

4th Sunday of Lent
3.15.26

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he 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 neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am he." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then 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 mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

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 we do not know how it is that now he sees, 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 were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would 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 they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I

see.” 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 also want to become his disciples?” Then 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, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains. (867)

Heather Cox Richardson said something interesting on her podcast a few weeks ago. This isn’t unusual; she often says something interesting. An historian on the faculty at Boston University, she’s also a public intellectual issuing a daily synthesis of news and history. Entitled, “Letters from an American,” this comes out in written form on Substack and as an audio podcast. But what I’m remembering was a departure for her. It wasn’t a fact-based insight, but more a faith-based promise, if not from a religious faith of any formal sort. She said, “The good guys always win in the end.” Noting then that people will often respond to her saying that: “Then why are the bad guys winning?” “Because it’s not over,” she says.

Ms. Richardson is not a public intellectual whose authority rests in some religious confession. She seems, on the contrary, to avoid any religiosity in her commentary, which avoidance doesn’t seem out of a disrespect for religion but rather out of respect. Religious thinking amounts to a deep well, and since it’s one she knows less about than history and current events, it’s something she largely

keeps quiet about. She's wise enough in her knowledge and respectful enough about knowledge per se that she's not going to spout off about things she doesn't know much about and knows herself not to know. (And I like that about her.)

She's a careful thinker, and a responsible speaker, which gets all the more to why this promise surprised me—because it's something of a tautology, circular logic, the equating of two things that are actually the same thing just phrased differently. An easy example of this logical fallacy is in saying that the Bible is true as the Word of God which we know is the case because the Bible says so, and since the Bible is true we can trust its self-assessment. Richardson's statement, that the good guys always win in the end, can't be disproven even though often the good guys aren't winning, for this is but evidence that it's not over. The circularity of the proof structure makes this original statement one more of faith than of fact.

Which isn't to say I object to it. I don't. I actually agree with it, or at least I like it and hope it's true, I'll live as if it's true. In any event, we all need first things on which to stand and from which to pursue secondary insights. All knowledge begins with a faith statement of some sort, the sort of assertion that can't be proven or disproven, is simply accepted as the starting point.

What's more, her faithful assertion about the good guys always winning in the end is akin to what the Gospel of John suggests as true, and which is one my favorite aspects of this so-called 4th Gospel—that the creation itself isn't finished, that (yes) there are obvious problems inherent in the creation but that (no) these aren't evidence that God isn't good or that God isn't sovereign and the creator of all but that God isn't finished. The creation isn't yet complete.

The problem of evil is an evergreen one. It is indeed the shibboleth of monotheism, the thing that haunts monotheism wherever you find it. Wherever God is confessed as One, and as good, and as the creator of all things, the problem of evil is there to harass and to haunt: for how can it be that God is good, God creates all things and is sovereign above all, and that evil yet is, people yet suffer,

some inflict cruelty, even gratuitous cruelty on others with hardly a second thought. I mean, the creation itself lashes its creatures—volcanoes, earthquakes, famine, drought.

The Bible has had many answers to this problem. Many of the different books, sixty-six books in all, present a different answer to the riddle of the reality of evil. The book of Job is one of the great theodicies of literature, a theodicy being a work that justifies God, justifies the sovereign and good God in face of the obvious fact of evil. It basically has God answer Job's insistence that God justify himself thus: "Who are you to question me?" Proverbs (the book) promises that right living and good judgment can keep evil at bay, that indeed suffering is a sign of unrighteousness, is something those who suffer sort of deserve. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, mostly follow Moses as he leads this new people, Israel, and imposes this new Law, the Torah. And it's these, a righteous nation living by a life-giving law, that will be as light among all nations, shining against evil, setting it to flight.

The Gospel of John takes a radical new tack. Given the revelation that was and is Jesus Christ, God incarnate and then crucified, raised and alive forevermore, imagines that the creation simply isn't finished. God is yet at work, and he has sent his Son to continue in that work, which Son would gather disciples and apostles to join him in that work. "...the one who believes in me," he's even remembered to have said, "will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these..."

