

March 19, 2023  
John 9:1-41

Lent 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Heeding the Signs”

“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

A few weeks ago, I was waiting for a prescription to be filled at Shoppers Drug Mart and found myself wandering over to the magazine and book section. As I perused the shelves, looking for some new reading material, I noticed that the store also sells Ontario Drivers' Manuals for student drivers and persons studying for an Ontario driver's license. It brought back memories of my days in driver's education, which involved both classroom sessions and behind the wheel training to prepare us for our written and road tests. As I flipped through the manual, I came upon the chapter that describes road signs, including familiar sights to all drivers such as stop and yield signs, speed limit signs, directional signs, school zone signs, and other important road signs with which potential drivers must familiarize themselves and which must be obeyed when driving. Signs are important to keep drivers safe on both city streets and when driving major highways across the province.

As a person who had been driving for many years, I sometimes take road signs for granted; but I remember one day when our driver's education teacher took us to an unopened section of Interstate Highway 78. Today, I-78 is a major east-west highway across central New Jersey that carries thousands of cars a day; but during my high school years, the highway was being constructed and driver's education classes were allowed to use it to train students in driving on high-speed expressways. Everything was finished on the part of the road with one exception: the signs had not yet been installed. Without signs to guide a driver, there was no way of knowing the speed limit, or the number of the exit and where it would lead, or how far it was until the next major city. Without signs, there was nothing to guide a driver safely to their destination.

Signs play a critical role in many aspects of life; and signs also have an important place in the Fourth Gospel, in which Jesus' miracles are identified as “signs,” which may be defined as *“miracles that point to a deeper meaning about Jesus' identity”* (Jennifer Garcia Bashaw). Following his miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, John reports that *“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him”* (2:11). After healing an official's son in Capernaum, the Fourth Gospel states that *“this was the*

*second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee*” (4:54); after experiencing the miracle of feeding the multitude with five loaves and two fish, “*when the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’*” (6:14). While these signs provide healing and abundance to those who benefited from them, their purpose is to point beyond themselves to the fulfillment of the prophetic promise of a time when “*the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*” (Isaiah 35:5). As road signs point beyond themselves to what lies ahead in our travels, the signs of Jesus point beyond the present to the future that our Lord and Saviour has come to prepare for all God’s people.

Another of these signs is at the heart of today’s Gospel lesson, when as he is walking Jesus “*saw a man blind from birth.*” (9:1). Stories of Jesus giving sight to the blind are found in all of the Gospels (“*Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you.’ And their eyes were opened.*” – Matthew 9:29-30). While the man’s blindness is reported, he is not an active character in the story until verse 7. He makes no request of Jesus to be healed, nor does Jesus engage in any conversation with him about his healing. His first encounter is not with the blind man but with his disciples, whose question reflects traditional Jewish speculation on the relationship of illness and sin: “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” (9:2). The notion that the parents’ sins are visited on the children was common in Jewish reflections on the cause of suffering:

- “The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind; you shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help.” – Deuteronomy 28:28-29.
- “You shall not bow down to them and worship them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” – Exodus 20:5-6.

Jesus’ response turns the disciples’ attention away from conventional notions of cause and effect in explaining human suffering. In John, “sin” is not a moral category about behavior, but a theological category about one’s response to the revelation of God in Jesus (“*I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.*” – 8:24). The man’s blindness, therefore, is not an occasion for reflection on sin and causality, but an occasion with

revelatory significance: *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”* (9:3). The “need” that evokes the miracle is not the man’s blindness but the need for God’s works to be made manifest. Jesus goes on to teach his disciples that *“we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”* (9:4-5). “Works” (*erga*) describes what Jesus does as the one through whom God’s works are accomplished (*“I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.”* – 17:4) and also God’s work as belief in Jesus (*“My teaching is not mine but his who sent me”* – 7:16). Jesus’ presence in the world is the assurance to his followers that *“I am the light of the world”* (9:5), one of the “I am” (*ego eimi*) statements in John that serve as additional signs that point to the fullness of Jesus’ identity and mission. Jesus demonstrates what it means for him to be the “light of the world” when *“he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see”* (9:6-7). The healing power of clay made with spittle was a popular element in healing stories in the Greco-Roman world. John combines this with his translation of “Siloam” as “Sent,” linking the healing waters in this place to Jesus himself, the one who is “sent” by God (*“And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.”* – 12:45). Since Siloam was the source of the water used during the Tabernacles feast, Jesus is now the source of Tabernacle fulfillment in place of the traditional Jewish rites.

