

Laura Robinson
Bethel UCC
March 22, 2020
John 9

An Invitation for New Sight

Well, I don't know about you, but to me, it feels like Lent has been a tad bit disrupted this year. Probably because life, as it happens, has been a tad bit disrupted.

It has me and many of my clergy colleagues considering how best to go about being church in these unusual times.

Facebook Live or Zoom?

Video stream from the sanctuary or your home?

Live musicians or recordings? Have you checked the copyright?

Zoom or google hangouts for the weekly Bible study? How often should you be contacting your people?

What online giving platform are you going to use – cause there's a billion of them.

Lots of questions, even more answers – and I'm just talking about the clergy forums! I don't know about you, it's all a little head-spinning sometimes.

But – maybe – is there something here, an invitation perhaps, to not just try to keep life going as normally as possible?

Could it be that the call here isn't to just weather this storm, but instead to be transformed by this storm?

Life has been overturned. Which is frightening.

And we generally have a whole lot of questions when we're frightened. But sometimes, just occasionally, our frantic questions get in the way of our noticing what's happening right in front of our eyes.

Life suddenly... startlingly... miraculously... is looking a whole lot different.

Which brings us to our text for the day.

John, chapter 9. The healing of the blind man.

So, this text is a little long. And way back when, before life was overturned, I thought I'd have a whole group of people up in the front of the sanctuary to read out these different parts.

But things change. So, I'm going to summarize. (Don't tell the Biblical scholars)

For a little context, Jesus has been making his way through the Gospel of John, doing his public ministry: teaching, healing, turning water into wine, refusing to condemn the woman caught in adultery.

Ya know, cause of that whole – “let he's who without sin shall cast the first stone” thing.

Generally making life a bit uncomfortable for the religious leadership – who tend, then and now, to be the keepers of tradition.

Who tend to not react terribly well – myself included – to life being turned upside down.

So, one day, Jesus is walking down the street, when he comes upon a man who was born blind.

And Jesus' disciples look at him and ask, ““Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?”

Now, side bar – this text is FULL of people asking the wrong questions.

Focusing on the wrong thing – getting distracted trying to assign blame, figure out some cause and effect instead of simply paying attention to how God is showing up right in their midst. The disciples do it, the Pharisees do it, pretty much everyone except the blind man and Jesus do it.

It's kinda like it's human nature or something to get distracted by the unimportant stuff when we're faced with something truly world-altering.

Back to the text...

Jesus reminds his disciples to stop focusing on the wrong questions and instead calls them to focus on what's important: the work of God taking place right in front of them.

And then he heals the blind man.

Not just an abracadabra type healing though. Jesus spits in the dust, makes a clay paste out of dust and his saliva (lovely!), and rubs the paste in the eyes of the blind man, before telling him to go wash at the Pool of Siloam.

Rather than being offended – which I FOR SURE would've been – the man goes. He washes.

And he sees.

A life overturned. Abruptly and forever changed by this encounter with God.

There's an invitation, a call, to a new vision. The man's eyes are opened and he sees.

Of course, the story doesn't end there. Because when the world abruptly changes, people tend to get a little freaked out.

And so it goes with this man's community. The whole town – his relatives too – encounter him able to see and can't believe what has happened.

“Why, isn't this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?”

“It's definitely him!”

“No, no it's not the same man at all. It just looks like him!”

Encountering a life changed, a world overturned, many of us will do all we can to set it back right side up.

Of course, this can't be the man we knew – it only looks like him!

When the man assures them that is in fact him and that he encountered a man named Jesus who rubbed mud on his eyes and told him to wash in Siloam, he finishes relating his encounter by saying “When I washed, I saw.”

Rather than rejoicing at this miracle, the people are aghast. And march this man – their neighbor, their cousin – right over to the Pharisees, to hear what the religious leadership have to say about this unusual turn of events.

And like we do, the Pharisees begin to ask him all sorts of questions.

How did you become able to see?

Where is Jesus? Is this Jesus-guy a God-guy? Surely, he can't be – he healed on the Sabbath, breaking all kinds of God's rules!

But how could a bad man do these kind of miraculous God-revealing things???”

No surprise, as it goes when a bunch of humans get together to puzzle over something, there are disagreements.

“There was a split in their ranks” as the text puts it.