The resetting of the clock when it comes to the work of creating starts right at the beginning of the Gospel of John. This book begins as Genesis began, a book from a millennium earlier. "In the beginning..." Genesis, the first book in the Bible (if not the earliest written) begins with time and matter, and famously counts down the seven days of God's creative work, speech-acts that simply have God speaking

and it is so: Light. Dry land. Creeping things. The human being. And at last, on the seventh day, rest, a sabbath rest.

The Gospel of John begins the same: “In the beginning...” and, though here departing from Genesis literally, the theme remains. Genesis says, “In the beginning, God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light,” while John says, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God.”

From this vast cosmological consideration, John’s narrative narrows down, focuses in: first on John the baptizer. We follow him through what the narrative calls, “the next day,” which is when John first sees and announces Jesus, and then again on what the narrative calls, “then the next day,” when John gets Jesus’ attention and we at last hear him speak—his first words: “What are you looking for?”

Then there’s a next day, which is followed by the third day, though the narrative taken literally has already counted three days which would have this day be the fourth. No matter: on this third day, we’re at the wedding at Cana where Jesus performs his first sign according to John, and it’s a sign of abundance, water turned to wine such that the wine will never run out. This is to point to what awaits the world on that true third day, a day of resurrection, when all good things will abound, when life itself will be abundant, everlasting, sustaining as that ancient bush that burns but doesn’t consume.

The Gospel of John understands Jesus as the Word who was at the beginning with God; Jesus as the One who awaits us at the end, having accomplished all the work of making the the creation complete and perfect, all sin worked out, all evil brought from its dark and annihilating absence into good and true and fullness of being, now at long last with the whole creation to rest in glory, in praise; and Jesus as joining us amidst time and creation so God’s works might be revealed in him, sent indeed, as he’s remembered to have said in our reading this morning, to “work the works of him who sent me...”

This is the significance of the man born blind being made to see. He wasn't born blind because he himself sinned or his parents sinned but simply as indication that creation isn't yet complete. And so, Jesus, the carpenter by whom the world would yet be under construction, took mud, the very stuff at the beginning from which God fashioned God's creatures, the name of whom even means mud: Adam being *adamah* meaning mud. He took mud and mixed it with his own spit (the spit and image, as the saying goes; not "spitting image" but "spit and image") and finished this one creature as a sign of what completion is yet to come. This is all very much as when God according to Genesis in the beginning fashioned his clay dolls, the man and the woman, and then breathed into them the breath of life that they might live.

And so it would be according to the Gospel of John as well, Jesus' creative work made complete on the cross where Jesus took on the violence of the world and returned it as peace, the beingness of God poured out onto the world so God would be everywhere, the all-in-all. This Jesus would himself declare from the cross just before breathing his last: "It is finished," and would then return alive to breathe onto each of the disciples: "Receive the Holy Spirit," this now being born from above that all creation might move toward its true completion, peace and praise everlasting.

Meanwhile, though: what to do with the one who's been perfected? This man born blind who now can see: what to do with the one on whose incompleteness we've all become accustomed to, even strangely relied on. The economy of this world, its inner workings and value judgments, does indeed rely on those unfortunates who probably (let's face it) deserve what they're getting. The way the man born blind gets lobbed back and forth as to who will take him, whether his parents or the religious authorities (because whose fault was his blindness and whose fault is his now seeing?) is a fascinating accommodation while also resentment. But at last he takes up himself, asserting his own voice and right to

speak for himself, saying even what only Jesus would say of himself according to this gospel: "I am..."

This tiny phrase: "I am..." This pregnant phrase: "I am..." This recalls God naming Godself at the burning birth, that ancient theophany revealing something of God's being, nature, and intent. Here Moses was so bold as to ask this God's name and God deigned to respond: YHWH, the sound of breath and translated, "I am" which is to say being, the beingness of all being.

Jesus according to the Gospel of John will step into this tradition of God as Being, seven times claiming of himself, "I am," whether "I am the vine and you are the branches" or "I am he," or "I am the way, the truth, and the life," or "I am the living water." Each time *ego eimi*, not some braggadocious declaration about himself, but a joining, an abiding amidst, and a welcoming in to abide him, God, the eternal, creative, and redeeming God.

Only two other people speak this unseemingly powerful phrase according to the Gospel of John. John the Baptizer speaks it but only ever thus: "I am not..." which he says to draw a distinction between himself and Jesus whom people keep taking him to be. The other is another unfortunate like this man born blind, someone who'd been ill for thirty-eight years and who was trying to get the pool of Siloam for healing but couldn't because people kept stepping ahead of him, which he explains thus: "...while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me."

