

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Samuel 16: 1B, 6-7,10-13A
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-3A, 3B-4,5,6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 5:8-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the light of the world, says the Lord;
<i>Gospel</i>	John 9:1-41

For the Fourth Sunday of Lent, the Church continues her journey through the life of Christ toward Calvary and the resurrection. And on this Sunday, just like last Sunday during Year A, the Church picks another passage from the Gospel of John. So even though most of Year A is devoted to the Gospel of Matthew, during Lent there are certain Sundays where the Church chooses stories that are only found in the Gospel of John. Just like last week we looked at the story of the woman and the well, and we saw that the Church gave priests and deacons permission to preach that reading about the woman at the well every single year because of its connection with Baptism, the same thing is true for the Fourth Sunday in Lent. Every year, including Year A, a priest or deacon has the option of focusing on the story of the man born blind in John 9. And as you are going to see, the reason for that is because this story is absolutely foundational for our understanding of the Sacrament of Baptism, which is what catechumens will be receiving at the Easter Vigil. So we are going to look at the story very carefully. It's a long reading for today — like many of the readings during Lent — I will walk you through the story first and read it all the way through, and then we will come back and will ask a few key questions to unpack it. As you will see, this is one of my favorite chapters from the Gospel of John because it really is so rich and powerful for the Christian life and for the Season of Lent in particular. So the Gospel reading for today - we are going to start there - is from John 9:1-41. This is the story, it says this:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."¹

Note that emphasis on light and dark, it is going to be important.

As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Silo'am" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, "Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he"; others said, "No, but he is like him."

In other words, that he looks like him.

He said, "I am the man." They said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Silo'am and wash'; so I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. The Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" There was a division among them. So they again said to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight, and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if any one should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age, ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see."

You can start thinking of the human Amazing Grace, that is where that is from.

They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?" And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you." He said, "Lord, I believe"; and he worshiped him.

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.

Alright, end of the Gospel reading. As you can probably tell there's a lot going on in this particular text here. So we want to break it down, ask some key questions and highlight some key themes. So let's just walk through one by one what those are. Number one, the first key theme here is the relationship between sin and suffering, between sin and the blindness of this particular man. You'll notice that when the disciples see this man who was blind from birth, they assume that his blindness is either a result of his own personal sin or of the sin of his parents. So they say "who sinned, this man or his parents?" And Jesus says "neither, neither this man nor his parents, but his blindness in this case is so that the work of God might be manifest in him." So God has a higher purpose in allowing this man to be blind, but it is not the result of his own personal sin. Keep that in mind because we are going to come back to that. It is going to be a very, very important point.

The second aspect of the story that is worth highlighting is the way that Jesus performs the miracle. Notice that there are three key elements to the miracle here. Number one, Jesus performs the miracle in the context of declaring "I am the light of the world." In other words, in the face of this man's blindness, he makes a statement about his own identity as the light of the world. Number two, Jesus doesn't just speak a word like he does in other miracles — like the centurion's servant, "only say the word and my servant shall be healed. In this case, Jesus goes further and he spits on the ground and makes clay out of the dust and the spit, and then uses the the clay to anoint the man's eyes and heal him. Now this is really a rather shocking action on Jesus' part. I mean think about just that act of him spitting on the ground. How much spit would he have to use in order to make clay out of the dust? So clearly this is a deliberate act on Jesus' part. He's using his own spit and the dust for some reason. What's the deeper reason? Didn't Mary teach Jesus any manners here? Not to spit? You know it might seem repugnant at first, but there is something significant going on. And then third, Jesus doesn't just

spit and make clay, he also commands the man to wash with water. To wash in the water of the pool of Siloam that we see elsewhere in the Gospel of John. Okay, so why? What is the reason for these three steps of the miracle?

