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John 9

### **Cloud of witnesses: Man born blind**

The Man born blind. The man who had formerly been blind. The man whose eyes were opened. The man who received his sight. He isn't named in the Gospel of John. Not all of the significant characters are. In fact, many of the ones who the Gospel writer thinks of as model characters are not. The Samaritan woman. The Disciple whom Jesus loved. Perhaps this character is unnamed because John wants us each to be able to identify with him. It could be Scott or Betty or Lisa or Jeremy. We are all on a journey of faith like him. Or it could be that the Gospel writer wants to emphasize particular characteristics. It is significant that the Samaritan woman is Samaritan. It is significant that The disciple whom Jesus loved is beloved. It is significant that this is the man who **was** blind but now has received sight. Whatever the case, I will refer to him as the man whose eyes were opened.

The man whose eyes were opened might be the easiest character to identify with so far in our "cloud of witnesses" summer series on faith heroes. Not necessarily in his experience of miraculous healing, perhaps. But he is a man who is on a journey of faith where the answers aren't always easy and where he needs to work out a lot of things for himself. He doesn't just rely on the religious authorities but reflects on his own experience of God and comes to greater and greater understanding.

The story begins with Jesus and the disciples discussing this blind man they see. It is significant, I think, that everyone except Jesus' in this story interacts with him in a way that is shaped and defined by the fact of his blindness. The disciples see him begging beside the road, see that he is blind, and decide based on no other evidence that either he or his parents must have sinned. All they know about him is that he is blind and their thoughts jump to sin. They also seem to think that because he is blind he is unable to hear or speak. They proceed to talk about him to each other and to Jesus in his presence.

The man's neighbours and those who had seen him before and were familiar with him aren't much better. After Jesus has healed him, they wonder if this is, in fact, the man who had been blind. Even after he insists that he is the man, they still cannot believe him. He is not blind. His blindness is the only way they are able to make sense of who he is. However long

they have known him, they aren't able to get beyond that one fact and get to know him in any other way. Even when he declares his identity, they won't listen to him, as they have never listened to him before.

The Pharisees and Jews, of course, are only interested in him because of how his healing on the Sabbath plays into their distrust of Jesus. He was blind and now he isn't and it happened on the Sabbath. They aren't interested in listening to what the man has to say for himself or for Jesus. They won't even believe his testimony until it is confirmed by his parents, who have never been blind.

Even his parents seem not to know him very well or really to have any interest in knowing him better. When they discover that he has been healed they don't run to him to find out what happened or who did this or even how he feels about it. They express little interest in him or excitement about this new stage in his life. Rather, they say "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." (John 9:20-21)

Everyone, from the disciples to the neighbours to the religious authorities to his parents defines him by his blindness, interacts with him only on the basis of his blindness, and is unwilling to listen to his words or pay attention to his actions. And yet, in this story the healing takes two verses and the rest of the story takes 41. There is so much more to him. This man is perhaps the most filled out, multi-layered character in the Gospel of John, and yet no one can see him for who he is!

This is a remarkable man and a remarkable story! His blindness has made him a social and religious outsider. Because he was blind he was considered a sinner. There was a prosperity gospel kind of approach that said that if bad things happened to you, it was because you weren't doing what God intended for you. Jesus challenges this theology, but it was clearly part of the worldview of the disciples and of the religious authorities.

Yet the man whose eyes were opened is the hero of the story and has a remarkable ability to stand up for himself, despite being challenged and despite being threatened. When they doubt his identity, rather than separating himself from his past of exclusion, he claims it. "I am the man" he repeats over and over again, saying that he is the same man even after the cure. Not much has changed fundamentally. He's not ashamed of who he was and he's not ashamed of who he is. Perhaps the most important part of his healing is not the physical cure but that it is an

encounter with Jesus. It sends him on an important but difficult journey of faith.

