

“Seeing the New Thing of the King”

Introduction: The statement, and follow-up question we hear God ask, is sobering. Through the prophet Isaiah (from whom we shared responsively in our call to worship), God declares to the Israelites who are mired in exile in Babylon: “See, I am doing a new thing!” And then the all-important, follow-up question: “Do you not perceive it?” Is it possible for God to be at work, and for his people not to see it? It is possible for God to want to lead his people out of a desperate situation, and for them to fail to discern it? Apparently it is, and so we want to ask ourselves, what is it that might keep us from seeing, from discerning what God is up to so that we can align ourselves with whatever he may be doing in our midst?

We’ll come back to Isaiah in a moment. Let’s first take those questions into yet another episode in which we see Jesus healing a blind man. On the one hand, we’ve observed this Lent, through a couple of other healings of blind men, that such healings are a part of what reveals that in Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah has arrived, both powerfully and compassionately. But we’ve also observed that such healing stories serve as a paradigm for the spiritual journey and the need for our eyes to be opened to see who King Jesus is and what he is doing.

The healing episode in John 9 actually focuses the bulk of our attention, not on the healing itself, but on the various levels of spiritual blindness among those who witnessed it—from the disciples, to the Pharisees, to the neighbors, to the parents—blindness that kept them from discerning what Jesus was up to. Let’s look briefly at each

I The Disciples - Asking the Wrong Question

A. The disciples’ problem, it seems, what prevented them from seeing clearly, is that they were asking the wrong question. Walking along with Jesus, when they bumped into this blind man, the disciples asked: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The problem with this question is that right off the bat, this blind man was put under a theological microscope. Instead of concern and compassion for this fellow, the disciples began by trying to assign blame, by trying to figure out how it happened. When confronted with human suffering, they wanted, it seems, to come up with some kind of cause and effect that would make them feel better about what they were seeing, or maybe give them an excuse not to engage it, instead of wondering how Jesus would meet this poor fellow’s needs. As a result, they were in danger of missing the work of God that Jesus would be displaying in this man’s life.

B. Now, theological questions are not bad questions to ask. We need to be theologically grounded. But if our theological concern prevents us from seeing how God might be calling us to meet human need, or where God is at work, then it is preventing us from seeing clearly. So for instance, what if we could prove that the homeless people we take in through Family Promise had become homeless through their own bad choices. Should we not take them in? Would they somehow not deserve our care? If that was our conclusion, I don’t think we’d be seeing the grace of God clearly, which has ministered to us, despite our own bad choices!

We don’t have a “cause and effect” God, but a God of grace. The real question here is not whose fault is the blindness, it is asking, what are the needs before us, and how is the compassion and grace of God going to be revealed, even through us?

## II. The Neighbors - Stuck in Old Ways

A. After Jesus goes ahead and heals the man, his neighbors get involved as they look out their windows and watch him come home. As they get together at the local pub that night to try and puzzle it out, many of them refuse to believe it is really him. That a blind man who they knew had been blind from birth, because he grew up in their neighborhood, could now see simply did not fit into their idea of the way the world works. When the man himself later walks into the pub and declares, "I am the man," they still don't really seem convinced. What prevented them from discerning what God was up to? They had become stuck in their old ways and were not willing, it seems, to consider that in Jesus, God could be doing a new thing.

Illustration: I remember the first Christmas we drove to visit my family in North Carolina. Leaving before dawn on Christmas Day required that we open our presents on Christmas Eve, and bring our stockings in the car and open them up between here and Hartford! The first time we did this, the girls were definitely not happy! But somehow, over the years, we've become surprised, and this new way of doing our Christmas has become a much-anticipated tradition. Who knew that we would one day look forward to opening our stockings while cruising down the Mass Pike?!

B. On a spiritual level, this is where Isaiah is helpful. "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past" God instructs his people. So what is God asking them to forget? Well, he has just invited his people to remember what he did in the Exodus, how he parted the waters so his people could safely escape the Egyptian army. Forget that? That's curious until we read that the new thing God is going to do when he rescues his people from exile in Babylon is not part the waters and make a way for them through the sea; he is going instead to make a new way for them to cross the wilderness, bringing water instead of sending it away. He is the same God, just doing things in a different way. And when we push those two rescues out, that from slavery in Egypt and that from exile in Babylon, as foreshadowing an even greater rescue from our slavery and exile to sin, accomplished by the Messiah on the cross, then we truly have a God who is not afraid of new ways of doing things, so neither should we be.

