

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
5327 W. Washington Blvd.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 2, 2008  
John 9:1-39

*“Twas Blind, But Now I See”*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

The text we consider this morning is one of the striking episodes in the Gospel of St. John. As we look at these words that speak of blindness and sight, of light and darkness, we will become aware of many themes that are most appropriate to our lives as God’s children. Our theme is based on the words of the man born blind. Words which are really a witness on his part and which are also part of a very popular hymn: “Twas Blind But Now I See”—May the Spirit of the living God enable us to apply those words to ourselves as well.

Due to the length of the account, the Gospel lesson for today has only selected verses from the 9th chapter of John. But they relate the story well. We can see in these words the story of the blind man, those who are truly blind, and our part in this miracle in the words and works of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I. The Blind Man

We begin with the blind man himself. Our text relates that Jesus and his disciples came upon this man who was blind from birth. The disciples asked a question that has probably been raised by many. When faced with some serious disability or illness or tragedy, it is always easy to ask, “Whose fault is this? Whose sin caused this?” And that is what the disciples did: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus response to them is already an indication that there is more to this story than meets the eye: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed 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.” And then the Lord literally takes matters into his own hands. The account relates that he made mud from some clay and from his saliva and he put it in the man’s eyes. Now this would be a most uncomfortable thing, to have mud placed in our eyes, but Jesus also tells him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” The man did just as he was told and the text simply states, “So he went and washed and came back seeing.” A miracle was done.

Now this chapter relates that his healing and new-found sight created a sensation among the people who knew him. They could not believe that this man who was blind all his life could now see. He tells all who would listen that Jesus had healed him. He did not know much more than that. His healing also attracted the attention of the religious establishment. The Pharisees wanted to know more. For the healing had taken place on the Sabbath. They want the man to condemn Jesus. He does not do it. In the portion of the chapter which we did not hear read before, we see the man’s answer: “So for the second time they called the man

who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." 25 He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "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?"

The Pharisees expel the man from their presence. But Jesus finds him again. Jesus takes his incipient faith and makes it blossom. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked, "that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have seen him; it is he who is speaking to you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. In this case, sight leads to faith. Though really it is sight in the one who brings faith. As Jesus had promised when first seeing this man, the work of God was displayed in his life.

## II. The Spiritually Blind

Now it is clear from this account in the Gospel that there was more blindness present than meets the eye. Think about that sentence for a moment. There was a spiritual blindness far worse and far greater than the physical blindness of this one man. The Pharisees were exhibiting it with stubborn tenacity. They refused to see. Oh, they could see all right that the man who had been born blind could now see. But they could not see the One who had worked the miracle. They were blinded by their own spiritual darkness. They knew the Law of God, they claimed Moses as their teacher, but they could not believe in Him who was the light of the world. The darkness of their hearts did them in. And so as Jesus said in the closing verse of the Gospel for today: "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."

## III. An Application

And now to each of us here: "Are you blind?" Now you might say, "Of course not!" All right then, "Are you spiritually blind?" And again you will say, "Of course not! We know the light of the world is Jesus." But the question still needs to be addressed because sometimes we act as if we are still blind. We stumble around not acknowledging the love and power of God. And most assuredly the world around us shows the power of darkness and blindness to the truth of him who is the light.

In the Old Testament lesson for today, we hear the words of the Lord speaking to his servant about the blindness of his people: "And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them. They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, "You are our gods." Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see!"

The Epistle lesson for this day is also a remarkable reinforcement of this text we have examined. St. Paul writes very clearly: For at one time you were darkness, but now you are

light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Live in the light. Sometimes we still prefer the darkness.

Why is it so often the case that if Christians are living new lives in Christ Jesus in so many ways in modern day America their lives are indistinguishable from the rest of society? In matters of marriage and divorce, sexual promiscuity, money and values, the statistics show just that. Now maybe you don't fit into one of those particular categories but we can all confess that at times we need with repentant hearts to acknowledge that we might like the darkness more than the light. That is what our Lenten journey should be about. For we find the light at the foot of the cross.

### Conclusion

To understand it more, consider the life of John Newton. Now he lived in another time and place. Born in Great Britain in 1725 he spent his early life in various situations until he was impressed into naval service. Through various misadventures and troubles he finally found himself the captain of a slave ship—transporting slaves from Africa. This is not exactly what we would consider a rewarding line of work. Yet later in life, he became a Christian preacher and on his tombstone from his own hand is recorded these words:

John Newton, Clerk, Once an Infidel and Libertine, A Servant of Slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.

John Newton? Someone blinded by the darkness who came to know the light of Christ. You may not know the name, but you certainly know some of the hymns he wrote. "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds." "Come, My Soul With Every Care." "Glorious Things of You are Spoken." And most certainly you know his most famous and enduring song which we will sing at the close of this service which most eloquently repeats the words of the man born blind:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found  
'Twas blind, but now I see.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.