Well you won't be surprised to realize that it really lies in the Old Testament, it lies in the Jewish roots of Jesus's action here. Because in first century Judaism — this is really interesting — there was a tradition going all the way back — the Dead Sea Scrolls refer to this — that when God made Adam from the dust of the ground he used spittle. That he used spit. Because if you try to make something from dust, you can't do it. You can't mold a statue of dust. You have to have some liquid in order to hold the dirt together. So the Jews had this tradition that when God made Adam, he made him from spit and clay. He made him from his own spit, and the Dead Sea Scrolls actually have a line that said that Adam, or man, was made from "spat saliva, molded clay." So think about that for a second. If in Jewish tradition God makes Adam from spit and dust from the clay, what is Jesus doing here?

Jesus is acting like God acted in the Old Testament. In other words, he is performing an act of a new creation. Just as Adam was given his body from the clay, so Jesus now gives the man born blind sight. He gives him, in a sense, new eyes from the clay and his own spittle. So this is like a divine action for Jesus to spit on the ground and make clay and give this man sight. That's the basic theme of what is going on here. So this is yet another aspect of John's Gospel where Jesus is revealing his divinity. He is not just the Messiah. He is not just the king of Israel. He is the divine son of God. He's I am. He's the God who made the universe and who is now going to remake the universe and redeem it and make it new.

Now, you might think that everybody would see that, they would all love and it would be great. Unfortunately no, the response to Jesus's miracle is interesting here. Some people are confused. First of all they wader "is this the same man?" They doubt that he could actually be the same guy. Maybe he just looks like somebody else. Maybe you have had that happen to you where somebody sees someone who they think looks like you — a doppelganger it is called in German. So some people think " is this the same guy?" Other people just accuse Jesus in response to the miracle. They accept that a miracle has been performed, but their problem is that he is doing it on the Sabbath, and they say "this guy's a sinner

because he is performing healings on the Sabbath." Now note again, the Sabbath day is an echo of creation. So Sabbath is a reminder of the book of Genesis. So we keep going back to the book of Genesis. Not just Genesis 2 with Adam being made from the clay, but Genesis 1 where God makes the world in six days and then rests on the Sabbath. So they say "well this guy, far from being divine, is actually breaking the Sabbath" and so they say that "he's a sinner." And then finally, what it says here — this is very important — it says that "the Jews did not believe." That "Jesus's miracle was met with disbelief" and they even call the parents of the man and tried to get them to bear witness as to whether this was in fact their son or not.

Now I want to give a quick explanation here about the way John's Gospel uses the word "the Jews." So when you read that English you might think that means followers of the law of Moses who are descended from Abraham and who follow the religion of Judaism — like we say today. When we say the word Jews today, that's what we are referring to, practitioners of the Jewish religion. But in John's Gospel that's not what this word means. The literal Greek word is *Ioudaios*, which translated literally its Judeans. And over the course of John's Gospel, he's constantly showing us this tension and conflict between the Judeans in the South and the Galileans in the North. So when John says "the Jews didn't believe," he can't be referring to just a religious category, because the man born blind was a Jew. His parents are Jews. The disciples are Jews. Jesus is a Jew. What he is talking about here is the way Jesus's actions are being received by the Southerners, by the people of Judea, especially the city of Jerusalem, who are going to reject Jesus and reject his Messiahship. So some people were confused, some people accuse, and some of the Judeans, in particular — the people of Jerusalem — meet Jesus's action here with disbelief, with rejection. They don't accept his miracle and they accuse him of breaking the Sabbath.