C. If we ever find ourselves uttering what are affectionately known as the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it this way before!" may we know that the Lord's rescuing and restoring and renewing character does not change. But he is the Creator of all things who does seem to love doing things in new ways. If we want to insist that the old ways are always better, we might miss what he is doing. As my spiritual director recently asked me, "Are you willing to have God surprise you?" If not, she was intimating, you just might miss seeing him at work in a new way in your life.

## III. The Pharisees - Protecting Their Place

A. If the healed man's neighbors were being blinded by their old ways, then the religious leaders, the Pharisees, were unable to see because they were concerned about preserving their place in the current religious system. The neighbors decided the best thing to do was to bring the man to the Pharisees and let them figure things out. But, when brought face to face with this marvelous healing, the Pharisees would not even consider rejoicing with him. Why not? Because they were blinded by the concern that the healing took place on a Sabbath, when no such work, they believed, should be done. No way could this fellow Jesus, therefore, have anything to do with God. If he did, the Pharisees knew that things would have to change, and significantly, including the roles they had carved out for themselves as keepers and arbiters of the rules, as well as overseers of the Temple system. But if we really don't

want to change, if we always want to remain in control of what happens in our lives, we'll miss discerning the new thing God may be doing among us.

#### IV. The Parents - Frozen by Fear

A. On the other end of the spectrum of the system, there were the man's parents. Called before the Pharisees, like bad kids to the office of the principal, the parents were faced with the threat that if they spoke the full truth of what they knew had happened and who, therefore, this Jesus had to be, they would be thrown out of the synagogue. So they acknowledged the man was their son but turned all accounting for, and explaining of, what had happened over to him. They acknowledge their son, but not Jesus. They, of course, were the defenseless poor, folks who were just trying to survive in a religious system that had become oppressive. And on one level, who could blame them? But because they were afraid of having to leave that system and explore something altogether new, they would miss what God was doing and remain frozen, blinded in an unhealthy place, by fear.

Illustration Perhaps you've been involved in changes at your place of work, either due to new ownership or just new management. Those can be stressful times, to be sure. Some people may end up receiving new and exciting roles while others end up losing their jobs in the wake of restructuring. When this is the case, we can certainly want to protect our place in the system and can be rightly afraid of what might be coming next. But know that if any restructuring goes on under Jesus, the "owner" and restorer of all things, that his intention is to bring life, not death. He desires to heal, not destroy.

#### V. The Man - Increasing Clarity

A. And what can we say about the blind man himself? Well, because he was open to who and what Jesus is and was doing, he was the only one who really ended up seeing what God was doing. We see that he experienced increasing levels of clarity, of sight, as the day went on, moving from understanding Jesus as a "man," then acknowledging him as a "prophet," then understanding him as one from God, and finally worshipping him as the Son of Man, the Messiah. Though in the end he got himself thrown out of the synagogue, he alone of all the bunch would up discerning the incredible activity of God in his life, such that he even wanted to join in.

So let's take a step back and think about this as individuals, and then as a church. As individuals, I'd encourage you to sit with this story this week and ask yourself which of these groups you tend to identify with—the disciples, the neighbors, the Pharisees, or the parents—or maybe where you see in yourself a little bit of each! Then prayerfully ask God to take the blinders off, as it were, to help you move beyond what might be preventing you from discerning where he desires to work in your life.

As a church, you may or may not know that our church council has appointed a discerning community from among us which is seeking to try and see what new things God may be calling us to as we seek to be his missional church in these challenging times in which we live. And, of course, we have called this community "New Thing!" So pray for us, as we meet monthly over the course of the next year. Pray that we would be open to new ways in which God may be moving, and that toward that end we would asking the right questions, see where we may be stuck in old ways of doing things, dare to let God stretch our vision, and not be frozen by fear of changes that may lie ahead. And may we trust, as individuals and a church, that the compassionate, renewing, healing and restoring character and presence of God will never change.