

Welcome To Life

A sermon on John 9 by Heather Thomsen

(invite kids up for children's sermon)

This week at Vacation Bible School many of you have been on a great adventure with Miss Melinda, Miss Sharon, Miss Amber, your crew leaders, and of course, clumsy Clark Cavern. What sorts of adventures have you had this week? As we're sitting up here on the stage together, what do all these decorations remind us of? Of being in a cave, of course!

A handful of years ago when I was in college, some friends and I went on our own adventure in a cave. It was night time, and we had on climbing harnesses and head lamps. Do these look familiar from your own VBS adventures? We lowered a climbing rope through a crack in the ground that went down into a series of underground caves. I remember attaching the rope to my harness and rappelling down into the cave with my friend John. For some reason the rest our friends, including our leader who knew the way, had gone ahead of us into the caves. John and I tried to follow, but we got turned around in the darkness. We didn't know which way our friends had gone, and as hard as we tried to listen for them, we couldn't hear anything. We also couldn't see very much because it was so dark. Now, I'm sure you figured out already that John and I escaped from the caves. But the thought of being trapped down there is a little scary, isn't it?

Being stuck in darkness is not something people wish for. In fact, a lot of people are afraid of it. Why would anyone *want* to remain trapped in a suffocating, blinding, limiting place like a cave? But I wonder if sometimes we choose to linger in darkness even when we have the opportunity to escape to the light. And that's what our story from John 9 is about today. Before you go back to your seats, pray with me as we prepare to hear God's Word for us today.

We are going to explore together a story from the Gospel of John. If you have a Bible I encourage you to open up to chapter 9. Instead of reading the entire chapter right now, I'll be reading bits and pieces of the text throughout the sermon today. So keep your Bible open and follow along as we hear together this story about darkness and light, belief and doubt, blindness and sight.

John 9:1-16, The Message

As he was walking along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

³⁻⁵ Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light."

⁶⁻⁷ He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man's eyes, and said, "Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "Sent"). The man went and washed—and saw.

⁸ Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, "Why, isn't this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?"

⁹ Others said, "It's him all right!" But others objected, "It's not the same man at all. It just looks like him."

He said, "It's me, the very one."

¹⁰ They said, "How did your eyes get opened?"

¹¹ "A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I did what he said. When I washed, I saw."

¹² "So where is he?" "I don't know."

¹³⁻¹⁵ They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. The Pharisees grilled him again on how he had come to see. He said, "He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see."

¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "Obviously, this man can't be from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath."

Others countered, "How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?" There was a split in their ranks.

This is only the beginning of the chapter, but already the Gospel writer has introduced at least three layers to this narrative. It's about a blind man who receives sight. It also tells about a group of people known as the Pharisees. And a third layer of the story focuses on another man named Jesus. We're going to take a look at each of these stories within the larger story. Let's focus first on the story of the man born blind.

Put yourself into the blind man's position. How would you feel if a stranger suddenly approached you, put his own spit onto your eyes, then told you to get yourself to a pool to wash so that you would be healed. How would you respond? The crazy thing is that when the blind man is told to go to the pool, he actually does it. Maybe the mud was getting crusty and he was just eager to get clean. Who knows. But crazier still is that Jesus' mud and water trick works: the man washes his face, opens his eyes, and for the first time is able to take in colors and textures and shadows and depth in a way that he never imagined.

Before we get further in the story, we need to understand the significance of blindness in the ancient world. The physical defect of blindness, along with being deaf, being a leper or a cripple, or having a flow of blood, were all considered a ritual impurity in the ancient Jewish world. Ritual impurity was a big deal because the standards for inclusion in the community were based on purity vs impurity, clean vs unclean. I'm not talking about being clean like putting on deodorant and taking a shower. And I'm also not talking about inward spiritual purity. In the ancient world, it was important for a community to maintain its purity so that God could dwell in its midst. The categories of pure and clean, in contrast to impure and unclean, directly correlated with the community's ability to be in the presence of God. Contact with blood or corpses or certain kinds of animals or bodily fluids made a person unclean. Contact with disease made a person unclean. And in order to preserve the purity of the community as a place in which God's presence could dwell, a person who was unclean or impure could not participate in the life of the community until he or she became clean and pure. This is what a lot of the Old Testament book of Leviticus is about.

