

## Seeing God

God is Spirit, so no one *sees him* – not in the physical, optical sense. But we do see the eye of God -- even in the iridescent feather of a bird or the moon that stares at us from a winter dawn. But no one sees God. Israel *saw* fire on the mountain, and billows of smoke. But when Moses went up into that dense cloud and asked for a chance to see the face of God *that* request was denied: “No mortal may *see* me and live,” says the LORD. (Ex 33:19-20). All Moses got was a glimpse of God with back turned. And that is what we get to see in creation: God with his back turned. And yet out of Moses’ encounter came the Torah – God’s instruction, a gift to reveal God’s will, to us and show us who God is. So, no we can’t see God in the optical sense; but we can trace his path, like the wake of a great ship on the sea. We can experience God in a vision or revelation – and when someone has such an encounter, how are we to judge the authenticity of that? But still these experiences of ours must be evaluated by and held up to the same gold standard that *no one has ever seen God*. Because in human flesh we are *all born blind*. Which brings us to

### **This man’s story**

The wooden bowl in his hand shoots up and tracks the clink of coins in purse on the thigh of a passer-by, a smoothly automated motion relaxed enough that its repetition doesn’t exhaust the arm and leave, by the end of the day, his elbow sore, yet it’s forceful enough to make its point: I have a need. Blind since birth. But his fine-tuned ears tell him legs and garments have now drawn a thick curtain that surrounds him. The air grows suddenly still in the midst of the circle of men who surround him.

“Rabbi. . .” (One of them begins. . .)

“Ah,” says the blindman to himself, “men with a *rabbi!*” This virtually guarantees him a good alms. (He’s found men alone to be not quite generous as those in a group and especially those out to impress the rabbi)

Then he hears the man’s question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

The blindman’s always wondered that himself. I mean, there must have been *some* reason, the LORD chose not to put seeing eyes into his head. But did his *parents sin?* The very thought is troubling. But on the other hand, was it *he himself* who brought this upon himself, sinning in the womb perhaps? But if so how does one sin in the womb, and against whom? But surely *someone* sinned to cause this curse of blindness. To think otherwise would be to question the wisdom of a God. Either way he’s still blind. And blindness is never merely optical. It’s a condition that touches the depths of the soul. IT shapes all he is. The malformation of his eyes, he must admit, has impaired even his spirituality. How he *sees* God. But here’s a *rabbi* who’s about to tackle *his* question.

### **It was a strange answer**

The rabbi tells his disciple that he’s asking the wrong question. Why blame *anyone* for innocent suffering. What the man *should* be asking is what is God going to *do* with this.

The rabbi tells the man not to waste time on questions like that! We need to put everything we’ve got into the work of God -- make hay while the sun shines, because it’s going to get dark *soon*

and we need to get it done. Because “*as long as I’m around, I am the light of the world.*” And having said that. . .

### **The rabbi kneels and spits on the ground . . .**

mixes the spit with the clay then gently spreads the mixture on the beggar’s sightless eyes.

By the way, God formed Adam from clay, spat on the ground, sculpted a man then breathed life into that “clay” And now a rabbi named Jesus seems to be acting out the same kind of primal drama, doing what was left undone when God formed this man’s body in the womb. Jesus is making *eyes* out of the clay. Adam-eyes. New beginning eyes. New Creation eyes. Eyes of clay.

And meanwhile, the blindman is wondering why this Jesus calls himself “the light of the world.” After all, what *is* light to blindman? Sighted people have often tried to explain light to him. Sighted people *tell* him that when they are in a room with no light, they are *just as blind as he*. But as soon as they open a door or window, they say, the *light comes* in, and then and only then can they *see* things. Then, they say, if they close the window or door, they can shut the light out and become once again as blind men.

But what is light to a man *born* blind? Each morning *feels* sunrise on his cheeks, but he’s never *seen* its light. . .