Now what happens after this, though, is once they call the man born blind to them, we have this whole exchange between them and him over whether Jesus is in fact a sinner. And what the man born blind says is this, "I don't know whether he is a sinner or not, all I know is I was blind but now I see." So he's using the fact of the miracle to testify to the fact that Jesus can't be a sinner because he gave me sight, and that God doesn't listen to the prayers of the sinner and yet God clearly listened to the prayers of this Jesus who healed. Now watch what happens once the man

born blind says, "if this man were not from God he could do nothing." The Pharisees and the leaders there repeat the same mistake of the disciples. They say, "you were born in utter sin. Would you teach us?" In other words, they too assume that because the man had illness and sickness in the form of his blindness, that he had done something wrong. That he had sinned or, as the disciples thought, his parents sinned. And when Jesus finds the blind man after that exchange, something very important happens. He asked him, "do you believe in the Son of Man?" And the blind man says, "well who is he Lord that I might believe in him?" And he says, "you have seen him with your new eyes and it is he who speaks to you." So he says, "Lord I believe!" And he worshiped Him. So, notice what happens here in the story. When the blind man first meets Jesus, there is no indication he knows who He is at all. After he heals him, he calls him a prophet. Then, when he gets into an exchange with the Pharisees and the Judeans he calls Him a man sent from God. So it's like his faith is going up from a prophet to a man sent from God, and now when he encounters Jesus for the second time Jesus says, "do you believe"? He says, "Lord I believe!" And he worshiped Him.

So we see him coming to the fullness of faith in Jesus's identity as the Lord, as divine, as the One who made the heavens and the earth. And once the blind man gives Him that confession of faith, Jesus gives his final pronouncement, "For judgment I came to this world so that those who do not see (like the man born blind) may see, and so that those who do see may become blind." So what's Jesus talking about here? He's teaching us the difference between true sight and true blindness. See, the Pharisees think that true blindness is physical blindness. But what Jesus is revealing here is that true blindness is the inability to see that He has come from God, and that He is in fact the Savior of the world. And natural blindness or physical blindness, as in this case, Jesus is saying isn't real blindness because in this case the blind man sees far more clearly who Jesus is. He's a prophet. He's a man sent from God. And He is in fact the Lord (kyrios), God himself, the divine son of God. So, the whole story here then isn't just a miracle. It's about the difference between spiritual blindness and physical blindness, and although for most of us if we think about being physically blind we might get really afraid like that would be an awful thing if I lost my sight! And what Jesus is saying here is "no, the real line blindness that we should be afraid of, that we

should avoid, is the spiritual blindness that would keep us from seeing who he is and the actions of God in his life and in his ministry and in his miracles.

That's the basic meaning of this miracle. Well what does this have to do with Lent though? And why does the Church choose it for this Fourth Sunday of Lent and allow the homilist to preach it every single year during Lent on the Fourth Sunday? Well it's because there's a deeper meaning going on with this miracle, as is always the case in John's Gospel. If you look at the miracles in the Gospel of John, you will see over and over again that many of them are not just displays of Jesus's power, they are actually actions that point forward to what he's going to accomplish in the sacraments. So many centuries ago Pope St. Leo the Great actually said this, "what was visible in our Savior [what was visible in Jesus' public ministry], has passed over into his mysteries." In other words, into his sacraments. The ancient Christians referred to the sacraments as the mysteries. So in other words, the visible miracle of Jesus healing the man born blind points forward to the invisible miracle of what he's going to accomplish in one of the sacraments. Which sacrament is it? Well all the ancient Church Fathers said that it's the sacrament of Baptism. In ancient Christianity, one of their favorite names for the sacrament of Baptism was the sacrament of illumination, Enlightenment, whereby we would receive spiritual illumination to be able to see the truths of faith through the gift of faith. Now if you take that baptismal meaning back to the story, all of a sudden a number of aspects of it jump out. For example, when the disciples say "who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus says "neither." Why? Because the spiritual blindness of the man is like a sign or a symbol of Original Sin.

Original Sin is a state into which we are born. It's not the result of our own personal sin. It's not even the result of our parents' personal sin. It is a result of the original fall of Adam and Eve. So when we talk about Original Sin, it is not an actual sin for which we are culpable. We are not blamable for it. It's a state into which we are born, just like the man born blind. So the man's blindness there is a symbol of Original Sin. Which is very important because sometimes people describe Original Sin as some thing. For example, when I was little one of my teachers said that Original Sin is like a stain on your soul and then when you are baptized the priest wipes the stain off. That might be helpful for a child but it's slightly incorrect because Original Sin is not some thing, like a stain, it is an

absence of something, like the absence of sight. It's the loss of the original holiness and the original grace that our first parents had when they were created by God in communion with him, in perfect communion with him, before the fall. So the man born blind represents all of us born into a state of Original Sin, and then Jesus, the Savior, comes to restore our sight.

