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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

John 9:1-7

New Sight

The healing of the blind man is the sixth of seven signs that John includes in his account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Three of the six signs were healing miracles—the sick boy, the paralyzed man, and the blind man. The three accounts are very different in their details.

Jesus heals the sick boy instantaneously and from a distance. John provides no hint of how Jesus brought about the healing. A desperate father begs Jesus to travel with him to see his dying son. Jesus declares to the boy's father that the boy will be okay and sends the man home alone.

In the account of the paralyzed man, John again provides no information about how exactly Jesus brought about the healing. The paralyzed man does not seek Jesus out and does not ask Jesus for anything. Jesus approaches the man, asks him a question, and gets an evasive answer. Then Jesus commands the man to pick up his mat and walk, and he does.

In the account of the blind man, John gives details. Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. Then he gave him some instructions: "Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam." The man remained totally blind until he followed those instructions. The man went and washed and came home seeing.

It's tempting to read about Jesus' healing miracles as if they were primarily about the person being healed, as if each story is like a contract that spells out how to get God to do what we want him to do. But the miracles are more about the healer than the one being healed. They don't spell out how to get healed. Instead they paint pictures that reveal certain aspects of the character of God, the identity of Jesus, and the shape of his kingdom.

Even in the midst of a broken creation, the One through whom and by whom and for whom all things were created has the authority and power to make whole what is broken and to make a way even when it seems like every way leads to a dead end. Jesus has the authority to carve out a new way forward and to breathe into us new life.

There's no anticipating how Jesus might go about doing that or how long it might take. Frequently, faith plays a role, but nothing we do or say compels God to do what we want him to do the way we want him to do it. Sometimes, obedience plays a role, and doing what Jesus says to do is part of the story. Sometimes, healing occurs with a word or a touch. Sometimes, ordinary elements of creation are involved, such as saliva and dirt. All the time, more people are involved and God's purposes are bigger than just the one being healed.

It turns out that in this story, the unnamed blind man is not the only one who cannot see. His blindness is obvious--obvious to himself and obvious to all who encounter him. The blindness of others is not so obvious, but John tells a long story about the blind man that calls attention to the blindness of others.

Jesus and the disciples are walking along. They pass a beggar, a man who was blind from birth. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The blind man does not enter into their world, and they do not enter into his. He is a theological puzzle to ponder, a chance to engage in philosophical conversation, a question mark requiring an explanation. With their question the disciples raise an invisible wall between themselves and the blind man. He is a riddle on display. They are observers from a distance.

The issue that captures their attention is blame. Whose fault is it?

That issue easily captures our attention in lots of situations. Why was this man born blind? Whose fault is it? Why did my spouse get laid off? Whose fault is it? Why will this illness not go away? Whose fault is it? Why does loneliness dog my steps? Whose fault is it? Why does my child reject my advice? Whose fault is it? Why do my parents seem unable or unwilling to love me? Whose fault is it?

We are broken people in a broken world. Very often the question of whose fault it is has no answer. Even when the question can be answered, sometimes answering it provides no resolution, no healing, no end to the grief and pain. When the question of who is at fault has no answer, or when the answer makes little difference, it is time to ask a different question. Not, who is at fault. But, who is at work. Who is at work in the midst of it displaying his grace? Who is at work in the midst of the grief and the pain revealing his presence? Who is at work in the midst of the confusion and the longing offering assurance and encouragement?

This is not a simple cause-and-effect world that we live in. Causes and effects weave and interweave through generations and across continents, whirled this way and that by intentions and accidents, resulting in a tapestry that we cannot unravel. Usually we cannot trace the individual threads, at least not very far. Through it all we can be sure that God is sovereign, and that what seems to us now to be a mess will someday be woven into something meaningful.

Very often the question why has no answer, at least no answer that is accessible to us. When the question why has no answer, it is time to ask a different question. Not why. But how. In the middle of this mess, how will Jesus reveal his glory?

"Rabbi, who sinned?"

"This was not the result of sin," said Jesus. "Watch, for God is at work."

Then Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. As soon as Jesus approached the man, he was no longer a riddle on display, he was a human being. As soon as Jesus approached the man, the invisible wall between him and them evaporated. As soon as Jesus approached the man, the disciples could no longer remain at a distance; they were drawn into his world.

When John tells this story, it last for thirty-some verses. The account of the healing of the blind man is only a small part of the story. The healing of the blind man is the event that kicks off a larger story, which includes many other persons who are just as blind, even though their eyes function.

There are the man's neighbors, who have difficulty seeing beyond their own expectations. Is this the same man we have known, the man who has been blind his whole life? It looks like him. But, surely, it cannot be him. For this man sees, and the

man we knew was blind. It's easier to believe that a look-alike appeared out of nowhere than to believe that one who was blind can now see.

There are the local Pharisees, who have difficulty seeing beyond their own careful religiosity. The Pharisees are lay religious scholars, devoted to studying Torah and extending all the teachings of Torah to every aspect of daily life. Because the local Pharisees are known for studying Torah with great care, the man's neighbors bring their questions to them. So focused were the local Bible scholars on whether or not this healing event violated certain interpretations of the command to do no work on the Sabbath that they hardly even noticed that a miracle had happened.

Questions of Torah interpretation aside, questions of the man's true identity lingered. Yes, yes, it looks like the man we have all known for years. But it can't be him. He was blind. End of story. Oh, it is so hard to see beyond one's own expectations and preconceived notions!

The man's parents enter the story. They are the resident experts on this man's identity, but they have can't see beyond their own fears. The neighbors are debating there was a miraculous healing or a case of mistaken identity. The local religious experts are arguing fine points of Bible interpretation. The parents just want to stay clear of debate. They don't want to take sides. They don't want to offend. They don't want to end up on the wrong side of authority. So they bow out. They are so caught up in their own fears that they can't even celebrate their own son's miraculous healing.

The healing of the blind man is an invitation to all of us whose vision is clouded and who can't see rightly...whether our eyes function or not. Instead of seeing with eyes of compassion, we see with eyes of judgment. Instead of vision colored by gratitude and praise, we have vision blurred by skepticism. Anxiety makes us near-sighted. God places before us a breath-taking vista of victory over temptation and all we see is the hurdle that is blocking our next step. God places before us a mind-blowing journey of sharing God's life-saving grace with others and all we see is the unattractiveness of the scars they bear. God brings us to the cross so that we might see the expanding galaxy of love and grace that shine behind it, but all we see are the blood stains around the nails. God brings us to the empty tomb so that we might see the promise of life in Christ, but we are transfixed by the heavy stone.

Jesus builds us up, and teaches us to dance, and removes the scales from our eyes. But here's the thing. Jesus doesn't do these things for our sake alone. Jesus does these things to reveal his glory. Jesus doesn't do amazing things in our lives so that we can get what we want when we want it. Jesus enters into our lives to heal and set free and transform so that the work of God might be displayed in us...and so that we might join in the work that God is displaying in others.

There's something about approaching rather than stepping back, stooping down rather than looking away, touching rather than observing, getting involved rather than hiding behind philosophical conversation. When we approach rather than step back, stoop down rather than look away, touch with compassion rather than observe with calculation, the Spirit who lives within us goes to work, doing that for which he was sent. And we can go to work, doing that for which we are sent. Then it just might happen that we will begin to see rightly. And it just might happen that Jesus will reveal his glory.

Thanks be to God.