

Born Blind

Have you ever closed your eyes and—just for a few moments—tried to imagine what it would be like to be blind? Max Lucado shares the story of a man who had lived all his life without being able to see.

“For fifty-one years Bob Edens was blind. He couldn’t see a thing. His world was a black hall of sounds and smells. He felt his way through five decades of darkness.

And then, he could see! A skilled surgeon performed a complicated operation and, for the first time, Bob Edens had sight. He found it overwhelming. ‘I never would have imagined that yellow is so...yellow,’ he exclaimed. ‘I don’t have the words. I am amazed by yellow. But red is my favorite color. I just can’t believe red. I can see the shape of the moon—and I like nothing better than seeing a jet plane flying across the sky leaving a vapor trail. And of course, sunrises and sunsets. And at night I look at the stars in the sky... You could never know how wonderful everything is.’”

Do you and I take being able to see for granted? Is it difficult for us to really comprehend how precious is the gift of sight? How precious and how wondrous it would be to someone who was born blind?

This Sunday, in John's Gospel, we hear the account of another man who—long ago—was born blind. A man who's never seen a sunset. Or a wildflower. Or the face of a loved one. A man without sight. A man whose life has been filled with hardship and humiliation. Not only does he live in deep darkness. Not only is he unable to earn a living. He also bears the stigma and the shame of judgment. Because everyone who passes by him presumes his blindness to be the result of sin. Even the disciples of Jesus, when they see this man, want to know *who sinned, he himself, or his parents?* For him to have been born blind, *somebody* had to have sinned.

For in that day and time, people believed that God punishes children for the sins of their parents. *And* believed that God punishes one's own sins with illness or disability.

Is this philosophy still prevalent—in some measure—today? Do we believe that suffering comes as a punishment for misdeeds? When we see someone hurting, is it part of the way

we view the world—is it in the cultural air we breathe—to wonder what that person did to deserve it? Is it embedded in our human condition to say—at least to ourselves—something like this? *With that lifestyle, she brought this on herself. Or: If he hadn't been so shiftless, he could have found a job, and then he wouldn't be sitting around waiting for a handout.*

Did someone say that—or think it?—about the man born blind? About this nameless man who sits and begs? You know, I think there's a reason why we're not told his name. I think the Fourth Evangelist wants us to understand that this person born blind could be any of us. That he represents each one of us.

Because his story is our story. And to understand our part in it, we need to be aware that in John's Gospel, darkness and light, blindness and sight, operate on two different levels of meaning. There are physical eyes and there are eyes of faith. There is physical blindness and there is spiritual blindness.

You and I are born blind. Unable to see others as they truly are. Unable to see ourselves as *we* truly are. And unable on our own to go to the only One who can offer hope and help and healing.

Just as the man born blind was unable to go to Jesus. So Jesus came to him. We can't—on our own—get to Christ. So Christ comes to us. The initiative of grace is always his. The initiative of grace is always taken by this Jesus. Whose grace is grounded in the love of the One who first loved us.

The Holy One who has fashioned the creation in all of its goodness. My brothers and sisters, hear me when I tell you that *everything* God has created is good. Illness and disability, pain and suffering are not from God.

Who opens our eyes to see the truth. To see the truth of Jesus Christ. This kind of sight comes not all at once, but gradually. Just after receiving his sight, he who was born blind, in retelling the event, refers to the One he's met as "the man called Jesus"—a miracle worker, to be sure, but just a man. Later, he's able to recognize Jesus as a prophet. By the end of the story, he has come to a place where—with the perfect clarity of twenty-twenty vision—he can confess Jesus as his Lord.

This man born blind has been given his sight. He's been given physical sight, and also the kind of sight that, with eyes of faith, sees Jesus as the revelation of the One who sent him. This second kind of sight is offered to all—to each one of us. But not

all will choose to accept it and respond to it. In the Fourth Gospel, those who refuse to accept and respond to Jesus are identified as Pharisees. Or sometimes just as “the Jews.”

Now it’s important that we understand the Evangelist’s meaning here. Because—tragically—passages like this one have for centuries been used as justification for anti-Semitism and for the church’s persecution of Jews.

But this reference is *not* to Jews of all times and places. It’s specifically to those first-century Judean leaders who reject Jesus and his offer of salvation. And in doing so, unwittingly pronounce judgment on themselves. In John’s Gospel, “the Jews” refers only to particular religious authorities who confront and challenge Jesus.

Don’t they seem to be pointing accusatory fingers at everyone other than themselves? Especially at the One who has healed on the sabbath day? This One who is—in their view—guilty of not observing the sabbath? This Jesus who is—in their words—not from God?

To these Pharisees, the man born blind is a sinner. He’s one they interrogate again and again. They determine that he was *born entirely in sins*. But—ironically—it’s these very leaders

who sin, according to Jesus. The Pharisees claim to be sighted. But in reality, they continue in darkness. In blindness, Jesus charges.

Is he speaking not only to them but also to you and me today? To twenty-first century church people? Are you and I meant to hear this story of a blind man as a cautionary tale? For Jesus Christ is still overturning the world's conventions. And as he does, sighted folk can become blind—blind to all that he would have us see. Jesus Christ is still turning this upside-down world right-side up! And as he does, the blind receive sight.

Thanks be to God! You who were born blind are being healed of your blindness. You who were born blind are receiving the gift of sight. You who were born blind—you who once were darkness, as Ephesians reminds—are now children of light!

You've been given fresh lenses. You've been offered a new kind of vision, a new way of seeing. You've been empowered and enabled to see others in a new way. Not—like modern-day Pharisees—to tally and judge the sins of others. But to see them as persons for whom Jesus died.

Jesus who takes the mud of messy human need and places it before your eyes so you can see that need. So you can see others

the way God sees them. The hungry. The hurting. The lonely. The grieving. The excluded. The destitute. The desperate. So you can see them with God's eyes of compassion. So you can see them even as Jesus saw—and welcomed into community—the man born blind.

Who has been healed. Whose eyes have been opened. This man born blind will never again be the same. His affirmation of faith is simple and eloquent: *Lord, I believe*. And rejoicing, he worships this One who has touched his eyes. He worships this one whose face he can at last behold. For he once was blind, but now he sees! Then, immediately, he goes and tells—tells how God's mighty works have been revealed in him.

And, beloved, that is *exactly* what this story of a man born blind calls you and me to do. To go and tell.

For your eyes have been touched by the One who is the Light of the world. Let his illuminating presence abide in you. Be filled with his radiance. So that in you, the Light of the world will shine brightly—for all to see!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.