The man born blind whom we meet today has managed thus to make his way. He speaks from the other side of that gulf, on that far bank of the deep river Jordan where all is peace. Here he could say with confidence, with a fullness of God whose creative touch has made him whole: "I am." "I am he," he kept saying. Indeed, while some were saying, "It is he," and others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him," he kept saying, "I am he." Abiding in God, with God abiding him, now walking with

Jesus from life to Life, Jesus having heard that he'd been driven out now looping back to pick him: "I am."

The book we finished most recently in the church book club had the author rejecting monotheistic faith, rejecting its faith-claims because of the reality of evil. Jonathan Rauch, our author, simply (rather too simply) rejected the reality of God because of the also undeniable reality of evil, or at least of things being seriously messed up. He simply (rather too simply) couldn't square that God is good, God is sovereign, and suffering is everywhere. How could a good God let all this happen?

My argument to him, should it ever come to that, should I ever be so lucky to bump into him somewhere, would be to try out John's perspective for a week, a month. What if this whole thing simply isn't finished? What if God is yet at work in creating, and also needful that we join with God in that creating? Might you try seeing from that perspective, a seeing that might prove true? Maybe this is what you're looking for, so to speak?

We Goodmans need new flooring upstairs. Our current boards are too thin. They're splintering and so we've hired the builder we always hire, and the other day he came in and ripped up the oak strips. Only the subflooring remains. I could go home now and see the room's incomplete. I could call him up and yell at him. "What's the deal? The room is useless!" And he would say, rightly, "I'm not done. I'm waiting for the new flooring. When it comes in, I'll install it. Then you can move the bed back in."

Oh! He just hasn't finished the job.

I love this worldview established in the Gospel of John. That it is, in some eternal way, all finished, all perfected and complete, Jesus now finally at rest and thus honoring the sabbath because the sabbath has finally arrived; but also in some lived way not yet finished, not yet complete: I love this worldview, this storied insistence into which we might place our lives and out of which we might live hope and anticipated joy.

I love it because so much of our politics, informed even by primitive and impulsive faith, is about going back, reactively, even violently, going back. Going back to the time when everything was better, when it was simpler and children were better behaved and adults were reliable and trustworthy, back when art was better and music was better and sports were wholesome and even war-making was just, Rosy the Riveter resolutely making her bombs and Johnny the soldier taking a bullet with steely acceptance and no urge whatsoever to seek revenge. This is all of the impulse to get back to the garden, to be Adam and Eve once again but this time never to fall to the serpent. We've got to get back. We've got to make things great again, healthy again, whole again, before the fall, before it all fell apart.

2015 (before Trump.) 1980 (before Regan). 1970 (before Watergate). 1963 (before Civil Rights). 1860 (before the Civil War). 1775 (before democracy). 1517 (before the Protestants splintered off and then splintered some more). Name your date before which everything was perfect. (Then discover the people who'd say, "No, thanks.")

The thing is, life isn't like that. Time doesn't travel in that direction. It cannot be recovered. It cannot be reclaimed, in spite of what so much fighting in congressional hearings might have us wish for: "Reclaiming my time!" Time is rather an ever-rolling stream. It bears all its children away. Yet even an ever-rolling stream enters into an eternal ocean—which is either nothing or is everything, all fullness, all fulfillment, the all-in-all.

So let's keep going, because the only way through is through. Let's keep going, even though history has given us so much we'd rather TACO out of, following our leader in chickening out, he under whose leadership we might finally have stepped into something we cannot back out of. Iran is an explosion onto history's stage that we cannot pack back into its bombshell.

We search for redemption, the vision of which we're given as a matter of faith and are charged with making real in the materiality of the world and the living of

our days, loving the creation in all its parts and particles and iterative whole into a fullness into being: loving this created order into a fullness of being. This is the work of the Creator given to his Christ the anointed one into which we are gathered for a labor that is light.

Come and see because perhaps it's this that you're looking for. Come and join. Come, labor on. Give your hands and hearts to such assured perfection. Good can't lose. It's simply not over.

Thanks be to God.