

Covenant Word

When Were Your Eyes Opened?

Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
March 9, 2008*

It has been more than 20 years since I traveled to Tusculumbia, Alabama to tour the childhood home of Helen Keller. The homestead is called "Ivy Green," and each summer, the locals perform the story of Helen Keller and her remarkable teacher, Anne Sullivan, on a stage that is in the backyard. (Van Wyck Brooks, Helen Keller: Sketch for a Portrait)

Born in June of 1880, Helen experienced an illness at 18 months of age that took away her sight and hearing. Helen described her life at this age

as if she existed in a "no-world," one without hope, anticipation, wonder, faith or joy. She was often like a wild animal, violent, stubborn, and given to such spasms of baffled rage that her family was left bruised by her assaults. She would snatch whatever she chose from the dishes on the table and throw herself in a fury on the floor if she was denied. Meaningless sensations rioted within her. All she knew was that she was compelled to seek food and warmth as she remained helpless and alone in the deep dark pit of her handicaps. She was to later compare herself in these hopeless silent years to a ship groping its way in a dense fog at sea, only she had no way of knowing that safe harbors existed. Helen had no sounding board or compass until Anne Sullivan became her teacher.

Within a month of Anne Sullivan's arrival, seven year old Helen was transformed into a gentle child who showed the signs of an exceptional intelligence. When the word "doll" was spelled into her hand, she could not make any connection, but she did try to teach her dog to spell this word by manipulating his claws. It was only when Anne held Helen's hand under the spout in the pump-house that she connected the word "water" with the cool stream that flowed over her hand. It was the first time Helen realized that things had names and that the manual alphabet was the key to unlock the mysteries that surrounded her. Helen was to later write:

Suddenly, there was a strange stir within me,--a misty consciousness, a sense of something remembered. I under-stood that it was possible for me to communicate with other people by these signs. Thoughts that ran forward and backward came to me quickly,--thoughts that seemed to start in my brain and spread all over me. I think it was in the nature of a revelation...I felt joyous, strong, equal to my limitations. Delicious sensations rippled through me, and sweet strange things that were locked up in my heart began to sing. It was as if I had come back to life after being dead... (Brooks)

Helen never allowed her disabilities to limit her. She attended college with her faithful teacher Anne Sullivan at her side. She traveled, lectured, wrote books, and kept company with amazing individuals like Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Ford and Albert Einstein. Mark Twain was to say of Helen Keller that she saw more in her blindness than others who had sighted eyes.

Such is the case in our gospel reading for today, for we encounter a blind man whose restored sight

points out the blindness of those who possessed sight all along.

Jesus had been at the Temple teaching. As

people heard his words, they wondered if he were a prophet or the Christ. The Scripture is clear in pointing out that the people were divided in their opinions of him. Some felt so strongly that they wanted Jesus arrested. The Pharisees, in particular, were deeply disturbed. As they discussed what they might do, Nicodemus stood to defend Jesus. So with no restraints yet, Jesus continued to preach and teach in the Temple. This is when the scribes and Pharisees bring the woman caught in the act of adultery before him. This is when Jesus makes his confession that he is the Light of the world. This is when Jesus makes a distinction between the sons of Abraham and his own followers. He makes many pointed statements, like:

You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. (8:15)

...and...

You cannot bear to hear my word <because> you are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth because there is no truth in him...he is a liar and the father of all lies. But I tell the truth and you do not believe me. (8:39ff)

Is it any wonder that they watch him closely in the hope that they will catch him in a clearly defined breach of the law?

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



Baptist Church of the
Covenant

Where Faith Comes to Life.

2117 University Boulevard
Birmingham, AL 35233-3188

205-328-0644
FAX 205-328-6060

Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

Into this cauldron of fear, suspicion and hatred, comes our story for today. Jesus and his disciples pass by a man who has been blind from birth. The blind man does not ask for anything. He seems to be present only so the disciples can have an object lesson. Looking at him, they ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, since he has been born blind?"

Now I do not think the disciples are trying to fix blame by asking this question. They are not out for retribution or blood. They are curious.