So now, the blind man sits with eyes of clay --Adam-eyes, and wonders if this rabbi might be doing some sort of prophetic thing like the great prophets of the past used to do -- some action that speaks the word to Israel, shows what God is trying to say – a lesson for all Israel to heed. Perhaps the rabbi means *light* in more of a spiritual sense. Perhaps all Israel needs a new eyes. Maybe the rabbi is telling these men that follow him that they too lack Adam-eyes. That all of us have left Gods path to struggle and stumble in the dark as blind men. Perhaps all of us are as deceived as Adam and Eve thinking our eyes are open but in reality, born blind – never really grasping the nature of the light in the spiritual sense. . .

The blind man had heard a Scripture once. It was read in the Synagogue. It said that when the Messiah came, would “give sight to the blind” It was one of the few things ever said in the synagogue that he really wanted to believe. Could this rabbi be claiming to be a prophet? Or even Messiah? What does he mean: “I am the light of the world.”

But there was no time for questions for he is given r . . .

### **An Act of Obedience**

The rabbi tells him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.”

Siloam means “Sent” in Hebrew. It’s an very old pool. The prophet Isaiah knew it when he spoke of the “waters of Siloam” (Isa 8:6). They it “Sent” because the water is *sent* there though the channel they call “the Sender”. But why must a blindman he go *to Siloam*? It’s some distance away and he is blind.

But the symbolism is obvious. The rabbi said he is “is doing the work *of him who sent* him and in the waters of Siloam God’s healing will be be sent.

So now with the strange cakes of mud on his face, he makes up his mind. He will obey this strange request. He will **do** what the rabbi asks.

As he makes his way, here and there people help for a few steps along the way. Even if just an outstretched arm to prevent him from banging his shin on a market-stall. He doesn't need too much help, but he's grateful nonetheless. He feels there is good somewhere in every human heart, if you can find it. He knows the maze of these streets well -- a city he has never seen. He knows the way to Siloam. Like a ship in the night, he uses certain navigational beacons. Amidst the waves of sound he filters out the useless noise and concentrates on key sounds: the ring of the anvil as he passes the blacksmith, turns right, heads towards the smell of bread, past the bakery. And there's the woman on the left who sells fish, she's *always* talking. He can count on her to be there, and *always* talking. And this means he's getting close. Then he hears the steady trickle of **water in the pool of Siloam!** In the melodious gurgling as he stoops and washes away the clay, there are words in the water, words of the rabbi: "*Go, wash, go, wash, wash in the pool of Siloam, wash your eyes and go home seeing, wash your eyes and go home seeing . . .*"

### **Imagine receiving sight!**

So *this* is **LIGHT!** This is what they kept *telling* me about, and now I can see how it works. And in a moment he knows that this is what he's been missing. It's as if all that was before was a womb of darkness -- a kind of a pre-life -- leading up to the REAL LIFE has begun.

He's astounded how easy it is to *walk in the light*. By the time he's made his way back his own street-corner, he is not even groping along with his arms, no longer shuffling his feet out of fear of potholes that have thrown him to the ground on almost a daily basis. He's wielding the blind-man's cane in triumph like warrior's spear. His face is beaming. He drinks in each new object, connects each face with a voice he's *heard* all his life but never until now could *see*. He just can't seem to satisfy the appetite of these new-creation eyes. A lifetime of hunger for sight is suddenly served an unending banquet.

"Who *is* that guy?" they wonder, "I know him from somewhere. "

The young women giggle and blush as he looks each of them over -- head to toe -- one after the other, each with equal curiosity.

"Why's that man staring at us?", a young child asks his mother.

They didn't even recognize him.

"*That's* not the blind guy. No way."

"Yes it is!"

"No, come on, *that* guy just *looks* like him."

"***I am the man,***" he says "***And I can SEE.***"

### **Now, this happened on the Sabbath.**

Not much happens on the streets of Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Nevertheless the news spread, house to house -- even on the Sabbath. By the next morning, in the temple courts, Pharisees --

lawyers are standing around consulting a large scroll. It's a scroll from the *Mishnah* -- the Book of Jewish traditions -- a vast commentary on the Torah. The Mishnah is the source of legal advice and precedents. The Mishnah is all about how Jews over time, have learned to apply the commandments of God to life's complex circumstances. And there are many scrolls in the Mishnah, but the scroll the lawyers examine are rules for the proper keeping of Sabbath.

