

“Lord, I do believe.” (*John 9:38*)

These are the words of a man blind from birth who now sees in faith more clearly than through his received sight. Can they be our words? We, who profess to see more clearly in faith than through physical sight? That test has been put before us this week. It has already been a crippling journey. We are blinded by a virus that we cannot see – a virus that remains hidden and yet, becomes more visibly manifest with each passing moment. Our situation asks us to make many difficult choices. Can we remain apart from one another so we may care for each other in the best possible way? Can we change the privilege of our movement now so that others may simply move? Can we remain faithful in the light of such an unbelievable reality? This story invites us deeper into that long and dark journey so that we may come more fully into the “I AM the light of the world” (*John 8:12*) – into Easter light – into the resurrection of the incarnation of the *logos* of God.

This gospel passage occurs during the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkoth* meaning ingathering, or the Feast of Booths), a harvest festival during which tents or booths, were erected to shelter harvesters. The symbols of the festival include rain (water from the pool of Siloam) and lights (illumination of the four torches in the Temple Court of the Women). John continues the theme of the replacement of feasts (Passover, 2,13; 6,4; Hanukkah, 10,22; Pentecost, 5,1) and here accomplished by Jesus as the Living Water. These chapters comprise seven miscellaneous controversies and dialogues. There is a literary inclusion with Jesus in hiding in chapter 7,4-10 and 8,59. There are frequent references to attempts on his life.

As Jesus encounters the blind man, it prompts an expectable question from his disciples. In first century Judaism, blindness and any other “dis”ease was considered to be a sign of sin passed on from parents or a sin committed by the child in the womb. Jesus, the one sent from God, does not counter the disciples understanding, he makes it null and void by simply spitting into mud, placing it on the man’s eyes and telling him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man’s sight is restored. Until now Jesus has indicated that he does not perform his works on his own authority. Now he includes his disciples in his work: “We must work the works of the one who sent me” (v4a). Yet all who encounter the healed man, especially the religious authorities, remain blind to Jesus’ sign and search for an understanding within their own limited view. There is no questioning that a miracle has taken place. Rather, the authorities question Jesus’ identity and focus on his breaking of Sabbath regulation. And while the waters of Siloam are integral to the story, it is clear that it is not contact with the waters that effect the cure, but contact with the Sent One. Jesus, the light of the world (9:5), the Sent One (9:7) has restored sight to a man who has never seen the light.

The action of Jesus does not lead to the praise of God, but to schism among the man's neighbors. In a way similar to Jesus' own self-identification, the cured man speaks for himself: "I AM the man." The man identifies with the I AM of Jesus. He becomes one sent to make God's healing reality known.

As the authorities question the blind man, they remain in darkness focusing on Jesus' offense concluding he cannot be from God as he does not keep the Sabbath. Others, however, point out that Jesus' signs indicate that he cannot be a sinner. As the man progresses in faith (vv. 7, 11, 17), the Pharisees move in the opposite direction. Belief is beyond them; they must have the facts. So they question the man's parents. The parents affirm that their son was born blind and they withdraw from the discussion. There is a threat to both the parents and the son as they could be put out of the synagogue. This reality, however, would resound much more with Christians of John's community hearing this story. It was not until 85 AD that Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogue ("curse against heretics" found in the *Eighteen Benedictions*).

The Pharisees again question the man and he replies in words we know very well: "I was blind, but now I see." Not being able to confess such faith, the Pharisees cast him out. Jesus, however seeks him out and ask him only "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man replies, "Lord, I believe."

This week of Lent has asked us if we believe. This week of Lent has posed the difficult reality before us that we may not be gathered together for Holy Week and Easter. The reality of Holy Week already lays before us in the today's Gospel and in the Sundays that remain in Lent. This Sunday (*Laetare* meaning 'rejoice') invites us to see beyond our present reality. This gospel centers on the call to rejoice and join the Sent One in proclaiming God's power to heal and restore. It is the Maundy Thursday we long for as Jesus' offers himself to us in bread and wine – in food that nourishes our souls and allows us strength for the journey ahead. Next Sunday's gospel (the Raising of Lazarus) lays before us the reality of death and belief in transformed life that Jesus' gift of self will model. Finally, Palm Sunday invites us to join in a Holy Week procession through the paschal mystery.

As the coming weeks bring more darkness and fear and we are "dis"eased, may we find the hope and courage to join the Sent One in proclaiming God's power to restore and save. May we continue to reach out to one another and those we do not know and proclaim "we are still blinded, but we will see." Many more holy weeks lie ahead. May we rejoice as did the blind man and exclaim "I do believe, Lord."

AMEN.