They really want to know if there is a different way to look at the existing idea prevalent in that day that blindness = sickness = sin = human fault. They have been watching Jesus debate theology with the Jews in the Temple and here was an example of a faith question that plagued them. So, who better to ask than their teacher? So they ask: Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? It is a fair question for inquisitive students to ask their teacher. (This exegesis is taken from Anna Carter Florence, "Preaching the Lesson," *Lectionary Homiletics*, March 2, 2008)

Jesus, as was true to his style, turns the theological tables and stumps everyone with his answer. There is no blame given. There is no fault declared. "No one sinned," he says. "This man was born this way so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Now this answer requires me to look at every situation I encounter with different eyes. It is my tendency to fix blame. I want to find out who is responsible for what has happened. I'm uncomfortable with mystery. I need a logical explanation. I want the guilty parties to get the judgment that is due to them. But Jesus has a whole different approach. No more law, only grace...a grace that even we sometimes think is too easy.

For how many times have we said: *Whose fault is it that the baseball went through the kitchen window? Whose fault is it that the rear bumper of the car is dented?* Blame is not necessary. Fault is not the issue. The issue is how can God be glorified in even the worst of circumstances? And how might we join God in the helping?

Whose fault is it that this couple cannot conceive a child? Whose fault is it that this marriage is ending? Blame is not necessary. Fault is not the issue. The issue is how can God be glorified in even the worst of circumstances? And how might we join God as a part of the solution?

Whose fault is it that I got laid off? Whose fault is it that the mortgage did not get paid? Blame is not necessary. Fault is not the issue. The issue is how can God be glorified in even the worst of circumstances? And how might we enter into God's solution?

Whose fault is it that I have cancer or a predisposition to depression or a propensity for addiction or chronic pain or ADHD or...or...or...you fill in the blank? And the maddening answer comes yet again: Blame is not

necessary. Fault is not the issue. The issue is how can God be glorified in even the worst of circumstances? And how can we join God in being redemptive?

As if his words that work to change our perspective are not enough, Jesus refuses to allow the blind man to be used only as an object for this lesson. He spits on the ground, makes some mud and places the mud on the man's eyes. Then he tells him to "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam."

And when he washed the mud away, the man could see.

Now in the story of blind Baritmaeus, after Jesus heals his blindness and Bartimaeus opens his eyes, the first thing he would have seen was his healer, Jesus himself. But in this story, Jesus disappears into the crowds. When the blind man's sight is restored, he does not see Jesus. He sees his neighbors who were also at the pool of Siloam. He does not have a clue as to the identity of Jesus, yet this is exactly the information that the Pharisees seek from the man.

You see this healing presents a problem for the Pharisees. Jesus worked on the Sabbath. He mixed the mud. He applied it, and he healed the blind man. This was a direct infraction of the law, and so they are off and running on another theological rabbit chase. As they miss yet one more opportunity to celebrate a miracle of divine grace, the man becomes, once more, the object for another lesson. Ironically, their intent is to find fault and fix blame.

He is brought before them and interrogated. In contrast to the certainty of the Pharisees' righteousness, the man does not mind admitting that he does not have all the answers. He does not know where Jesus is or if it is accurate to call Jesus a sinner. There is only one thing he knows for sure, that is that once he was blind but now he can see. As he is forced to give testimony over and over again, we watch him gradually grow in to the complete truth. Jesus is, at first, just a man, then he's a prophet, then he is "from God," and finally he is "Lord." The man's vision grows sharper with each testimonial until in full focus he finally confesses "I believe."

What is remarkable to me is the consistency of this man's testimony. He stands completely exposed in the glare of public scrutiny. He does not become self-important, nor does he abase himself. He makes no extravagant claims concerning his healing, but neither will he change his testimony in order to please the priests. He never attributes the miracle to his own righteousness. He does not judge Jesus one way or the other. He speaks the truth simply and he consistently tells his story to his neighbors, to his parents, and to the Pharisees. This prevents the Pharisees from rewriting the story to suit themselves. (Andrea LaSonde Anastos, *Minister's Annual Manual*, March 2, 2008)

As he is forced to give testimony over and over again, we watch him gradually grow in to the complete truth. Jesus is, at first, just a man, then he's a prophet, then he is "from God," and finally he is "Lord." The man's vision grows sharper with each testimonial until in full focus he finally confesses "I believe."

