light of Christ leads this former beggar to a life of courage and conviction. All other things shrink before the blessing of new life—"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." Now I see. Faith is simplicity loaded with power gifted by God. For this man a few things now matter most, and most things matter a lot less.

The blind man's story in John 9 is a brief capsule of the journey of faith into which we are called, a journey that evolves us and strengthens us. In this story the man moves from not knowing Jesus (v.1), to calling him by name (v.11), to naming him as a prophet (v.17), to believing he is from God (v. 33), to finally confessing in v. 38, "Lord, I believe" and surrendering his life to Jesus. That's what the word "worship" means here—to surrender. This brief story is the journey of faith across a lifetime, a life of living in the light where more and more it becomes clear that it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us. Our life is meant to be lived in this beauty.

Allow the power of God to poke holes in your darkness again and again and again. Immerse yourself in prayer-filled conversations with God. Sink into the word and the writings of the saints across the centuries. Taste the Eucharist. Feel the water of baptism. Touch each other with the peace of Christ. Allow the bright light of Christ to lift up your spirit, capture your heart, energize your imagination, give wings to your courage. The blind man was not recognized by his neighbors when he returned with sight in his eyes and light in his life. Live as unrecognized people of God, not trapped in the world's darkness, but now free in the light, because your home is elsewhere, deep in the heart of God for all time. Amen.