When faced with the unlikely – people have all kinds of opinions, ideas, questions and answers to offer. It's kind of our thing.

And so, as the Pharisees continue to argue about who Jesus is, about the KIND of man Jesus is – they bring the formerly blind man back before them.

“Well. You’re the expert. He opened *your* eyes. What do you say about him?”

He said, “He is a prophet.”

And even after asking him, even after acknowledging his first-hand experience of this miracle – they don’t believe him.

So, they bring his parents forward to question them.

“Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?”

His parents, rightfully or wrongly, choose not to get in sideways with the religious leaders, and hurriedly respond they need to ask the man himself.

After all, they weren’t there! They didn’t see him gain his sight. How are they supposed to explain an experience they didn’t have??

“He’s a grown man, he can speak for himself.”

And so, the faith leaders bring him back again.

“Surely this man is an imposter. “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

And he replied, “I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind . . . I now see.”

I was blind... I now see.

Perhaps you’re not surprised to hear, but John 9 was the inspiration for the hymn *Amazing Grace*.

Written by John Newton – a man who worked in the slave trade. Perhaps many of you know this story – John Newton was on his boat in 1748 when a violent storm overtook him.

Not a particularly religious man, John prayed to God on his boat that day and thus begin his religious journey. Something I only just learned – Newton continued to work in the slave trade for another 6 years or so, before he gave it up altogether.

Even when called to new sight, to a transformed life – jolted by a near death experience – it can take humans a while to wake up and change their ways.

The thing we must remember – is that in those six years – countless lives of kidnapped and enslaved people would have been destroyed and forever changed – because John Newton was slow to become a changed person.

Church – we are in the midst of disruption.

However you're feeling and reacting to this is understandable.

Disruption is disorienting.

But if I know anything about disruption, about disorientation – I know there is an invitation in it.

But we'll only hear it, we'll only understand it, if we allow ourselves to truly experience it.

We must experience the disruption.

We can't let ourselves be distracted.

And there are, oh so many, distractions.

Articles with so, so, so much information – information that's changing every moment.

What feels like a million answers to every single question we might have.

The promise of a \$1,000 check – which by the way will only come to taxpayers, so if you don't make enough to pay taxes, don't expect to see it.

The horrible daily drama of the stock market.

Leadership, unprepared, unwilling, to respond to this crisis with a plan for real change, change that might actually make a difference in the lives of our neighbors.

There IS an invitation in this disruption. But we can't get distracted.

We have to focus in on what matters.

People.

The earth.

All of creation.

That's what matters. And we have an invitation right now to start actually prioritizing those things. To focus in on our priorities with new sight.

As Rev. Traci Blackmon, our UCC General Minister of Justice and Local Church Ministries – told me and many others watching her Facebook livestream yesterday.

We have an invitation and a responsibility to live differently in these times.

To not spend unnecessary money – to not numb ourselves, our anxiety, with consuming.

We are called right now to practice prudence, because we are going to need our resources to care for one another in the weeks that come.

And if we do spend our money, we have a responsibility to spend with our friends and neighbors at our local businesses – not huge corporations.

We need to be prepared to take care of one another. To love one another, to protect one another, and to stand by one another through this.

As Rev. John Boonstra told area clergy this week – we have a responsibility to rethink that trip that's getting postponed in the wake of the virus.

Postponed? Consider canceling. Our world, this planet, will thank you for a few less plane trips.

And many of you reminded me this is a time when we have the responsibility and the privilege to check in with one another.

To ask the serious questions, while still leaving space for laughter, for joy, for lightheartedness.

It's a time to go out of your way to take care of someone else's needs.

To sew face masks. Deliver groceries. Waive the rent for a few months.

This is the time to get our priorities straight.

This is a call for new sight. For opened eyes.

This is not a time for business as usual. This is not a time to fear change. This is not a time for isolation or fearmongering.

This is a time to let love be our guiding force.

This is the time to experience God in our midst.

Because make no mistake. God is here.

Calling us to take time to rest. To heal.

So that we may break out of our destructive routines that harm us, our neighbors, and this beautiful, vulnerable planet.

God is here – offering us a new vision.

God is here – offering us a chance to do things differently.

God is here – in all this disruption.

And that my friends, makes for a good season of Lent.

May WE have the courage to have our eyes opened.

Amen.