

**“The More You See, the More You Don’t See”
John 9:1-41**

So what’s the point of this story? Is it to focus our attention on the age old question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” That question just won’t go away, no matter what wisdom I have shared with you over the years! There are those who always who see either a direct connection between sin and suffering, or who see suffering as somehow heaven-sent so God can teach us whatever lesson we need to learn.

The story of Job in the Old Testament is about a man who suffered every calamity in the book. His so-called friends insisted that he must have done something to deserve all of it. “No, I didn’t,” Job insists. “Yes, you did,” his friends counter. And so the argument goes back and forth. Job was right. The story says he was a righteous man but Job gives a very sobering self-assessment at the end of the story. When Job was granted the personal audience with God he asked for, he said:

“I know, Lord, that you are all-powerful; that you can do everything you want. You ask how I dare question your wisdom when I am so very ignorant I talked about things I did not understand, about marvels too great for me to know. You told me to listen while you spoke and to try to answer your questions. In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. So I am ashamed of all I have said and repent in dust and ashes.”ⁱ

Job’s saving grace is that even though he knew he was right and his friends were wrong, he also recognized that he didn’t know everything. We could pursue this issue in more depth, but John doesn’t linger on this subject. It is dismissed in five verses. **“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”** What did he do to deserve this? “Give it a rest,” was Jesus’ reply. “He did nothing to deserve this. This is all about seeing God at work!”

Then is this simply a healing story? Yes, but not “simply.” The miraculous healing is in only 2 verses. **“[Jesus] spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.”**

The remaining 34 verses are about the controversy people had over Jesus – “Who is this One?” Sadly, controversies leave no room for celebration. A man born blind is able to see for the first time in his life – and there’s absolutely no rejoicing, not even on the part of his parents. They were too afraid of being ostracized and kicked out of the synagogue. That’s just how blind we can be.

Consider this thought by Marcie Hans...

Fueled
by a million
man-made
wings of fire–
the rocket tore a tunnel
through the sky–

and everybody cheered.

Fueled
only by a thought from God-
the seedling
urged its way
through thickness of black-
and as it pierced
the heavy ceiling of the soil-
and launched itself
up into outer space-
no
one
even
clapped.

We think we can see clearly, but not clear enough to behold the real miracles in life. Few of us have 20/20 vision – if we do, it’s only because of hindsight. We often deceive ourselves into thinking that we have 20/20 vision – that our view of the world is crystal clear and that if everyone saw things the way we did, what a wonderful life it would be! Our vision is so poor, however, that we often ignore what is important and mock what should be applauded.

However, most of us need corrective lenses. I’m very nearsighted. If I wasn’t wearing my contact lenses, I wouldn’t be able to see anything clearly unless it was six inches in front of me. That’s why I’ll never forget the quip by Garrison Keillor one evening on Public Radio’s, *Prairie Home Companion*. He, too, wears thick glasses and said he had no regrets for his poor vision. “No regrets at all,” he said. “To have 20/20 vision is to be forever trapped in clarity.”

Thank you for playing a role in today’s story. I’m sorry (just a little bit) to have assigned you the roles of the antagonists, but it’s a good fit for religious people. We often are trapped in clarity. We like to think we know what is right and wrong, what is moral and immoral, who’s in and who’s out, what is ugly and what is beautiful.

That’s especially true in this post 9/11 world. “Religion is the source of most of the world’s problems,” some insist. I certainly don’t believe that because religion has been the source of much that is good and beautiful in the world. To be sure, religious extremism causes much hatred and violence. In a brief article in *Newsweek* at the end of this past year, Lisa Miller reports how more modest voices are reclaiming the debate over faith from the bomb throwers. Her closing thought is worth the price of the magazine. “What’s dangerous about the world today is not belief in God – or secularism or unbelief – but ruthless certainty. If 2008 is the year when we can begin, in private and in public, to concede that we don’t know all the answers, then let us say *amen*.”ⁱⁱ

That’s the danger of being trapped in clarity. Someone once said to Helen Keller, “What a pity you have no sight!” Helen replied, “Yes, but what a pity so many have sight but cannot see.” Jesus warned about this by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “**Your ears are open but you don’t hear a thing. Your eyes are awake but you don’t see a thing. The people are blockheads! They stick their fingers in their ears so they won’t have to listen; They screw their eyes shut so they won’t have to look, so they won’t have to deal with me face-to-face and let me heal them.**”ⁱⁱⁱ

That's a fair description of the neighbors of the man born blind. After he was healed, they didn't recognize him because he was no longer a beggar. Even though the man jumped up and down in front of them saying, "Hey, look, it's me," they couldn't, or wouldn't, recognize him because his eyes were open. They buried themselves in the question, "How could this happen?" When they couldn't solve the puzzle, they took the man to the Pharisees – "they knew everything, didn't they?"

