

Sermon – Lent 4A

John 9:1-41

Sunday, March 19, 2023

Siloam

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There is so much *of* this text (41 verses – a whole chapter) but also there is so much *in* this text. As we know, with John, there is layer upon layer. It is rich.

I am going to focus today on one key aspect of this story, that focusses in, initially at least, on verse 7: *...and Jesus said to him (the man born blind) 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means sent)'. So we went and washed, and came back seeing.*

What most people remember about this healing of the man born blind is Jesus making a mud pie with his own spit and rubbing on the man's eyes. But, you know, this man *did not* see after he had this mud placed on his eyes. When did he start seeing? After he had gone, sent by Jesus, to wash in the pool of Siloam. Many Bible readers forget this second part of the miracle, as if it were really only an incidental detail, that this man had to wash this 'miracle mud' off somewhere at some point, and the nearest pool would do.

But John's telling of the story is not like that. Nothing is accidental or incidental. The man is told by Jesus to go to a specific place, to the pool of Siloam, a pool in Jerusalem just down at the bottom of the hill that leads up to the temple. It was the pool used for ritual washing (what the Jews called 'baptism' – obviously not Christian baptism). So before people went up to the temple to worship, they had to wash and purify themselves. The water for the pool of Siloam is piped into the city from the Gihon Spring outside the city, from where its waters are *sent* – Siloam (that is what the name means).

John wants to draw our attention to this name, not just to give us some tourist information, but as always, because he is making a point. This man born blind is sent by Jesus to the pool called 'sent'. This is not a co-incidence. Neither is it a coincidence in John's gospel that the Greek name for this pool is 'Apestalemos', the Greek word for 'sent', the same word from which the word 'Apostle' comes. An Apostle is one who has been sent – in the NT, sent by the risen Lord Jesus to preach the Gospel to the world.

Now guess what happens immediately after this man washes his eyes and is able to see? (verse 7). Verse 8-11: *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 the man." 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."*

This man, sent *to* the pool of Siloam blind, is sent *from* the pool (an apostle), to give his first testimony about what Jesus had done for him. He, once blind – a man who did not even know who Jesus was – now has had his eyes opened, and he begins to tell others what has happened, including the pharisees who of course refuse to see, who are blind.

Almost before he knows it himself, he is witnessing to the confused and wondering crowd around him about the sign Jesus has performed. Before the end of the chapter he does this a total of three times. As he does so, he finds that he is almost the only man who can see in the midst of a community who are blind to the truth. He even preaches his first sermon in verses 30-33, telling the pharisees what is obvious even to blind Freddy; that Jesus is sent from God. But they do not want to see it.

As he does this he partially fulfills the prophecy Jesus made back in verse 3, that God's glory would be revealed through him, and fulfills it completely in verse 38 where he says 'Lord I believe, and falls down at Jesus' feet in worship', because he has come to see who Jesus is: the Messiah and Son of God.

Sent *to* Siloam a blind man, and sent *from* Siloam, with his eyes opened, testifying to Jesus' grace and mercy.

What is John telling us about Jesus and his work in our lives? What is he handing on to us? Remember, in John's Gospel especially, Jesus' miracles are called 'signs' – they are not just meant to awe people, or show Jesus' divine power, but to show *something in particular* about Jesus and his heavenly redeeming work in the world. So what do we see here?

Well, lets see: Jesus sends a man born blind to a *pool* used for *ritual washing and purification*, to *wash* himself, so that his *eyes would be opened, enabling*

him to see and worship Jesus as his Lord, and, while was still dripping wet, testify to unbelievers about Jesus and what he had done for him.

Do you think John might be driving at something here?

We too were born blind, unable to see or know God, lost in sin in darkness. We too received a miracle: we were sent, by the command of Jesus himself, to the font. We were washed and purified, and in that moment *our* eyes were opened – even though we might not even remember it. Our rebirth in holy baptism took us out of blindness and darkness into the light, where, as Paul puts it so powerfully in Ephesians 1, the ‘eyes of our hearts’ were enlightened. Jesus has done it – it’s gracious gift. Full of darkness and sin though we were, God’s glory is now displayed in our lives. This is what is talking about in the opening verse of today’s epistle reading, from Ephesians 5: ...once you were darkness, but now in the Lord, you are light.

And that light shines. We may not even always be aware of it, but God is working through us. We *are* different, and it shows. People ask questions and we have the chance to shine light on them, to tell, like this man who has his eyes opened, simply and clearly what has happened to us – not by our decision or initiative but because the ‘man called Jesus’ (verse 10) opened our eyes to see him, to know him, to believe in him as our saviour and Lord.

John is also passing on to us the reality that the man born blind also faced and struggled with: that as live in the light, we will often be faced with people who still live in the dark, in our workplaces, our families, our social circle who are blind and go on choosing to remain so. The pharisees in this narrative cannot see what is staring them in the face, and the more they claim to see everything, the more they prove that they see nothing, that their faith is placed squarely in what they do and what they can achieve as law-keepers, Disciples of Moses. Christians have always faced this: people who have placed their faith in human efforts of some kind: progress, science, political development, education, even humanitarian aid.

And whatever objections and questions people may have about Jesus, we should remind ourselves of something: *we* were blind once ourselves, and *Jesus* worked a miracle in us. That is what he does. Our job is simple; it is to testify simply and honestly to Jesus, like the man who been born blind: one thing I know. I was blind but now I see.

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 neighbours 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 the man.' 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.' But 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, 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.' 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 worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near 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.