

HERE IS AN ASTONISHING THING

[written in oral form]

John 9:1-41
Lent 4, Year A

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The story / the event in the John passage is a narrative / a testimony about an encounter with the Divine. It is both a faith statement..... and a disbelief statement.

The story presents a man born blind who is made able to see, thanks to Jesus,and it reveals how he and those around him responded to his new his gift of sight.
The whole episode is a teaching event about God's touch that gives new vision,.... and... the reaction that gift had on others.

To clear the ground / to debunk common erroneous assumptions, Jesus clearly states that the man's blindness was not a consequence of sin.

Even today, many tend to think that beggars, panhandles and the poor deserve their lot in life, for various reasons, including laziness. And, it's common to treat those who are different as less in value than those in the standard culture.

His blindness was not a punishment for sin, just as we should not wonder about men that have hairy heads. Sin is not the reason for their primitive hairy scalp. (Yet, I confess, I still wonder?)

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A blind man simply can not see with his eyes, and that's it. He is still a man in every other way, and maybe more of man than some. ???

In addition, the reverse is true, too. We must not presume that we are favoured just because our limitations are not so obvious.

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With that clarified, Jesus states the reason for the man receiving sight,.. and the miracle was NOT to debase or devalue the natural cadence / laws of life. Jesus didn't bring vision to all blind people. Blindness and such things happen. People get diseases, and some are lethal. This divine touch of sight does NOT alter the natural order in creation.

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The reason for the miracle is presented in verse 3: so that the man... and others would experience God's involvement / God's presence / God's touch. This is important to remember. ~~~~~  
It was a gift of sight,.... and not just visible sight, but rather the opportunity to see God in the moment, through Jesus.

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It was a teachable moment.

Teachable moments are those special occasions when we are open to receive new insight / new awareness.

Usually, emotions/ feelings are a factor.

Emotions can help open the door to discover new insight, and emotions enable us to change.

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Absorbing facts / learning details is merely memorization.

Insight / new awareness comes when we are open and able to comprehend something new.... when we are willing to be changed.

People will say, “I heard that for years, but never understood until now.” The comprehension of the new insight is an eureka.

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The man born blind was **touched** by Jesus. Jesus placed his own saliva-made-mud on the man’s eyes and invited the man to believe by telling him to go and wash the mud off. He responded to the impossible, and he saw – his eyes saw..... and he saw clearly. He saw the divine touch in Jesus – a touch that gave him new awareness – new sight!

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Those who knew him as a blind beggar couldn’t believe what had happened. The Pharisees caught wind of the event, and questioned him, too.

The Pharisees regarded Jesus as a heretic, an iconoclast... and a sinner. Jesus didn’t follow the rules. Jesus didn’t fit into their mould / their expectation of what a prophet / a “divine” person should be like.

The Pharisees accused that man of being a “plant” / of being one of Jesus’ followers and of never have been blind.

So, they checked with the man’s parents, and put them on the hot seat, too.

The parents confirmed the blindness and that he was their son, but they refused to give an opinion on what happened because they were afraid of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees went back to the man who could see, and resumed their inquisition.

They hammered away at him, trying to break him into renouncing his assertion that Jesus’ divine touch made him see.

In frustration the man responded, “Here is an astonishing thing!

You don’t know who he is / where he comes from, YET.... He Opened My Eyes.

In other words, I’ve seen him; I know; I’ve been touched by God through him, and so he must be the Messiah,.... yet you guys the experts don’t see that or believe that --astonishing.

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The Pharisees berated him some more and drove the man away.

Jesus went to the seeing man’s rescue. Jesus confirmed to the man that he was “seeing” the “Son of God.”

The seeing man “used his words”, and said “I believe.”

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Nearby, the Pharisees were listening, and when confronted by Jesus, they refused to see. They remained in the dark.

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It is terribly sad when we miss that precious opportunity to see.

It is terribly sad when refuse to open up to see the divine.

It is terribly sad when we refuse to see / refuse to be open to the impossible from of God’s touch.

It is most unfortunate when we block the opportunity for enlightenment / to avoid perceiving the world in a different light. Unfortunate because I think God is in such illumination.

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Those moments of awareness may arrive like seeing a sunset in a different way – a eureka after years of exposure or by witnessing others patiently model and teach a better way.

Those moments of awareness may be intentionally put before us, such as a prod to get our attention or even a bold confrontation.

The exercise of "God sightings" was a prod for us to look for God in the world around us.

