

John 9:1-41

As Jesus walked 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 Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes,⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight¹⁹ and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"²⁰ His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.²³ Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. 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?"²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."³⁰ The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.³² Never since the world began has it been

heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴ They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

What story do you live amidst? What story do you tell yourself as true that you understand your life to be amidst, that you *imagine* your life to be amidst?

These aren't facile terms—"story," "imagine." These aren't insubstantial terms, terms for insubstantial things. Stories aren't to be thought in contrast to reality, which of course is the hard and durable, the plain and provable. And the imagination isn't to be thought in contrast to reality, which is of course the commonly known and observed, as if the imagination were a personal, private realm of escape from reality. No, stories are what we make of what's real, to put it all together into something that makes sense, something intelligible by which we can then go about our lives, living in relation to the wider social world. The imagination is the means—the wondrous, human means—for interacting with all that makes up reality, to form relationships with other things of the creation—people, pets, manufactured goods, art and artifact, nature and the wild.

What story do you live amidst? What story do you tell yourself as true that you understand your life to be amidst, that you *imagine* your life to be amidst?

John's gospel has a particular story to tell in this regard. According to the Gospel of John, the creation is not yet complete. God is not yet finished with the creation. According to this Gospel, which begins in the beginning, God has not yet come to the point of completion, that 6th day, not yet come to the time for rest, that 7th day.

Consider John begins his gospel narrative with the same words that begin the book of Genesis, and by extension the whole Bible: "In the beginning..."

According to Genesis, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep."

And maybe you know how it goes from there. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And that was the first day, and God deemed it good. Then there came the second day, and more speech-acts of creation, which resulted in what God deemed good. And then there came a

third day, and fourth, and all good things came of God's speech-acts—the sun, the moon, and the stars; the dry land and the sea; swimming things and swarming things, crawling things and walking; until, eventually on the sixth day: humankind, all of which God deemed very good.

And then, on the seventh day, God rested. For God's work of creation now being complete, God could rest, God could repose—for all was now made perfect, which is another word for complete. What's more, it was all good, very good.

John's gospel begins likewise in the beginning, with the very words, "In the beginning." But here the similarities end. For John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

This is a striking statement because it equates Jesus with the God's speech-acts by which Genesis imagined all things come into being. It inserts at the beginning this second person of the Trinity—that is Father, Son, Holy Spirit—into the unity of God.

It's striking also because it resists the notion that the creation is complete, and it moreover positions Jesus as having come into creation in order to continue the works of creation, in order that all that is yet imperfect about creation might be worked out, all that is imperfect might yet be made in God's image, according to the glory and fullness of God.

This is why we see over and over again in this Gospel Jesus speaking of having come to do the work of the Father. Fourteen times in twenty-one chapters, Jesus is remembered to speak of working the Father's works, of having come to work the Father's work or to do the work of the Father in the world. Fourteen times he's remembered to have understood that the work which the Father began in the beginning is work on-going and is his to do—and, incidentally, is ours to do. The completion, the perfection, the salvation—which is to say wholeness—of this world is indeed the very reason he has come, that he would do it and that we would do it too. "You will do the works that I do," he would later say to his disciples, which is to say also us. "You will do the works that I do, and even greater works than these."

This is why also Jesus is remembered to have worked on the Sabbath, because according to this gospel, we haven't yet reached the Sabbath, we haven't yet arrived in the perfect realm of God which the Sabbath is intended to evoke.

Which was the problem here—that Jesus did work on the Sabbath. That was the problem here, in this encounter with the man born blind.

Well, that was one of the problems here.

This man born blind: there's hardly a story of any encounter in all this Gospel more suggestive of this world-view: a man born blind encounters both Jesus and his disciples, who then ask of Jesus, "Who sinned, his parents or the man himself, that he was born blind?" Speaking of him as if he weren't a person, were merely an object for an object-lesson, the disciples missed what Jesus would later recognize: this person was a *person*, and therefore deserving of health and wholeness, not begun in sin but deserving of wholeness—as deserving as any of us, I mean.

So, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus said. "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." In other words, he was born incomplete into a creation incomplete. Just as we all are, incomplete and in need of perfection, so this man was born incomplete, blind, no one's fault, no one to blame, and not indicative of how it all began but pointing to how it's to end—by which, then, Jesus would reveal God's works and God's working.

He would finish the making of this man not fully made.

A note about blindness here: it shouldn't be thought that blindness is in particular a condition of incompleteness. This story shouldn't be heard to condemn all people who are blind as but partially made. No, this man is emblematic of all of us. We are none of us complete; we are all of us but partial. The blindness in this story is how such incompleteness shows up, but we should understand this man to resemble us all.

And so, indeed, Jesus took clay, that same storied substance of which the first man was made. He took clay, and spat on it, and rubbed it on the man's eyes, similar means that God is said to have used back in the beginning. He worked the works that his Father had begun in the beginning, the same works the Word was engaged in in the beginning, and that the Word-become-flesh in Jesus was sent now to continue to work until completion, until perfection, until indeed he spoke from the cross: "It is finished."

The creation is made complete and perfect in absolute self-giving love, in self-emptying love, the Greek *kenosis*, God pouring Godself out as exemplified in the cross.

Ours isn't a God who creates by overpowering but by self-giving. Ours isn't a God who has much to do with power at all except as it arrives in the appeal of love, sacrificial love—which, incidentally, to see this is truly to see.

But the world will blind us to this, because the world operates so utterly in power-politics that it's hard to believe there could be any other way.

John's Gospel was written for a community comprised mostly of outcasts. The Johannine community: people who'd been cast out of their villages for their going with the Jesus way, cast out

of their communities, their places of worship and learning because they no longer believed in what held those structures together, they no longer believed in the dynamics that generated and regenerated those communities.