So when he takes his spit and he makes clay from the earth and he gives the man eyes who was born without sight, what is he doing? Well he's inaugurating a new creation, because in Baptism that's what happens to us. Jesus makes us into a new creation. The one who made the world, the one who made Adam, now makes us anew and gives us sight, not to see earthly realities, it is not about restoring physical sight to us, it's about giving us supernatural sight so that we can see the truths of faith and we can see the mysteries of faith, especially the mystery of his incarnation, that God has become man out of love for humanity. So that's the truth of what happens to us in Baptism. We receive the gift of faith and now we are able to see. And once you understand that, you can see now why the Church puts this during Lent. Because what is she doing on Sundays during Lent? She is preparing the catechumens to receive that grace of illumination, the sight that they will receive in the washing of the water in the font of Baptism.

Now you may think “wow, I have never heard that before, this is new.” Well if you have any doubts about that just look at the original readings for this week. So as I said before, during Lent the Old Testament reading doesn't necessarily correspond with the New Testament reading. Because the Old Testament reading is taking you through salvation history. So for this Sunday, the first reading is from 1 Samuel 16. For reasons of time I am not going to read it. It is the story of the anointing of King David. So this is where David is anointed with oil and becomes the *mashiach*, in Hebrew, the anointed one. Or in Greek the *christos*, the anointed king of Israel. So the reason the Church picks that reading is because she's taking us through salvation history, which started in Genesis with Adam and Eve. Then we move to Abraham on the third Sunday and now we are moving to David — just moving chronologically through time. But if you look at the second reading this week, it is from Ephesians 5:8-14. And in this case the second reading is chosen to go with the Gospel. So let's just read that quickly together. And guess what the second

reading is about? It's about darkness and light and new life in Christ after Baptism. And St. Paul writes this in Ephesians 5:

For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it is said, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light."

This is a beautiful passage here. So what's it describing here? Before baptism, the Ephesians, who were all pagans, walked not in physical blindness or physical darkness, but in the spiritual darkness of sin. But now that they've been baptized, they are to walk as what they really are, children of light, doing what is good and right and true and avoiding sin, avoiding the works of darkness, avoiding the shameful works that they had in their former life as pagans, living lives of immorality and drunkenness and all kinds of sins that were just part of the pagan culture. Now they are going to walk as children of light. So the Church gives us this reading to prepare us to receive the light of Easter and especially to prepare those who are going to receive the grace of the sacrament of Baptism.

In closing then I'd like to give you a quote from the living tradition on this. This is from St. Ambrose of Milan. He was a great Bishop who actually converted St. Augustine and he preached a series of sermons and wrote letters especially on the sacraments. He was very much a teacher of the sacraments. This is what he said to those who are preparing to receive the sacrament of Baptism, with reference to the man born blind. St. Ambrose rights:

In one instant, we see the power of Jesus' divinity and the strength of his holiness. As the divine light, he touched this man and enlightened him; as priest, by an action symbolizing baptism, he wrought in him his work of redemption. The only reason for Jesus mixing clay with the spittle and smearing it on the eyes of the man born blind was to remind you that he

who restored the man to health by anointing his eyes with clay is the very one who fashioned the first man out of clay. And that this clay is our flesh that can receive the light of eternal life through the sacrament of baptism. You too should come to Siloam. Let Christ wash you and then you will see. Come and be baptized; it is time. Come quickly and you too will be able to say, “I was blind and now I see.”²

² Letter 80, 1-5: PL 16,1326-1327