Over and over again the man is asked how his eyes were opened. At first his reply just reflects the initial experience – he was healed. But as he is challenged his response shows more and more reflection on that experience. First he concludes that Jesus must be a prophet. Then, when the religious authorities challenge him and declare that Jesus must be a sinner, he stands up to them and responds again out of his experience. “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

But the religious authorities aren't willing to accept his conclusions. They have their own ideas about Jesus and there is something fishy about their whole investigation. Rather than being open to anything new, rather than a search for truth or a discernment of the work of God, they seem to be trying to confirm their own preconceived conclusions. They aren't willing to accept that there can be any truth in his experience. Their response is to revile and reject him.

Remarkably, the man whose eyes were opened doesn't slink off and accept what others think of him and his experience. In response to their challenge, he takes one more step on the journey of faith. He argues theologically with the religious authorities and uses his experience in an incredible confession of faith: "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and 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." (John 9:30-33)

In most of the healing stories in the New Testament, physical healing is accompanied by social healing – by restoration to the community. One of the tragedies of this story is that as this man comes to a greater and greater level of faith, he is more and more rejected by those around him. Yes he has been healed of his physical blindness, but his relationship with God has placed him right in the line of fire. Previously he had been cast out for his blindness. Now he is cast out for his beliefs. And yet he perseveres.

His experience of Jesus moves him on despite what comes until finally he meets Jesus again. This time, Jesus seeks him out. Jesus is the only one in the story who seems to care what he has to say and the only one who responds to the person he is. Jesus invites further reflection on his faith and accepts and trusts his final confession. “Lord, I believe.”

So over the course of this extended story, the man whose eyes were opened has moved from a testimony about himself - I am the man - through reflection on what had happened physically in his healing, to a growing realization that perhaps he has had an experience of God, to worship of Jesus as Lord. "Lord I believe." What a journey! What an evolution! So how did this happen? This man has a significant moment - an incredibly significant moment - when he is physically healed of his blindness. But he doesn't just carry on with his life. He thinks about that event. He talks about it. He reflects on it. He wonders what was going on. Eventually he begins to believe that God must have had something to do with this event and he reflects on it again. Finally he decides that God was at work in his life through Jesus and this leads him to worship.

Paying attention. Reflecting. Worshipping. Richard Peace talks about it as the Spiritual discipline of noticing God.<sup>1</sup> Paying attention to God's work in our lives. Having our eyes opened to the movement of the Spirit. It is not easy. I think I sometimes have trouble with these steps. Paying attention to the events of my life with eyes attuned to God's work. Reflecting on what happened. This I think is key to what the man whose eyes were opened did. He reflected on his experience and he noticed God at work. How often do I do that? How often do you do that? One of the reasons I go to a Spiritual Director, perhaps the main one, is that it slows me down. It gives me an opportunity once a month to look back on that month and reflect. It gives me the chance to look back and say "Ohhhhh. That was GOD." I think we don't always notice God in the moment. Often it is only looking back that we can see God at work.

A couple weeks ago I was talking to my cousin and he shared this reflection on God's work. He was climbing a mountain with his son. The hike started right beside a highway. When they were still close and looking at the cars whizzing by they saw them for only a moment with little sense of where they were coming from or where they were going. As they moved farther up, they could still see that highway and those cars, but their perspective changed. Things seemed to slow down and they could see much more of the path of those vehicles - where they were coming from. Where they were going. Going higher and higher, they gained more and more perspective.

I think this also happens in the life of faith. Often when we are close to events we don't see all that is happening. As time passes we gain greater perspective and can look back and see

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Peace, *Noticing God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2012), p. 14.

the patterns and understand better what was going on. Often in looking back and reflecting we can see the hand of God in our lives. So I invite you to a practice of reflection on your life. A regular looking back and noticing. Where has God shown up in the last while in your life? What does that mean for your faith? I think this kind of reflection on our lives can be a significant part of the faith journey.

It certainly was for the man whose eyes were opened. Opened physically. Opened to the work of God in his life through Jesus. Significant moment. Reflection. Eyes opened to the work of God. Like the man whose eyes were opened, may each of us experience the presence of God in our lives. May we look back, reflect and see. May we each worship God and be able to stand in Jesus' presence and say with the man whose eyes were opened: "Lord, I believe."

AMEN.