So, since blindness was considered an impurity, the blind man, along with any one else who suffered from physical disease, was considered ritually unclean and was cast out from society. The blind man wasn't allowed to work, to worship, or to interact with others. So blindness in the ancient Jewish world meant something very different than it does for us today. For the blind man, his physical defect entailed not only a lack of vision, but exile from meaningful, social interaction. He was relegated to an isolated existence that was only a shadow of the life he could have within the context of his community. So, when Jesus gives him sight, he bestowed so much more than vision. The blind man, for the first time, would have been able to participate in society as a whole and healthy person. Jesus gave him a get out of jail card, a free pass to a life he wouldn't otherwise have experienced.

With that in mind, let's return to our story. We read already about how the man recounted the basic details of his miraculous healing, and acknowledged that a man named Jesus did the deed. He also gave the details of the spit and the mud and the washing in the pool. Let's return to the text and listen in on the rest of the interviews about the miracle he experienced.

John 9:17-34, The Message

The Pharisees were still divided about who Jesus was. So they came back to the blind man and said, "You're the expert. He opened *your* eyes. What do you say about him?" He said, "He is a prophet."

18-19 The Pharisees didn't believe it, didn't believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, "Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? How is it that he now sees?"

20-23 His parents said, "We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don't know how he came to see—we don't have a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don't you ask him? He's a grown man and can speak for himself." (His parents were talking like this because they were intimidated by the Jewish leaders, who had already decided that anyone who took a stand that this was the Messiah would be kicked out of the meeting place. That's why his parents said, "Ask him. He's a grown man.")

24 They called the man who had been born blind back a second time and told him, "Give credit to God. We know this man Jesus is an impostor."

25 He replied, "I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I once was blind . . . I now see."

26 They said, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

27 "I've told you over and over and you haven't listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?"

28-29 With that they jumped all over him. "You might be a disciple of that man, but we're disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from."

30-33 The man replied, "This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn't come from God, he wouldn't be able to do anything."

34 They said, "You're nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!" Then they threw him out in the street.

The man's story-telling reveals an interesting progression. As he is grilled by the Pharisees time and again, his story becomes less and less focused on his own healing and more and more focused on the identity of the Healer. Yet all along, he doesn't have a clue who Jesus actually is. He only is aware of the way that Jesus' work slowly seeps into his life, bringing wholeness. This makes him bolder in his response to the increasingly hostile Pharisees. First, he describes Jesus as a prophet. Then, in yet another recounting of the miracle, he says nothing about the details of his healing, but offers a poetic defense of Jesus: saying this: "One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see." He finishes by claiming that this miracle-worker Jesus must be from God.

Let's read together the end of the narrative, when the man finally learns Jesus' true identity.

John 9:35-38

Jesus heard that they had thrown out the man who was born blind, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Messiah?"

³⁶ "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

³⁷ Jesus said, "You're looking right at him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

³⁸ Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

Until the very end, the blind man didn't have a clear understanding of Jesus' identity. And yet, he acted with trust and obedience. And his response when Jesus revealed his identity was to believe and to worship, even though he knew that the religious leaders are on a witchhunt for followers of this Messiah. The story of the blind man - the "sinner" who was outcast from society because of lack of sight - reveals increasing insight regarding the identity of Jesus as the one who brings God's life to the world. The man with no vision is the one who rightly sees and responds to Jesus.

But the story of the Pharisees, on the other hand, communicates a regression in their understanding of Jesus. The Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders who believed that their understanding of the law gave them 20/20 vision of all things religious. They become increasingly antagonistic toward the blind man and increasingly sure that Jesus must be a sinner. They ask sarcastic questions, impose their superiority, revile the blind man, and eventually drive him out as a sinner. Though the evidence of Jesus' healing work is right in front of their eyes, they choose not to acknowledge it. They effectually make themselves blind to Jesus' life-giving work. At the end of the chapter, the Gospel writer records this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees:

John 9:39-41, The Message

Jesus said, "I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind."

⁴⁰ Some Pharisees overheard him and said, "Does that mean you're calling us blind?"

⁴¹ Jesus said, "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."

Ironically, the ones who are supposed to have insight about the ways of God are the ones choosing to live in the darkness of disbelief. The ones who are supposed to have knowledge are portrayed as ignorant, like they are trapped in a cave. It is the man with defective eyes who responds to the light and sees what is most important – that Jesus is the way to real life, and Jesus offers him a place in the abundant community of God.