- “By delivering this man from the darkness of his blindness, Jesus reveals that he, as the light of the world, delivers all who are in the spiritual darkness of sin and alienation from God.” – Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV.

John reports that the healing takes place at a distance: *“Then he went and washed and came back able to see”* (9:7). There is no further contact between Jesus and this healed man until later in the story. John turns his attention to the traditional motif of witnesses to a miracle, but the witnesses’ questions also anticipate and set the stage for the interrogation of the man by the Pharisees. While some ask, *“is this not the man who used to sit and beg?”* (9:8), others speculated that *“no, but it is someone like him”* (9:9). The healed man insists that *“I am the man,”* and reports that *“the man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.”* (9:11). After reporting that he does not know where Jesus is, the crowds brought the man who is now identified as one who *“had formerly been blind”* to the Pharisees, the leaders of the Jewish people. John now includes another detail about this sign: *“it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes”* (9:14). To violate the sabbath

law was to challenge the laws that bound the Jewish covenant community together and the Pharisees' authority as interpreters of these laws. Even though the man reports how he had received his sight, Jesus' violation of a sabbath prohibition is seen by some of the Pharisees as evidence that "*this man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath*" (9:16). But other Pharisees ask "*how can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?*" In their division, they turn again to the healed man, who is now provided with an opportunity to bear witness to his healing. When the Pharisees ask him "*what do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened,*" the man responds, "*He is a prophet.*" (9:17). The healed man may be thinking of prophets like Elijah and Elisha, who performed healing miracles through God's power ("*So [Naaman] went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.*" – 2 Kings 5:14). By calling Jesus a prophet, the man progresses from his first affirmation about his healer, when he spoke only of "*a man called Jesus*" (9:11).

- "The man's growing awareness of the truth of Jesus' identity underscores one of the story's central theological themes: blindness is not determined simply by seeing or not seeing, but by recognizing the revelation of the works of God in Jesus." – Gail O'Day.

In the second interrogation scene, the authorities turn their attention to the man's parents. If they can show that the man was never blind, the whole question of the miracle can be dismissed. But when they summon them and demand that they tell them "*is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?*" (9:19), the parents confirm that this is their son and that they know nothing about how he received his sight. They invite the Pharisees to "*ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself*" (9:21); but John reports that their motivation is one of fear: "*His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.*" (9:22). The author may be referring to the "Benediction Against Heretics" that was introduced in the late first century CE; the Fourth Gospel may have been written to a community that was being expelled from the synagogue, and this conflict may have shaped John's story of Jesus. The man's parents are afraid to say anything about Jesus because they do not want to lose their religious and social ties with their synagogue community.

- "By shifting the focus back to their son, the parents put him in jeopardy in order to protect themselves. They act out of fear and self-interest. Throughout John 9, the formerly blind man is the only one who testifies in Jesus' defense.

By explaining the parents' motivation, John sets up a contrast between the parents' fearfulness and their son's courage." – Martin and Wright.

In the third and final interrogation scene, the authorities again confront the healed man, expecting him to accept their positions; *"the authorities try to intimidate the man with their status and knowledge, but he will not be intimidated"* (O'Day). The Pharisees demand that he *"give glory to God!"* (9:24), a traditional oath formula through which a person is enjoined to tell the truth or confess one's sin:

- "Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.'" – Joshua 7:19.
- "Give glory to the LORD your God before he brings darkness, and before your feet stumble on the mountains at twilight; while you look for light, he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness." – Jeremiah 13:16.

