

Signs of the Divine

The Rev. Rob Shearer + A Sermon for Every Sunday + April 12, 2026 + John 9: 1-41

Today's gospel passage one with so many twists and turns. On the surface, it's yet another Jesus' simple miracle stories – this one healing a man who is born blind.

Yet, in those 41 verses we've just heard read, it's really just two verses – verses 6 and 7 - that describe the actual and, let's face it, *weird* miracle of spit and mud and renewed sight. The rest of the text is really about what is *revealed* through what happens.

I've just used that word 'miracle' do describe what Jesus did that day – but it's notable that the word most often used to describe the so-called miracles in John's gospel – which we hear uttered by the Pharisees in verse 16, is the Greek word *sēmeion* which, in English, is more 'akin' to the word 'sign' than 'miracle'.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the word most used for Jesus' miracles is the Greek word *dunamis* – which means mighty works *or* power. But commentators note that *sēmeion* - *sign*, is more often used to emphasize the *meaning* of the miracle – that is, what it might tell us about Jesus, or about what's being transformed - rather than the word *dunamis* – which focuses on the supernatural aspect of the miracle until itself.

Our story begins with Jesus – not as a miracle-worker, not yet, anyways – but as an agent of transformation. And right from the get-go, Jesus is there shaking up, transforming the worldview of his disciples: “Rabbi” they ask Jesus - “who sinned? this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

And sure, we can think of ourselves as so far above that view of the world. But I'd suggest that it's still a view held to varying degrees by many in the realms of alternative health, or in a simplified westernized version of karma – not to mention even enshrined in some of our great hymns – tho the eye made blind by sin - thy glory may not see (Holy Holy Holy Lord God Almighty) - to name one notable example.

I think it's important to note that the blindness in today's story is, to be sure, a social location – but is not *the* problem to be fixed. From the beginning of the story, as we've heard, Jesus is sure to destabilize the view that the man's different ability is caused by sin. And as the story unfolds, it becomes clearer - the point really isn't about being healed from blindness – it's actually about a bigger transformation that happens – or in the case of so many onlookers, is resisted.

And, here, the man born blind, in spite of some of what might be our own preconceived notions or Sunday school memories, is *not* a beggar. Even before the healing, he is already a person with agency, with a family, with a community, with a clear ability to articulate. This is person whose life is whole. And with that, the point is not that blindness is bad or that blindness is a category which must be overcome.

I'd actually suggest that the point of Jesus' sign is far more *significant* than that.

In this sense, the first thing to note is there is something *entirely new* that is happening here. Nowhere in the Hebrew tradition - nowhere in the ancient scriptures of Jesus, the disciples and the Pharisees had someone been known to be healed of blindness – as is highlighted when the Pharisees say “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.” Resurrected from the dead, sure, even that happened. And yet, the Christian scriptures have Jesus healing the blind - at least 7 folk – and this man being one of them.

The first thing that Jesus does with this man who has been ‘demonized’ and assumed to be in a state of blindness because of sin, is take the accusation of sin onto himself. By the middle of our reading, it’s the religious leaders that are now accusing *Jesus* of being the sinner. In the next chapter of John’s gospel, the crowds even go so far to say “Jesus, has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?” [while] Others were saying, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” And after he takes that onto himself it’s as if Jesus slips into the background, allowing the agency of the man to shine that much brighter.

And if that isn’t powerful enough, I would suggest that the important action of Jesus isn’t so much the healing, nor even the transferring of the ‘sin’ onto himself. I’d suggest that the heart of what’s happening here is what the Eastern tradition of the church might call theosis; that the transformative process of becoming like God or being united with God.

There are so many cues in the passage that point to this kind of transformation.