What is remarkable to me is the consistency of this man's testimony.

I find it fascinating that not one person, not even his parents, say “Alleluia!” or “Thank God!” when he is healed. No one seems to be curious about what it must be like to see for the first time in his life or if the light hurts his eyes. They are so filled with fear of the established religious order that they slink into the background, and all the Pharisees want to know is “how” and “who,” “where” and “what.” There is no courage on any one’s part to admit the possibility of a new truth.

So these rule keepers decide they must flex their muscles one more time. Affronted by the man’s cheeky answer that insinuates they could not see God if God came and tapped them on their shoulders, they unceremoniously bounce him right out the front door of God’s house.

It did not matter that this was his hometown, his neighborhood congregation, or his place of worship since he was a child. Worst of all, it did not matter that he had

experienced a direct intervention of the miraculous. No, instead, they looked down their long noses into his newly opened eyes and drive him out of the fellowship. (Barbara Brown Taylor, “A Tale of Two Heretics,” [Home By Another Way](#))

Tom Long says of this story: We seem to have a textbook case of a repressive religious institution at work. As long as people are “blind,” the welcome mat is out, but let them start to see a little light, let them begin to think for themselves, let them start tapping their feet to the Spirit’s tune instead of the official march, and the religious police move in with handcuffs and billy clubs! (“Loving Jesus, Hating the Church,” [Whispering the Lyrics](#))

The first time I experienced this was when I agreed to serve on the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991. My convictions to practice historic Baptist principals amazingly had me and my family ousted from the neighborhood Baptist church that had been Lloyd’s home since childhood and in which I had served for 11 years. So painful was this experience that when we dared to talk with another church about the possibility of my being on staff, Lloyd asked: “What’s the worst they can do to you?” To which I replied: “Well, I guess they can fire me!” Then we both laughed hysterically with the realization that we had survived this once and could survive it again. The truth of the matter is, however, our laughter came from the realization that we had more than survived. We flourished! We flourished because as simple as it sounds, Jesus found us. Jesus found us like he found the blind man when the blind man was cast out of the Temple and touched his place of pain in order to make him whole.

It is profoundly meaningful to me that Jesus initiates the man’s healing and then seeks after him upon hearing that “they had cast him out.” Jesus was not going to just walk on by having used him for the benefit of the disciples’ learning. Knowing that every person, Pharisee, and disciple is an opportunity through which God may reveal light, Jesus refused to walk right on by. Instead, he stops to touch what prevented this man from being whole. Jesus stays just long enough to verify that, in spite of his ousting,

this man’s faith remained intact. Jesus asks, “Do you believe in the Son of man?” And the man simply replies with, “I believe.”

It seems to me that the people I encounter in all walks of life, at all ages and with varied interests are each and every one in search of a touch that heals. There are enough issues, enough misunderstandings, and enough blindness to keep us divided and disabled with personal pain. Perhaps what we are in need of are individuals who are dedicated to seeking after the heart of Jesus that reminds us that we do not need to blame and find fault. Instead, we are to look for a little dirt, a little spit, and place some healing onto the souls of those with whom we work...those with whom we live...yea, those with whom we worship.

Then we will be as teacher Anne Sullivan was to Helen Keller: holding another’s hand under the streams of living water, all the while spelling out the grace of God which is the key to unlocking the mysteries that surround

us. If we can...no, if we will, I believe that the strange, sweet things of faith that are locked up in our own hearts will begin to sing as we witness another come back to life after having been dead.

So as we continue this Lenten journey from blindness to sight, from darkness to light, from death to life, we encourage decisions of faith. Whether it is to become a follower of Jesus with an initial decision of faith or to come to the front in need of healing mud, we invite you to respond to God’s saving grace as we stand and sing Hymn # 60, “Be Thou My Vision.”