

A SIGN NOBODY SEES
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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Texts: Psalm 23 & John 9:1-41

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 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." When he had said this, 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. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 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." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove 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?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

I'm going to talk about the gospel reading this morning, but first I'm going to tell you another story. I'm going to tell you a story about my dog, Henry. He was a boxer/great dane mix, and when he was young he used to love going outside and chasing all the squirrels and chipmunks in our yard. But there was never any danger of him actually catching one because he wasn't very stealthy. He kind of clomped around like a horse.

One night, however, I let him out, and a few minutes later I heard him barking. And it wasn't his normal bark. It was his serious bark. So I ran outside, and I saw him over by the fence, and he was going ballistic. So I went over, and I shined the light on my phone, and I saw this gray furry thing about the size of a football. It was a opossum, and Henry had it cornered. But he had no idea what to do with it, so he just stood there barking his head off. So I grabbed him by the collar, dragged him back inside, and the

opossum ran off into the dark, never to be seen or heard from again.

And now that I've told you that story, I want you to hold onto it in the back of your mind while we turn to the gospel.

As he's walking along one day, Jesus sees a man who was born blind, and the disciples ask him who sinned, the man or his parents, which seems like a strange question to us. Why would they assume it was somebody's fault? But that was the conventional wisdom back then. When bad things happened to people, it must be because they sinned, and God was punishing them.

But Jesus doesn't agree with conventional wisdom. He has a completely different take. He tells the disciples, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." And then he demonstrates what he means by that. He makes some mud with his spit, puts it on the man's eyes, and restores his sight. And in so doing he reveals God's will—what it is God wants for us. God doesn't want to leave us in the dark. God wants to bring us into the light. (Remember what I said the other week about dark and light imagery in John's gospel. Darkness represents seeing things from a human perspective. Light represents seeing things from a divine perspective.)

So on one level this is a story about Jesus giving sight to a blind man. On another level it's a story about Jesus showing the disciples what's what—snapping them out of their conventional way of thinking and pointing them to a more elevated view. Which is why John calls this a "sign" rather than a "miracle."

A miracle is something that demonstrates power. In fact, the Greek word for miracle—*dunamis*—is where we get the word dynamite. A sign is totally different. A sign is an indicator. It directs people's attention to something else. A sign doesn't say, Look at me. Look at how powerful I am. It says, Look over there. Look at what I'm pointing at.

But the funny thing is, if Jesus giving sight to the blind man is supposed to be a sign for

the disciples, then it's a sign they don't actually see because it doesn't happen right away, and it doesn't happen in a the same location. Jesus puts the mud on the man's eyes, but it's not until he goes to a public bathing spot and washes it off that he looks around and realizes what's happened. And by the time he comes back able to see, the disciples have apparently gone on their merry way with Jesus because they don't appear in the rest of the story.

So that's a little peculiar, and if we assume that John knows what he's doing as a writer, then we have to wonder, what's the point of a sign nobody sees? I don't know for sure, but I have a theory. I think John might be trying to get us to reflect on our own spiritual lives. I think he might be trying to get us to ask ourselves: Are we paying close enough attention to signs that are maybe happening right in front of us—signs that are maybe pointing us to some new insight or understanding; signs that are maybe trying to give us a more elevated view? Or are we like the disciples? Are we "somewhere else" when those signs appear? Are we busy moving on to the next thing instead of taking the time to slow down and be attentive?

I think those are really important questions because in my experience, most signs are a lot more subtle than a blind man receiving his sight. Most signs come in small, ordinary moments that are easily brushed aside if we're in too much of a hurry—a moment of calm when we're sitting at a traffic light and some new thought bubbles up out of nowhere; a moment during a conversation when someone says something that makes us re-think an old assumption; a moment when we're hiking in the woods or walking on the beach, and we're struck by the beauty of the world.

So I think maybe John is saying to all of us, as people of faith: If the disciples can miss a sign that's this big and this obvious, think how much you might be missing. Think how much the universe might be whispering in your ear that you're too busy and distracted to hear. But that's not all. There's still a lot of story left that we haven't even gotten to. There's still the response of the

community when the man's neighbors find out he can see. So let's keep reading because I think John might have one more question he wants to ask us.

When the man comes back from the pool, and he's no longer blind, his neighbors aren't sure if he's the same person they used to see sitting and begging. So he tells them the whole story about what Jesus did, but they still can't wrap their minds around it. So they take him to the synagogue, where the Pharisees are even more incredulous.

They question him about what happened, and when he doesn't tell them what they want to hear, they round up his parents and ask them what's going on. But the parents are too afraid to say anything. So the Pharisees bring the man back in and grill him again. Who was this person who did this to you? How did he open your eyes? They keep asking him the same questions over and over, but the man has already told them everything he knows, which isn't much. He once was blind, but now he can see.

So the Pharisees get more and more frustrated. They want the man to say Jesus did something wrong, that he broke the law, that he's a sinner. But the man refuses. And not only that, he points a finger back at them. "Here is an astonishing thing," he says. "You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will."

He basically calls them a bunch of frauds, and when they hear that, they go ballistic. They start spewing the same old conventional wisdom we heard from the disciples—the same victim-blaming nonsense that Jesus rejected. "You were born entirely in sins," they yell, "and are you trying to teach us?" Then they drive him out of the synagogue.

So when you get right down to it, the Pharisees are just like my dog, Henry. They don't know what to do with this sign any more than he knew what to do with that opossum. They see it as a threat, and they stand there

barking their heads off until they finally chase it away.

Which brings up the other question I think John is asking: Are we any different? Even if we did slow down and pay more attention, and even if we did see a sign right in front of us, would we know what to do with it? Would we let it speak to our lives? Would we let it challenge our conventional views? Or would we refuse to accept it?

I think those are really important questions, too, because signs are indicators, pointers, and in my experience the signs God gives us always point from where we are to where God wants us to be. And the distance between those two places is often vast and overwhelming.

So signs can be scary because they call us to grow and change. They call us to leave behind old beliefs and old priorities and embrace a whole new way of living, and that always feels risky. What if we're wrong? What if we misinterpreted the sign? What if it wasn't a sign at all, and we're changing our lives for nothing?

But here's the good news is: We're not in this alone. God comes to us in those moments of self-doubt and gives us the reassurance and the faith we need to keep going. I think that's what the last part of the story is about.

At some point later on, Jesus hears about what happened to the man in the synagogue, and he goes looking for him. And when he finds him, he confirms what the man has until now only suspected. He confirms that he is indeed the Son of Man, the Messiah. And when he hears that, whatever doubts the man has are melted away, and he falls down and worships Jesus.

So we shouldn't let doubts and fears keep us from following signs and going where God calls us. Like the psalmist declares, God will be there to lead and comfort and encourage, and in the end God's works will be revealed in us. Amen.