The Gospel of John calls such people “Jews,” such communities “synagogues.” But we’re wrong if we hear those terms as they’re meant today. There’s nothing of current Jews or Judaism that’s particularly captive to the ways of the world. There’s nothing of current synagogues that seem especially convinced the world is fully and truly a rightful reflection of God’s image. Really, there’s as much of power-politics and prosperity preaching in the church as there is anywhere else. Sad to say, the church in many of its current forms seems as convinced as anyone that God would never suffer crucifixion, despite what they sometimes say, that God’s blessing rather shows up in good fortune, good looks, abounding worldly wealth, and the like.

But how can it be, that sign of God’s blessing is worldly wealth and power if God’s beloved son suffered the cross? I mean, which is it? Prosperity or suffering?

Remember? Remember that image of Jesus that made the rounds a couple decades back? It was a supposed likeness: what a first century Jewish peasant from Palestine might have looked like.

Turns out, according to this image, it wasn’t much, kind of ordinary. Brown hair, brown eyes, features that weren’t entirely symmetrical.

People freaked out. Some did, anyway. And those who did most seem to have been pious church-going Christians. Apparently, many of our co-religionists want Jesus to have been a hottie in today’s terms.

But this is blindness, whereas true sight is in seeing a suffering God as the only one who could possibly save the world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer is said to have said, “Only a suffering God can help.”

So, a God who would take on the suffering of the world in order for the world to take on the glory of God: this may or may not show up in someone who’s handsome, but that’s really beside the point.

Yet to recognize this is to risk suffering this—for the truth of a suffering God results in God’s faithful being willing likewise to suffer. Truly, to see this is to risk becoming an outcast of the power-structures by which the world does its work. No longer subscribing to the apparent truths of the world, no longer enchanted by the appearances and propositions and politics of the world: this means losing whatever communities are made for these dynamics by these dynamics, which turns out, are a lot of communities, are most communities in our society anyway.

When wealth no longer entices, you lose a whole lot in our society. There goes Wall Street and all of its off shoots.

When beauty no longer enchants, you fall out of exciting orbits. There goes Hollywood and the Hamptons and all that hangs onto such things.

When might no longer seems to make right, you're cast out of the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex—a disillusioning especially poignant on this 20th anniversary of the start of the 2nd Iraq War.

When conforming to power structures—these which always promise glittering prizes though more often dole out exploitation and humiliation: when conforming to these, complying to these, upholding them and perpetuating them, is no longer something you can manage to do, you're kind of on your own.

They say recovering from addiction is a two-fold process. The first phase of it, giving up the substance, is almost easier than the second phase of it, giving up the community that gathers in the spirit of whatever substance.

So much of society seems to run on addictions—whether to substance or to habit or to novelty or to aesthetics or to violence or to raw consumption. To recover from such addictions is possibly to cast yourself out, now utterly alone. You were born blind in world yet blind, but now you see, and you're all alone.

Except for those who also see.

Except for those who are also disenchanting.

Except for those others who are also tried of trying, and usually failing, to keep up.

Except for *us* others, I mean to say.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and he went back to find him. And he did find him—he who was no good to anyone else anymore and so was free to follow, nothing left to lose.

So, now seeing, now suddenly belonging: onward.

Onward. This is story I imagine myself living amidst. This is the story I tell myself as true and that I understand, I *imagine*, my life to be amidst. This one—this one of which there are many from which to choose. There are a lot of stories these days by which to live, a lot of narrative principles by which to organize your life. We seem to have more choices now than at any other time in human history. But maybe that's just presentism asserting itself. Maybe it has always been thus, a plethora of stories to enter into and to live out of—as long as they hold true anyway. And then you're off in search of another.

And don't think for one second that all of the stories that are on offer these days aren't faith-claims, even the ones that assert themselves as based in cold, hard facts, sharp, blunt reality. None of these are claims based on proof, for none of the matters of metaphysics are things we can prove.

That this world is all there is: that's a faith-claim: there's no proof of that.

That this life is all we get, that there is nothing that lies before or beyond what is mere material, the facts of the matter: that's a faith-claim and it's a particularly absurd one: that all there is that which can be proven, which itself cannot be proven.

That this world is fallen, broken, was once perfect or at least "very good," and is now somehow degraded from that perfect state, and will ever more degrade until the end comes and some are saved: that's a faith-claim, and it's moreover the one the church has often preached at least tacitly.

It gets good traction in the world, too, as so much of our politics, its rhetoric and its aesthetics and even sometimes its policies, seems premised on the notion that the best has already been, so our aim should be to get back—to get back to that state of grace, to get back to that garden of Eden, to get back to post-war when America everyone was rich (I mean everyone who counted), to get back to when America was great so to make it great again: I think some of the most destructive, and also delusional, moves in public life are based on the premise that we must get back to some prior time.

For that, I find the Gospel of John's framing of the world especially compelling.

It is not yet finished, except in Christ. We are not yet finished, except in Christ. Ours is not to look backward, but to look ahead, and to move into a future of which we have reason to hope.

Don't get me wrong, there's a lot about the future that is daunting, even scary. But the Gospel narrative insists also that we hope, that we not give up hope, and that we work for our hope, we serve it and even suffer for it, should it come to that.

That's the story I'm living amidst, both as a person and moreover as a pastor. I'm not nearly as interested in what has been as I am interested in what is now and then yearning for what therefore might be, eventually indeed shall be. The Church finds its life in the future, and therefore we need not be afraid.

It is finished. It is made perfect and complete, and ours is simply to walk in this truth, whereby we might make it true now as it is forever.

Thanks be to God.