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More often than not God -touching -us -to -see is a surprise.

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The blind man and the Pharisees were confronted.

Regardless, of the method, invitations to see do happen, and I firmly believe they are usually orchestrated by God.

And typically, they come to us in surprising ways.

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Today's text is mostly a testimony, and so I will keep to that genre,... and emphatically declare that on many occasions God has confronted me with the opportunity to see.

For example, I've assisted refugees, the marginalised and impoverished and homeless people for many years. I began helping in the mid 1970s by volunteering at an inner city relief centre. Then a large group of Laotian refugees arrived, and I became very much involved with aiding a number of Laotian families.

Later, while I was at seminary, I volunteered at a homeless shelter, and much of my ministry, while pastoring my first Mennonite church, was with street people and the homeless. I was also part of a group of pastors that were reaching out and empowering illegal immigrants who were brought in from Honduras by a large chicken processing company.

All these people needed help. I wanted to help,... and it made me feel good to help.

In hindsight, I think my attitude was a bit patronizing.

I was the able-one, the educated, the giver, the benefactor for the needy. I was trying to make those poor people's life a little better.

Then there was Debbie. She was homeless, except when she could find a man to give her shelter, at a cost. Two of three her children were already taken from her, and then painfully the government took her third. My church tried many ways to get her out from her terrible plight. We finally had her tested by the government. Her IQ was 3 points above the level to qualify for placement in special care facilities, and therefore her need for our generosity would not end. She was a poor soul, I thought.

Then one day, she came to me and presented me with a gift. [show]

She made this from beads and safety pins, and she wanted me to have it.

Suddenly, like a flash, my eyes were opened. I was not a benefactor, but the recipient. I was not superior to her. I was just another person living on this planet with her. We both were doing the best we could, and helping each other along the way.

I saw things and people differently from that point on, and I keep this in my office as a reminder. Her gift was a touch from God

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Sometimes, the event that opens the soul's eye is more profound.

I once was asked if I believe in miracles.  
My response was, "No, I depend on them."

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If you recall the story I shared before I came here, the one about the wind chimes. Both Leslie and I heard the most beautiful wind chimes at the moment we realized God had answered our prayers. Yet, there were no wind chimes nearby or even in the area. We later searched for them, in vain. Still, for about a minute, we heard them and knew God was smiling upon us.

It truly was an astonishing thing.

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Another story:

Thirty years ago, something happened that was extremely disappointing, even devastating. I was numb and deeply distraught, so I decided to go to a small nearby Lake, and sit on the shore alone...and protest to God.

As I was not-so-gently sharing my feelings of abandonment with God, I noticed a large flock of ducks and geese in the water on the other side.

I like ducks and geese. As you know, I used to have a pet duck.

Suddenly, all of them took flight--calling out and splashing, loudly over the water until they were airborne. I didn't see anything that would have spooked them. It was an impressive sight.

There were at least 30 of them, flying just above the surface of the water, and they were headed right for me.

Within moments, as if tediously rehearsed, they all landed in the water in front of me. The momentum carried them to the bank of the lake, just a couple of meters from me. Without stopping they came right to me. I quickly surmised that they were expecting food. Maybe someone used to feed them from this location? Yet, they gave no indication of that.

Instead of begging for food, they all sat down next to me, one by one they curled up and rested.

I was no longer alone. I was surrounded by dozens of ducks and geese, sitting and resting with me.

Actually, I was surrounded by God.  
It was an astonishing thing.

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When I was 19, I was very blind. I was making bad decisions. I was drifting deeper into the drug culture, and this wasn't just for recreation. At a soul level, God was telling me that I was in a dark place, and heading deeper into the darkness. Life included shipments secretly coming in, people with guns, and day by day, the police were getting closer. And, the drugs were killing me.

I tried and tried to stop/ to change and quit taking drugs, without success. Finally, late one night on a warm May evening. It was 2:00 am. I cried out a prayer of desperation ... and of total surrender, and then sat in silence looking out into the darkness through a open window.

A minute or two later, I could clearly hear,.... from across a small urban green space, someone playing Judy Collins singing Amazing Grace.

My eyes were opened.

I never touched a harmful drug again, except maybe Nyquil.

Even though I lost all my so-called friends, I could see clearly.

I could live again.

It was an astonishing thing. It was an astonishing thing.

God is love. God is gracious. God is ever present.

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Live in that light!

And,..... that is truly an astonishing thing.