

Lent 4 (John 9:1-41)

Vv. 1-7: How does it change the way we see each other when we notice, not sin, but how the works of God are revealed in each other?

Vv. 8-12: The first act of courage for the man born blind was to identify himself. When have you admitted you were the one who had not been able to see?

Vv. 13-17: The second act of courage for the man born blind was to look for words to identify Jesus; he called him “a prophet.” When have you made the experiment of stating publicly what you believe Jesus to be?

Vv. 18-23: The third act of courage for the man born blind was to understand and accept that someone else could not speak for him. When have you found yourself coming of age by understanding that you alone are responsible for what you believe and how you act on it?

Vv. 24-34: The fourth act of courage for the man born blind was to hold on to the evident truth of his healing even in the face of open hostility. When have you needed to hold on to the actual changes the Holy Spirit is making in your life in the face of resistance?

Vv. 35-41: The fifth act of courage for the man born blind was to be willing to commit himself fully to what it means to be on Jesus’ side. What do you do to take that step of commitment daily?

The story of the healing of the man born blind, which occupies all of chapter 9 in the Gospel of John, is one of the two triumphant miracles that complete Jesus' public ministry: light is given to the blind, and life is given to the dead. John has already paired these two elements in his Prologue, where he describes the Word of God: "the life was the light of all people." Of course, giving life is a greater achievement than giving sight, so the raising of Lazarus naturally feels like the climax of Jesus' public activity in this Gospel, where there is no Temple confrontation in the last week of Jesus' life. Jesus himself links the miracles by announcing that both have a transcendent, not human, purpose: the revelation (John 9:3) and glorification (John 11:4) of God.

At the same time, the two stories are very different. Each moves in a different direction. The healing of the blind man happens at the opening of the story, and the tension that follows is the consequence of that miracle. But all the tension in the second story anticipates the miracle, and the raising of the dead man happens at the closing of the story.

This is our hint that these stories are about very different things. When the man born blind is healed, we are told about the conversion and courage of an outsider. When Lazarus is raised from the dead, we are told about the conviction and consolation of insiders.

Because the story of the blind man is about the after-effects of miracle and conversion, it has another companion story in this Gospel. This is another unsolicited healing which Jesus has performed earlier. John's pairings are always about the gradual unfolding of salvation in humanity. The second story is the fuller expression of what is incomplete in the first. Remember night-time Nicodemus and noon-time Samaritan Woman: she gets it in a way he does not. The earlier companion story to the healing of the man born blind is the healing of the paralyzed man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-18).

Here also Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath who has not requested it, and the religious authorities surround the healed man with accusations and questions. In the unsettling story of the paralyzed man, this man blames Jesus for causing him to violate the Sabbath (Jesus told him to take up his mat and walk; John 5:8-11). It is significant that he does "not know" who healed him (John 5:13), but once he finds out, he immediately returns to the religious authorities to turn Jesus in (John 5:15); John tells us that this is when the persecution of Jesus began (John 5:16).

The contrast with the man born blind is astonishing. We find him heroically defending Jesus and vigorously holding on to the miracle of his new sight. He knows Jesus is the healer (John 11:11), though he does not know where he is (John 11:12), and only at the end does he perceive the full implications of Jesus' identity (John 11:35-38). He insists that Jesus must be a prophet (John 11:17) and that he must be "from God" (John 11:33). Through all the animosity of the religious authorities, this man holds on to the inescapable fact that he now sees—the truth is that his life has changed and he will not let go of the one physical change that made all the difference (John 11:11, 15, 25, 30-32). Here, perhaps, we have one of the principal messages of this story. It takes courage to hold on to the change in our life. If we are truly to be transformed, that must be expressed at the level of the body: we must be involved in new habits. The anchor for our transformation is the continual affirmation of the different physical truth that is now shifting how we think and feel. The man insists that what he cannot escape and what he

will not let go of is this: “I was blind and now I see.” Because he places that first, he can find his way through the anger and confusion that erupt around him.