

What are we seeing in all of this? Sermon on Sunday, March 22, 2020

Based on John 9

This gospel passage tells us the story of a man who was blind from birth. John tends to share fewer healing stories compared to the other gospel writers; but those he does tell he describes in astonishing detail. He frequently calls his miracles "signs." In other words, he suggests that the story is not just about the singular act of healing this particular man's disability; rather, the story contains a message for all of us. Personally, I believe it's not stretching the meaning of this passage to say that in John's book we are all (spiritually) blind from birth and need our eyes opened. I, Andreas, am spiritually blind often enough! Some of us have realized this over time; some of us have been pushed to see it that way by some very hard life lessons; some of us may not quite agree. But this is John's message as I understand it: we are blind from birth to life's deeper realities and our eyes need to be opened!

In these days of hectic resolutions to prevent the spread of the virus that has changed our lives, to find a cure or even just tests, I wonder whether God is trying to open our eyes to realities we did not sufficiently see or acknowledge before. I was heartened this week to notice insightful comments by some of the very people who are often on the forefront of modern life's hectic pace and the constant worship of numbers, commerce and success. Shocked into contemplation, we have begun to seriously question our normal modus operandi, our machine-society with its thirst for consumption and growth. Is this a time for our eyes to be opened, for the global community to make some much needed changes? I believe so and I hope (against the skeptic in me) that lessons will be learned.

The German national soccer coach who usually talks about soccer only, gave a very pensive press conference this week. He was raised a Roman Catholic, and I am not sure what his faith and his beliefs are these days. He made these comments: (translation by your pastor)

"Nothing is like it was before. The world has experienced a collective burnout. The earth seems to stand up to the human species and their actions. As humans we always think that we know everything and can do everything. The speed (of development, aw) that we have gotten used to was unsustainable. Power, greed, profit, records were in the forefront. Environmental disasters such as in Australia and elsewhere have only moved us superficially. Diseases like Ebola somehow petered out. But now we experience something that concerns all of us..."

He goes on to speak about family, respect, charity, being human and things like that. And believe me, he doesn't usually talk about things beyond the tactics of winning a soccer game. But that's what I mean: we are all shocked by the enormous scale of this global crisis, which was unthinkable just a few weeks ago. Without wanting to muddle all the global crises together, I think the pattern that we have witnessed in the last 10, 20 years or so is telling. Almost every other year we set a new record for "hottest year" since the beginning of recording. We have seen devastating wildfires pop up in various places on earth, Australia and California only being the most prominent recent examples. Natural disasters in general are becoming more severe all the time. Only simple minds can say that the fires for example have nothing to do with global

warming. "Yeah, someone left a cigarette burning..." But of course the conditions on the ground are such that any little spark can start an inferno! And we have been partly responsible for creating these conditions. The global human family is responsible. Are our eyes being opened?

I don't mean to rant here, but I seriously hope this coronavirus causes us on an international level to collaborate, not only in defeating this pandemic, but also in creating new ways of living that are sustainable for our planet, for all of us, for our fellow creatures, for life on earth, for our children and grandchildren. And I promise you, I get back to the Bible story now...

How does Jesus heal the blind man? John reveals an interesting methodology. Jesus spits on the ground, mixes saliva and dirt and applies it to the man's eyes. As far as I know it's the only healing in which Jesus uses this highly unusual and not quite aesthetically pleasing method. Then he tells the man to go wash himself in the healing waters of the pool of Siloah. I am still reading this story through the lens of our current crisis. What God is telling me (and this is not expert Bible interpretation, but just how I read and understand it today!), is that we sometimes need mud flung into our eyes before they can be opened. My heart goes out to all those who are suffering, including the many people in various industries who are out of work right now or will be in the upcoming weeks, including those with symptoms and those in intensive care, including those who have lost someone to COVID 19. Only in the bigger picture I want to suggest that maybe Jesus is flinging some mud into the eyes of humanity so that we may see. Are we going to take advantage of this opportunity? Or are we going to shake this off as dirty "mud" when it's all said and done and go about our old, unsustainable and often greedy ways? It would be an opportunity missed.

Jesus' healing methodology in this story from John 9 is not comfortable. It may even be described as humiliating and disgusting. How would you feel if someone spit on the ground, mixed his saliva with dirt and placed it on your eyes or eyelids? Yuck! Does this rabbi really know what he's doing? But the mixture of our own body's saliva and the dirt that grows our crops may be a symbol for our symbiotic relationship with the earth. Again, I am not claiming that this is the standard interpretation of this scripture reading, but as a pastor and preacher I read it through the lens of our time. For centuries we have neglected to see that our relationship with the earth is inter-dependent (with us depending far more than the other way around...). Native Americans knew. But we shut them up. The hippies of the 60's became more aware of it, but we regarded them as a fringe group on the periphery of our culture. And we went back to more production and expansion. We are now paying the price for our blindness.

In these upcoming days, weeks and perhaps months, let us pray that our eyes will be opened, that the eyes of the leaders of our world will be opened, that humanity becomes more aware of its collective sins and the possibility of collective redemption. As we approach Holy Week and Easter (not that far away), let us remind ourselves that death and resurrection, failure and renewal, blindness and seeing are and always have been the poles between which our presence and future are negotiated. And please join me in my prayer that the eyes of the world and world leaders be opened to God, to reality, and to the things we need to do as a human family to coexist peacefully, not just with other people, but with the earth itself. **Amen.**

"Nichts ist mehr, wie es vorher war", sagte Löw. "Die Welt hat ein kollektives Burnout erlebt. Die Erde scheint sich ein bisschen stemmen und zu wehren gegen die Menschen und gegen ihr Tun. Der Mensch denkt immer, dass er alles weiß und alles kann. Das Tempo, das wir in den letzten Jahren vorgegeben haben, war nicht mehr zu toppen. Macht, Gier, Profit, Rekorde standen im Vordergrund. Umweltkatastrophen in Australien oder sonst wo haben uns nur am Rande bewegt. Krankheiten wie Ebola sind irgendwo steckengeblieben."

Aber "jetzt haben wir was erlebt, was die ganze Menschheit betrifft", so Löw weiter. "Jetzt stellen wir auch fest, dass wir auf wichtige Dinge schauen müssen, wir stellen fest, was zählt: Familie, Freunde, Mitmenschen, der Umgang miteinander, der Respekt untereinander. Dass das Dinge sind, auf die wir in erster Linie schauen müssen."

Maybe God is sending us a sign? And please, I don't want you to understand this in black-and-white literal ways! I'm not picturing God Almighty sitting on his throne and deciding that "enough is enough" and "people need to be taught a lesson," and as in the days of Pharaoh he sends collective punishment in the form of a plague... These are pictures and images that are only half-helpful

For many years and indeed decades,

Of course the Pharisees that come along to test not only the accuracy of the miracle but also the propriety of the healer are the poster boys for

1 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.

2 His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

3 “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

4 As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.

5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

6 After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes.

7 “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

8 His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?”

9 Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

10 “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

11 He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

12 “Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said.