"It's *right here*," one of them says, "The kneading of clay is strictly forbidden on the Sabbath! Every potter in Israel knows that much!"

(There are in the Mishnah 39 different types of work forbidden on the Sabbath, and kneading was -- so was mixing: he *mixed* the clay with his spit. This was followed by a lot of stroking of the beards and then a long but reasonably polite discussion, the gist of which was that smearing the mud on the eyes would come under the category of anointing which, of course, was *work* -- also forbidden on the Sabbath. More stroking of the beards and then an abrupt end of proceedings.

### **Jesus had broken the Law of Almighty God.**

So they bring in the former blind man and ask how he received his sight.

"Look, he put clay on my eyes, and I when I washed it off I could see."

"And it was the *Sabbath*, was it not?"

The hard-liners had no doubts about it. But others wondered, "how do we explain a sinner doing a miracle?" There was a definite tension in the room, so they turn again to man who had been blind:

"What do you *think* about this Jesus?"

And he said, "He is a *prophet*."

This was definitely not the answer they were looking for, so they did what lawyers do if a witness gives evidence that weakens their case: *discredit* the witness.

Maybe this guy wasn't even blind to begin with -- one of these phoney beggars. So they call in the parents.

"Is this your son, who *you* say was born *blind*? How is it that he now sees?"

This puts the parents in a tricky predicament.

"*We* do not know what happened, he a grown man, ask him."

They *had* to say that because the word on the street is if anyone dares to confess *Jesus is Messiah*, they'll be . . .

### **Thrown out of the synagogue**

So it's a cruel choice: shall they lose their *son* or shall they lose their *souls*? For contemporary Christians, a church association doesn't possess the social power the synagogue had over the first century Jew. To be thrown out of the synagogue was not just an embarrassment. It was the formal act by which the Jewish community declared that certain a man or woman had no more

hope in God. The entire community would pray that such a person would be destroyed and their name blotted out to the book of life. Serious stuff.

So these trembling parents face a heart-rending choice. But they know their son. He's a good man. He's honest. He'll be all right if he just tells them the *truth* . . . won't it?

So for the second time they call the young man forward: "Give God the praise; we *know* that *this* man is a sinner. It was on the Sabbath, wasn't it. He healed you on the Sabbath, was it not? "

You were born blind, receive your sight, giving praise to God is no problem. But what could be more absurd than denying that your healer was sent from God. There's a courage that comes to those who have been healed. A boldness hard to find among those who have never had to suffer. He's no coward. It comes from meeting the challenge of daily life. And now the greater bravado having been healed. As far as he was concerned who wouldn't want to follow Jesus? So he asks them a question: *Do you want to be his disciples too?"*

### **That's where he crossed the line.**

"You are dirty street trash. " they said, "**You** are *his* disciple. *We* are disciples of *Moses*. " For we *know* God spoke to Moses." (P)

Yes. God spoke to Moses. No doubt. But not even Moses could take clay and make Adam-eyes. Not since the Garden of Eden had anyone made a human eyeball out of clay and opened it so a man could see. What's wrong with these people?

Religion does strange things to the human heart. People believe strange things for no good reason. How could mixing clay with spit possibly constitute an offence in the eyes of God? Nevertheless. . .

### **They threw the man out.**

Jesus heard what happened and he tracked him down. He asks, "Do you believe in the Son of man?"

It's an interesting question. "Son of Man" is the mysterious figure found in Daniel Chapter 7 who defeats the beasts that are kingdoms of this world and then this Son of Man comes into the presence of God, and meets God face to face. The Son of Man is Israel's representative before God. The Son of Man figure in Daniel 7 was understood by the Jews to be the Messiah, the one who alone could bring the salvation of kingdom of God to earth. The Son of Man was in a sense, a *second Adam*, who like the first Adam would be given dominion over the beasts of the earth. The Son of Man is the one who can alone determine whose name is and isn't written in the book of life. The Son of Man would decide who is and who is not in Israel.

"Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

It's a powerful question to bring to a Jew who's just thrown out of the synagogue. He's suffering the spiritual abuse of being told by his community that his name is no longer in the book of life. He's been told he longer has a reason to hope in God.

But the real issue is "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Do you believe there is one who can

bring you to God?

He answers, “And who, sir, is he, that I may believe in him?” Jesus said, “You looking at him. I am the Son of Man.

“IN that case,” He said, “ *I believe,*” and he *worshipped* him.

It is often said. . .

### **There are none so blind as those who will not see**

A few years ago, a young pastor in Britain, named Mat Redman came to the sad belief that his church, and perhaps many churches, are blind to the reality of worship. Mat Redman’s church was full of mostly young people, great music, lots of energy. Great atmosphere. It was a great place to connect. It was a very cool church. Yet Mat Redman had come to a troubling realization that, for the most part, there was a spiritual blindness among them. He felt they didn’t really know what worship really was.

So Mat Redman did something very daring in his church. For a period of time, the church would have absolutely NO MUSIC. During this season they would explore other ways to relate to GOD: the spoken word, silence, images. But no music. It was a strange feeling to come to church and have no music, no singing. But after a while this church began to experience presence of God in very deep way.

At the end of this time Mat Redman wrote his song “Heart of Worship”

**During Lent, the season leading up to Easter** there’s an ancient tradition of voluntarily giving something up as a sign of our longing experience God more deeply. Lent is a time to recognize that there are things in our lives that can distract us like the maze of busy streets the blindman had to find his way through on the way to Siloam. God may asks us to give up things we value, things we love, things that give us comfort, things we enjoy, even things we normally consider essential to our health and well-being.

The season of Lent allows us to find some space in our lives where we may voluntarily strip ourselves of distractions that we may *draw closed to God*.

Lent is NOT about “who sinned?” The man in our story had gone without sight all his life. It was not the sins of his parents nor even own. *Jesus said* it was so “that the works of God could be revealed.”

At Siloam this man experienced a work of God. It revealed his life’s purpose. From that day forward, no matter what else he did with his life as a sighted person, his life was all about worshipping Jesus. And what of those people who wanted to judge him and discredited him that? Who threw him out of the synagogue? They were the ones who were truly *blind*. So . .

### **A faith lesson from this story**

Should we not carefully examine our hearts each time we come to the Lord’s Table? Because it is entirely possible in the course of daily life to *lose sight* of the meaning of this Table and not even realize it. The Pharisees, were highly religious people. They had sought to follow the commandments to the letter – all their lives, but in reality still had no concept of God’s central

command:

“Hear O Israel, the LORD your God is one. And you shall love the lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. . . And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Jesus showed the blindman that kind of love. This man’s story teaches us that we are all visually impaired in our spiritual lives. But that impairment can’t ultimately keep us from realizing God’s purposes for our lives. In fact, it’s out of that sense of woundedness we press on to discover our purpose. It’s a journey we take to “Siloam” with our eyes caked with mud. We too must wash in the sacred waters of the real presence of Christ. As we come to the Table, we are *feeling our way through the darkness to Calvary*. Jesus told his disciples, **night is coming**. He was meant the darkness between Cross and Resurrection. The dark night of the human soul as it fumbles along in search of God.

We fumble our way to Siloam. We walk by faith, not by sight to *Siloam*, to wash in the water and leave seeing the world through different eyes. But like the blind man, we too must leave this table faced with a difficult choice: how then shall we live? What shall we say if asked “what do *you* think about this Jesus?”

The Pharisees had it all figured out. There were 623 commandments in the Law: follow them. But the one they forgot was the command to LOVE. But Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath, because he LOVED that man and that man needed GRACE that day.

So if we confess our faith in Jesus and the world conspires and throws us out on our ear, he will find us and ask us

Do you believe in the Son of Man?