Not really! They camouflaged their ignorance with arrogance: **"This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath."**^{iv} **"We know that this man is a sinner."**^v **"We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."**^{vi}

They couldn't explain the puzzle. They had no clue about Jesus. Why? Jesus always worked outside the box, outside people's frame of reference. You might say he colored outside the lines. His love was broader than the measure of their minds.^{vii} Their minds were already made up. They were trapped in clarity, but their clarity left them blind to reality.

Later on, when Jesus revealed himself to the man, the Pharisees overheard the conversation and asked a question expecting Jesus to agree with them. **"Surely we are not blind, are we?"** Jesus; response was not gentle. *The Message* translates, **"If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you're accountable for every fault and failure."**

Perhaps 20/20 vision isn't all that it's cracked up to be. The life of Claude Monet straddled the 19th and 20th centuries. His art defined French Impressionism. To make a long story short, in later life he developed cataracts which distorted the colors and clarity with which he saw the world. You can see the effect on his paintings by comparing his early art to his later art. He did have surgery on at least one eye in 1923. His vision through the operated eye saw everything as blue. You can imagine his frustration. He wrote, "I see blue, I don't see red anymore, nor yellow ; this bothers me terribly because I know that these colors exist, because I know that there is red, yellow, a special green, a particular purple on my palette ; I don't see them anymore as I used to see them in the past, and however I remember very well how it was like."^{viii}

All this is preface to a poem I heard at a conference I attended last year. It has haunted me ever since, mostly because I know I don't have 20/20 vision – physically, mentally or spiritually. In Lisel Mueller's poem, Monet is imagined as resisting the idea that his vision must be treated medically. If not exactly embracing impaired vision, she sees Monet as exploring it for what it new possibilities it may offer.

Doctor, you say there are no haloes around the streetlights in Paris and what I see is an aberration caused by old age, an affliction. I tell you it has taken me all my life to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels, to soften and blur and finally banish the edges you regret I don't see, to learn that the line I called the horizon does not exist and sky and water, so long apart, are the same state of being.

...now you want to restore my youthful errors: fixed notions of top and bottom...

What can I say to convince you the Houses of Parliament dissolve night after night to become the fluid dream of the Thames? I will not return to a universe of objects that don't know each other, as if islands were not the lost children of one great continent. The world is flux, and light becomes what it touches, becomes water, lilies on water, above and below water, becomes lilac and mauve and yellow and white and cerulean lamps, small fists passing sunlight so quickly to one another that it would take long, streaming hair inside my brush to catch it...

...Doctor, if only you could see how heaven pulls earth into its arms and how infinitely the heart expands to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

When you have less than 20/20 vision and your world is very blurred, you are forced to live with mystery. Instead of certainty, you must learn to live with ambiguity. It's in the mystery and the ambiguity that more room is left for God. Who's to say that gas lights really don't have halos, or that they are in fact angels? Maybe you would "see" them as angels if you were walking down a dark street by yourself.

The neighbors of the man born blind and the Pharisees did not have much room in their lives for God because they thought they knew what God was all about and how God worked. In their certainty, they were blind to the light of the world, the light which "becomes what it touches."

There's a line from the Talmud (a commentary on the scriptures by the rabbis), that reads, "We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are." One day, a man who was blind from birth was touched by the Light and he, himself, became a light and he touched others with his light and they, in turn, became light to others – all with a simple testimony: "I may not know all the answers, but **"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."**

Endnotes

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- i. Job 42:2-6 *Good News Bible*
 - ii. December 31, 2007 - January 7, 2008
 - iii. Matthew 13:14-15, *The Message*
 - iv. John 8:16
 - v. John 8:24
 - vi. John 8:29
 - vii. A line from the hymn, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*, by Frederick William Faber, 1854 ([Presbyterian Hymnal](#), #298)
 - viii. <http://www.intermonet.com/colors/>