While the authorities demand that the healed man agree with their statement that *"we know this man is a sinner,"* the man will turn the tables on them by acknowledging God's glory in the healing work of Jesus while the authorities burn their backs on this manifestation of God's glory: *"I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."* (9:25). He does not engage in their claim that Jesus is a sinner, but contrasts their claim with the reality of his experience and hence his knowledge. When they attempt to uncover inconsistencies in the man's testimony and gain additional evidence against Jesus, the healed man again refuses to be intimidated and cleverly turns the authorities' inquiries against them: *"I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"* (9:27). This sends the Pharisees into a rage: *"they reviled him,"* which marks the end of any pretense of objective inquiry by the authorities. The disdain with which the authorities contrast the man's status as a disciple of Jesus with their own status as "disciples of Moses" makes it clear that to them one can either be a disciple of Moses or a disciple of Jesus, but not both. The authorities continue their rebuke of the man by pointing to the superiority of Moses' relationship to God: *"We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from"* (9:29). The irony is that while God may have spoken to Moses, John has already reported that Jesus is *"the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth."* (1:14). But the man again shows that he is not governed by the fear that shaped his parent's response to the authorities; instead, he goes on the offensive, confronting them with the contradictions in their own position. He reminds them of the belief that God does not listen to sinners but to the righteous

(*“The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.”* – Proverbs 15:29). The man confronts the authorities with the scale of the miracle, and that his completely unprecedented healing makes sense only if God is the source of the healing:

- “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” – 9:31-33.

The authorities correctly characterize the man’s words to them as teaching, which they find offensive, since they believe that they have exclusive rights to be teachers of the people. They reject his teaching on the same grounds that they attempted to dismiss Jesus’ healing: *“you were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?”* (9:34). They drive the man out; but in contrast to their rejection of the healed man, Jesus takes the initiative to seek him out: *“Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’”* (9:35). The healed man is confronted with the possibility that the Son of Man, a figure of Jewish eschatological hope, is already present. When he asks Jesus to *“tell me, so that I may believe,”* Jesus responds that *“you have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he”* (9:36-37). Jesus’ words of self-identification lead to the man’s confession of faith: *“He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshiped him.”* (9:38). “Worship” (*proskyneō*) is used in John to speak of worship of God. In worshipping Jesus, the man acknowledges the presence of God in Jesus. *“The man addresses Jesus as Lord and gives him the response that is proper to God alone: the man worshiped him.”* (Martin and Wright).

While the healed man now disappears from the scene, Jesus offers a teaching in which he states that *“I came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”* (9:39). Jesus’ coming as the “light of the world” is a moment of judgment and division; sight and blindness are not defined by one’s physical sight, but by one’s openness to the revelation of God in Jesus. The Pharisees expect Jesus to affirm that they are exempt from the judgment he describes, but he redefines sin as one’s resistance to Jesus: *“If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”* (9:41). *“In their immovable insistence on their own rectitude ... the Pharisees demonstrate their own blindness and hence judge themselves.”* (O’Day).

The story of the healing of this man who was born blind employs a literary device called *mise en abyme*, a miniature version of a larger story about Jesus. The story

within a story in this episode heightens the irony that *“those who think they can see are blind to the truth while the one who was blind (and a “sinner” and accused of being an invalid witness) is the one who sees.”* (Bashaw). It serves as yet another sign that points us to the truth about Jesus as the one who is the “light of the world,” the one whose Gospel is truly “amazing grace” because like the healed man, those of us who encounter Jesus and believe that he is the Messiah of God are also those who *“once were lost, but now I’m found; was blind, but now I see.”* As the man was healed of his physical blindness so that he might see and believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, his healing is a sign that points us to the presence of God in Jesus and to that day when *“death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away”* (Revelation 21:4). The signs call upon God’s people to *“thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things”* (Psalm 107:8-9). In healing this man’s physical blindness, Jesus gave him the sight to see the blessed presence of God in Jesus and the assurance that as *“grace has brought me safe thus far, grace will lead me home.”*

- “If we honestly consider how blind we are to God’s heavenly secrets, we will understand that faith is a unique and precious gift of God ... Faith is a light of the Holy Spirit that enlightens our understanding. The Spirit witnesses to our spirit that God is our Father. ‘The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children’ (Romans 8:16).” – John Calvin.

Heeding road signs is important for us to drive in safety and arrive at our destination without fear of harm or danger. In the signs we see in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we witness the light and truth that is ours in following the one who is the Word of God that dwells among us full of grace and truth, the one who opens our eyes so that we can see him as our Lord and Saviour and following the signs that guide us on the path that will lead us to our eternal home in the presence of the one who *“will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.”*

Amen.