



Fourth Sunday in Lent 2011
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Out of Darkness

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind but now I see.” As I was preparing this sermon this week I just couldn’t get this hymn out of my head.

I know many people actually have trouble identifying with this hymn because they find it impossible to see themselves as a wretch. And I can understand that. We’ve come to associate being a wretch with someone who has done despicable things who suddenly sees the error of their ways and is now on the straight and narrow...thanks be to God.

But, in fact, wretch simply means outcast or someone in exile---or if you want to get really descriptive “a miserable person”—or perhaps more poignantly, “a person in misery.” Makes it a little easier to identify with the word doesn’t it? Who among us has not at sometime felt lost or cast aside or been in misery in some way? Because of his physical blindness our man born blind is an outcast, but today’s gospel confronts us with the teaching that there is more than one way to be blind and lost in darkness.

Now I share this reflection with you this morning because Jesus teaches us through this dramatic tale that John weaves so brilliantly that those of us who have eyes to see do not always grasp the truth that is right in front of us.

This is a story about physical blindness to be sure. But it is also a story about spiritual blindness. Both the disciples and the religious authorities are very much in the dark. The disciples have a skewed understanding of the nature of sin and the religious authorities refuse to believe eye-witness accounts of the miracle.

They are more concerned to maintain ritual righteousness about Sabbath-keeping than to love a fellow human being and rejoice in his wholeness. So, we begin to understand this

morning that we are supposed to be cluing in to what it *really* means to *see* and how very easy it is to simply remain blind.

Through the story of the man born blind, Jesus teaches us to understand that God is always ready to do new things and that we should always stand ready to see the world with new eyes and a new vision. John's gospel continually reminds us that those of us on the "inside" don't always get it.

He cautions us that we can become so possessive of God's grace and mercy that we start to think it is something we can give or withhold at our own discretion. The world is full of "good Christian folks" who are happy to tell us who is worthy of God's love and who is not.

It is sometimes hard for us on the inside, those of us who fill up church pews all over the world every Sunday, to believe that God can teach us through those who we might consider to be outside of God's mercy and compassion. We have to admit that we can be just like those who would rather drive the blind man out than be confronted with our own spiritual blindness.

The religious insiders are caught up in the importance of what they perceive their place to be. But it is in fact our blind beggar, whom the crowd wishes to silence, who eventually sees Jesus most clearly of all.

It is easy to feel that we would never be like the antagonists in this brilliantly drawn story, but there are places in all of our lives where we are blind to the ways we are possessive of what God seeks to give away for free. The first step in true discipleship is having the honesty to see ourselves clearly and to be courageous in throwing off everything that seeks to keep us blind to the world as God sees it.

It can be hard to move from where we are to where God wants us to be. That's the reality of a faith-full life. People who refuse to struggle with new insight are often resisting God's call to new life and new understanding.

But everyday God is calling us from where we are to where God knows we *can* be--- and that's why we are challenged when God pushes over sacred icons in our lives and opens up places of uncertainty, places where what we think we knew suddenly no longer rings true.

The disciples struggle with this constantly as do we. You see, when we move closer to *really* following Jesus on the Way, our perspective changes and our eyes *are* opened to new truths and new understanding. But this new vision, just as with the man born blind, can thrust us into conflict and controversy when often we'd just prefer to sit in darkness.

I was reminded this week in all of the press coverage around Elizabeth's Taylor death and her work with AIDS--- of a story I heard years ago about a church community that went through just this kind of transformation. It happened in a church in a small

Midwestern town. It was a church where the sermons were fire and brimstone and where it was pretty clear what the church was against--- which was most everything.

And then one day the pastor called the deacons to his office and choking back tears he told them that his youngest son Roger was gay and had AIDS.

The deacons of course were very sympathetic to their pastor for a few moments before they broached the subject of his need to resign. And the pastor knew it was what he had to do. He knew he could not subject the church to the shame and embarrassment of the pastor's son being both gay and having AIDS. So, he took out a sheet of paper and began to write his resignation.

But then one old man, the oldest member of the church, spoke up and he asked, "Since when did Jesus start throwing people away?" And he said, "If we can't love our pastor and his son through this we shouldn't even call ourselves Christians."

His courage in stating this truth started a whole other conversation. The result was a decision to embrace the pastor's family and the son. And they committed themselves to an AIDS education workshop and a few months later they actually began support groups for AIDS victims and their families---and this in a church which once saw only shame and sin in those they deemed as unworthy of God's love and care.

They were moved to this new understanding of God's call to them because suddenly AIDS was no longer simply an issue or a concept---something they could deride as outside of their experience. Suddenly this horrible killer disease had a face and represented a human being in crisis, someone that they knew and loved, and suddenly they "saw" things differently.

They "saw" with the eyes of God instead of with the eyes of a narrow and punishing concept of those whom they called "sinners." Now sadly, about half the members quit this church...you see sometime the closer we get to God's unconditional love, the less religious people want anything to do with it! But in the lives of those who were willing to have their vision transformed, a ministry was born that still brings God's grace to many.

But you see, here is the hard part--- when we allow God's transformative power into our lives, the way those who remained in this church did, the demands that new our vision creates can be pretty overwhelming. Our story today tells us to be careful about what we want, because we might get it—and life might never be the same.

We might have to give up something up. It might be some old pain, some old grudge, some sense of status or some other way of being in the world ----or even how we understand God. These are all things that we wrap around ourselves like a cloak. A cloak that hides our deepest fears that perhaps we are in fact a wretch and so we must deny it with all we're worth---even if it blinds us to Christ's love and mercy not only for the world, but for ourselves.

Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century Christian bishop, taught that basic human sin is the refusal to grow—the decision to remain miserable but safe, the decision to hide in our familiar cloaks of blindness, the decision to avoid any clear vision of who we want to become.

Paul urges us this morning to "live in the light" and repudiate the "deeds of darkness." But to see ourselves and the world as God does often requires radical vision correction. That's because God doesn't look at the world like we do.

As Samuel tells us, "The Lord does not look at the things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart". There is indeed more than one way to be blind, but God in Christ offers healing for all of them. Amen.

**The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Seattle, WA**