Now that we have considered the stories of the blind man and the Pharisees, we turn to the third layer in our narrative: the story of Jesus. The Gospel of John paints a picture of Jesus as the Son of God who is the Life and the Light of the world. In the poignant beginning of the Gospel, and all throughout its 21 chapters, Jesus is described as the Light of the World and the Life of all people. Light and darkness are important metaphors in John because they contrast the ways of God against the ways of the world. Light illumines and exposes things – it shows us what's true. Here in John, Jesus is the **light** who reveals the path to truth, the way to God.

And Jesus is **life**. If we had to boil the Gospel of John down to one main point, I would argue that it's about how Jesus represents and gives *real life* to those who believe in him. It's the life of God – a life of wholeness and abundance and joy and community. The life we all long to have, if we really are honest about it. Jesus is the way to this truly good life because those who believe in him receive and participate in that life.

But the blind man and the Pharisees don't know this about Jesus. In fact, one of the points this chapter makes is that Jesus is who he is regardless of whether or not the other characters acknowledge it. Whether or not people see or believe, Jesus represents and brings the abundant life of God, because that's who He is.

So we've looked at three characters in this narrative: the blind man, who was given not only restored vision, but an opportunity to participate in abundant life. And we've looked at the Pharisees, the religious leaders who were supposed to have perfect religious vision but who become increasingly blind toward the identity and work of Jesus. And we have Jesus himself, the bringer of Light and Life. So how do we fit into this story? Where do you locate yourself within this narrative? Some of us resonate with the Pharisees. Maybe we have chosen not to believe because what we see and experience of Jesus doesn't mesh with what we've been taught or what we know. Or maybe we know too many Pharisees ourselves, and their hypocrisy and judgment make it hard for us to see through them to who Jesus really is.

I think all of us, if we are honest, can resonate with the blind man. Aren't there areas in all of our lives that function like blindness? In the ancient world, blindness prevented people from participating in life. It represented brokenness, exclusion and isolation. For us today, spiritual blindness surfaces in many ways: loneliness, selfishness, depression, egotism, bitterness. What prevents you from seeing rightly and living fully? What prevents you from participating in God's abundance life? Like the blind man, we are utterly incapable of overcoming our weakness and brokenness.

Do you remember the headlines from 2010 about the 33 Chilean men buried in a collapsed mine? They were trapped underground for 69 days. One of the miners, Mario Sepulveda, recalls his desperate effort to find a way out.

"It was pitch black except for the lamp on my helmet. I kept walking and looking for a way out. I walked for hours. I found a ventilation shaft that had a ladder so I started climbing. The walls were soft and the rocks fell back in my face. I tried to climb without the ladder but the walls crumbled. I could not make it. I could see two big rocks up ahead that were blocking the shaft. That was a moment of utter despair. I came back down and had to tell the other guys there was no way out.'

This is the experience of the blind man. And it's our own experience, too. On our own, there is no way out of the darkness in which we are trapped. On our own, we cannot escape the exile caused by our own spiritual blindness. We cannot restore ourselves to life. But just like the Chilean people, who went to a huge effort to rescue the miners, so too does Jesus rescue us. He can and does heal, he does restore life and brings light into darkness. Because that's who he is. Whether we acknowledge it or not.

Jesus' work of healing isn't always manifested in physical ways. We know all too well that people who are physically ill are not always physically healed. We've all met someone who was blinded in an accident, paralyzed in a car crash, or diagnosed with cancer and has not been physically restored. But Jesus can and does reach into areas of our lives that are vulnerable. Jesus has the power to bring new life to those parts of us that are empty, or are shriveled up, decaying, or even dead. Even if you don't know anything about Jesus, as we see in John 9, Jesus is still at work.

So how will you respond? Will you allow yourself to discover more about Jesus, the bringer of Light and Life? Will you recognize Jesus' power to heal and restore, and will you welcome his saving movement toward you? Like the Chilean miners, will you accept the efforts to liberate you from darkness? If your answer is 'yes,' I suspect the words spoken by the Chilean president to the rescued miners will be true for you, too: As they were pulled from the dark, threatening earth, the president told them: "welcome to life." These are Jesus' words to you, if you are willing to receive them. After all, this and all the stories about Jesus are written so that we might believe, even if we don't understand, and that by believing, we can have real life in Jesus' name. Go to the pool and wash, Jesus is saying. Open your eyes. Welcome to life.