Sight to the Blind | John 9

One of my favourite singer-songwriters, John Mayer, once said: *When I try to write a song about the ocean, I get a cup of water. But when I write about a cup of water, I tend to find the ocean.* As we continue our journey through the *7 Signs of Jesus* in the Gospel of John, I feel like that's what these sign-stories are like. Very specific stories about very specific people with specific events in specific times and places – you know, like writing a song about a specific "cup of water." But, all pointing to a far greater significance and relevance and reality that is as wide and vast as the ocean. And as we come to the next sign story in John Chapter 9, I feel like that's especially true in this story where Jesus heals a specific man with a specific condition of being blind from birth, but does so as a sign to *all humanity* with a desire to open *all of our eyes* to a spiritual condition we often can't see for ourselves.

So as we enter into this story together, I want to invite us to enter in at two levels. First, at the "cup of water" level of this man's specific situation and what it can say to us. And then, second, at the "ocean-wide" level of what Jesus was most trying to point to and point out in this story – for all to see – ultimately so we may come to *see and know* him like never before.

So to briefly recap the story, as John 9 begins, Jesus and his disciples find themselves walking through Jerusalem on the Sabbath, when they come across a man begging near one of the temple courts because he'd been blind from birth. Now, for any of you who may live with or have loved ones who live with visual impairment or a degree of blindness, I want to say I can only imagine how challenging that must be. But here, perhaps even more so in the first century, where being born blind was experienced by some as a near-death sentence. Causing some people to be abandoned by family and left to beg in the streets in a devastating existence most saw as hardly worth living. Meaning, for all intents and purposes, this man in John's story was considered nearly dead and in need of new-life resurrection.

And yet, as Jesus' disciples notice this man, their first response isn't heartfelt compassion but theological confusion. You see, it was common among the rabbis in Jesus' day to try to come up with theological explanations for why otherwise unexplainable bad things happened to people. With the assumption being that bad things like blindness from birth *certainly couldn't happen* to "good people." And so, the disciples get into theology-mode by addressing Jesus as ***"Rabbi"*** to ask: ***"who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).*** And at the "cup of water" level of this man's situation, the first thing I want us to see in this story is that Jesus makes it clear that this is absolutely the wrong question for the situation. That while the religious community of Jesus' day – often like ours – was eager to find cause-and-effect explanations to settle their minds and hearts that certainly God couldn't allow bad things to happen to good people – and, as a bonus, to feel comfort in pointing out when bad things happen to quote-unquote "bad people" – Jesus reframes the whole situation in the reality that, while evil and brokenness are indeed at play in our world (but are definitively *not* from God), God, on the other hand, is constantly in a process of ***"caus[ing] everything to work together for the good" (Romans 8:28)*** out of God's great love for all people. Reframing the temptation of his disciples to view life and reality in a way that has been around since the first pages of the scriptures when Adam & Eve were eager to eat from the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil* out of their desire to ***"be like God" (Genesis 3:5)*** and become judge and jury of good and evil in the world around them.

Now from there, as the story continues, we get our first glimpse of the "ocean" level implications as Jesus further taps into Genesis origin-story imagery, declaring in ***Verse 5***: ***I am the light of the world.*** That while the creation story in Genesis describes light being created by God on the first day, John began his gospel by saying that: ***[Jesus] was with God in the beginning. And through him all things were made. (John 1:2-3)***

And so, Jesus declares himself to be *the light* before there was light. And to be *the light* by which any and all other light (or view of reality) can be seen. Then the story says:

> ***After saying this, Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.***
>
> ***John 9:6-7***

Now, when you think of the miraculous power and work of Jesus, it seems weird that Jesus needed or decided to get spit and mud involved in this man's situation. And while some scholars note that spittle was thought by some to have healing properties, in the religious community, a combo of spit and mud would've been seen as "unclean" – kind of like how they saw the man who'd been born blind. A way of seeing that Jesus was in the process of shedding new light on. And further still, a way for Jesus to keep taking his disciples back to the beginning in order to shed new light on their view of reality by re-enacting the way God combined dust from the ground and the vapor of his breath to bring the first human being to life in ***Genesis 2:7*** – now as Jesus' way to bring this man – this human being – to *new* life.

And after placing the mud on the man's eyes, Jesus tells him to go to a pool used for ceremonial washing – called "Sent" – illustrating how sometimes we simply need to listen to Jesus and go where he sends us even before we're able to see the full picture.

And friends, through this first "cup of water" layer of this man's story, I want to say that if you've ever felt lost in the dark? Or feel hardly alive in a dead-end situation? Or worse, are feeling guilty or shamed because of the hand you've been dealt? In whatever your specific "cup of water" is – whether feeling lost in the darkness of grief, stuck in financial challenges, caught in relational messes, having a hard time seeing your next step at work or school, or blinded by a cloud of doubt and confusion – Jesus wants you to know that he sees you. That he loves you. That he is the light who can help you see and bring new life.

That he wants to place his hands on your life – as weird as that can sound or seem at times – so that you can hear his voice, respond to what he says, and see him for who he is. Bringing you into a new way of seeing and a new way of living in *your* "cup of water" situation.