I’m indebted to an article by one W. Fiona Chen that highlights these – and I’d like to read a few of her points in detail. She says this: See: Chen, W. Fiona - [HEALING AS DIVINIZATION: A POSITIVE READING OF THE HEALING OF THE BLIND MAN IN JOHN 9](#) and see also Michael A Meerson’s Human Dignity, Truth and Diefication in John 9 in *Comunio Journal*.

- [from Chen] Jesus is “the sent one” or “the anointed one,” the man is *sent* to wash in Siloam; [which, the text points out, literally means ‘sent’]
- Jesus is the incarnation of God who comes to reveal the Truth, while the man is born to *manifest* the work of God.
- Both [Jesus and the man born blind] have disputed origins or birth and have their true identity doubted ([and even] the man’s parents deny his parentage out of fear);
- both are divisive figures in the community and rejected by their own people.
- both are regarded as sinners, yet both reject the ... use of the term “sin”
- both are reviled by community leaders, and both provoke crises between believers and non-believers.

And one of the most telling points that Chen raises is that the man born blind calls himself “I am” in verse 9. In many of our translations, the verse reads “I am he” or “I am the man” – but the ‘he’ or ‘the man’ simply doesn’t exist in the original Greek texts. She notes that ‘the “I am” statements have special importance in the Gospel of John... In John’s gospel, of the ten “I am” statements spoken, nine come from Jesus - including the one early in our reading today - “I am the light of the world” - except the one [spoken by the man born blind...(and) all signify or suggest divine identity.’

Of course, though it might seem strange to us in the church of the West, this tradition of becoming God-like is not novel – it’s deep in the consciousness of the Eastern, or Orthodox church.

For them, this metaphor of healing as salvation, this theosis, this union with God, this sanctification, of sorts, is central to their understanding of God's liberating work in our lives and, in fact, for the life of the world.

Neither I, nor the Eastern Church are suggesting the blasphemous notion that the man born blind becomes God. Yet we are suggesting that there is a profound union of transformation that changes everything and that that is the very point of such a so-called 'sign'.

And yet, even as the man who is born blind is lifted up and given a new kind of divine agency – there's much of the passage reveals the flipside is happening; that when we resist the transformation, that when we close our eyes the works of God manifest all around - we become agents of oppression rather than love. Nitpicking about religious rules. Trying to interrogate whether it really happened. During his own transformation, we no one in that world around him is trustworthy except, of course Jesus – even though he is kind of hanging out in the shadows as all this drama unfolds.

Most become interrogators. The religious leaders. The crowds. Even the man's parents throw him under the bus out of fear. The category of blindness is so embedded, that the people can't even recognize the man once he's healed. Those gathered become the counterpoint to the man's transformation in their missing of the point. As much as the story is about the theosis – the manifestation of God's work and God's presence in the man born blind, it's the inability of the others, those who have sight, to witness God's glory manifest. The failure to open their eyes and to see what is clearly happening in front of them.

Friends, I believe that there is a choice to open ourselves to this love, to receive this grace or, conversely, to close our eyes. How might Jesus - that agent of transformation shake up our lives and our views of the world that live in fear instead of love? How might we open our hearts to accept the strangeness of Jesus' spit and mud on our eyes? How might he transform our own perceptions of our limitations to rise up, to find our voice, to know who we are – to invoke the name of the great I Am as we challenge oppression, exclusion, ableism and violence?

And the good news is that, in grace, this theosis is there for all of us. And this is not a means to an end – some personal mystical experience. But, it is, as our text suggests, it is, to echo the words of Psalm 82 – to enter into the power of God who "Rescue[s] the weak and the needy and delivers them from the hand of the wicked."...and where, then, God says to us, "You are gods - children of the Most High, all of you."

What might it mean to respond to Jesus call, to let him to spit on eyes and enter into union with the Creator of the Universe, to invoke the power of the great "I am", to rise from our unwillingness to see, and to do so for the love of the world, for the very sake of love incarnate?

Let us open our eyes, so that all creation might be able to experience the works of God made manifest. It's happening everywhere.

Amen.