And now, to dive deeper into the "ocean" implications of this story… Where, throughout the rest of John Chapter 9 that we didn't read, there becomes a great debate about how this man received his sight; theological concerns about when and where it happened; what all that meant about whether Jesus was "good" or "bad" in the eyes of God; and ultimately what people would choose to see – *or remain not seeing* – when it comes to what God is up to in and through the person of Jesus, especially in ways we don't always expect or understand.

To highlight some key moments from this second half of the story, in **verse 13** it says:

> ***[The neighbours] brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath.***
>
> ***Some of the Pharisees said, "This man [Jesus] is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?"***
>
> ***A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."***
>
> ***He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"***
>
> ***John 9:13-16, 24-25***

As the debate ensues about how exactly this man was healed and whether this was "good" or "bad" in the eyes of God, a group of religious leaders known as the Pharisees become viciously adamant that there's absolutely no way Jesus could be from God – or even on the side of God – since Jesus violated their boxed-in and blinder-driven understanding of the religious rules of keeping the Sabbath day. All with this poor man whose eyes have just been opened to a whole new lease on life, now caught in the middle of a religious debate and heretic hunt.

And I want to pause there to say, if you've ever felt like that in a faith community, I want you to know you're not alone. In fact, if you've ever been called "sinner" – maybe even while simultaneously experiencing the newness, freedom, and vision of Jesus in your life – that you're in good company. As the Jesus we call *Saviour* knows what it's like to be called *sinner*.

And then after the Pharisees throw this man who was once blind but can now see out of the synagogue – which Jewish scholars describe as even harsher than being flogged with a whip as it cut you off entirely from your community – as we heard read in the story, Jesus went to find this man and asked him: ***"Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (John 9:35).***

Now, recall that earlier in the story after placing the mud on the man's eyes, Jesus sent the man to wash at Siloam. And then Jesus continued on his way. And while the man was suddenly able to see after washing, he actually hadn't laid his eyes on Jesus till this moment, now saying, ***"I want to believe"*** and Jesus saying, "***You have now seen" (John 9:36-37)***.

And out of this, the "ocean" implications of the story wrap up in the final verses:

> ***Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."***
>
> ***Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"***
>
> ***Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."***
>
> ***John 9:39-41***

Friends, as this story concludes, the truth and reality that Jesus is getting at here is that we're all born with a degree of spiritual blindness. That if we're honest in our self-estimation, none of us are fully capable of always seeing or completely understanding all that God is up, or what exactly his good and life-giving work may end up looking like in the lives of others – especially when it flies in the face of our understanding of our religious rules.

And at the end of this story, with an ocean-level sign for all people everywhere, Jesus explains that while he *hasn't* come to condemn the world – a clarification he makes multiple times throughout John – Jesus says he *has indeed* come to bring the divine light of judgment. A revelation and illumination of what's real and not real in our world. Not the kind of judgment that condemns or accuses – like the Pharisees in this story – but the kind of judgment that shines the light of truth on our world and our real-life situations through Jesus who is the full and complete revelation of who God is and what the work of God in people's lives looks like.

And while, in the "cup of water" situation the man in this story found himself in – where sin was *not* the cause of his *physical* blindness – when it comes to the "ocean" of reality we swim in together, Jesus makes clear in this story that choosing to remain or staying stuck in our spiritual blindness has *great potential* to cause sin. To cause us to miss the mark on who God is and then miss out on what life with God is all about – especially when the pushed aside and left for dead find new life in him.

So the question for all of us at the end of this sign story is: ***How will we respond to our spiritual blindness?*** And while there are "cup of water" layers in this story we can relate to with the man who was born blind, the ultimate choice before us that bookends this story is whether we'll respond like Jesus' *apprentices* or remain in our blindness like the *Pharisees*?

You see, recall that the story began with the disciples – or as we've been calling them this fall, *apprentices* – having a very particular view of reality that they were sure was right. But, coming to Jesus with enough curiosity and open-mindedness to ask and see and be transformed by what Jesus had to say about it. And then ultimately staying on the journey with Jesus to grow in being with him, becoming like him, and having their eyes slowly but surely opened to what it meant to be part of and do more of what he did in the world.

Where, sadly, the Pharisees on the other hand, felt so dead-set on their need to grit their teeth and white-knuckle their faith with dogged certainty and blinding arrogance that they ended up missing out on seeing and participating in the work of God right in front of them.

So, I invite you to ask yourself: What are some of the ways we might be staying stuck in our own spiritual blindness these days? What is it about our algorithm or media choices that keep our perspective locked and loaded in an airtight echo chamber – an echo chamber one that may or *may not* echo the heart of Jesus? Or how have we gone about reading or approaching the Bible trying to feel so certain in our perspectives and interpretations so that we can feel like the sole arbiter on who's in or who's out when it comes to our understanding of religious rules? Or what else in your life might your eyes be so focused on these days that *isn't* Jesus as the guiding light of your life – whether wealth or success or politics or people-pleasing or fling-chasing or pleasure-seeking – that ultimately has you blinded to and missing out on the new and unexpected, full of grace and truth and love, life-giving work that Jesus wants to open your eyes to and do in your life, and in the lives of those around you?

All of which has the power and potential to be a sign as beautiful and miraculous and life-changing as someone able to declare: *"I was blind but now I see!"*

Let's pray together…