

## **Transfiguration Sunday/Jesus Heals the Blind Man**

February 11, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 27: 1-4; John 9: 1-41

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

Once there was a village where all the inhabitants were blind. One day they felt the earth shake and a blast of sound. A man riding an elephant was passing their town. As the man offered a greeting, the villagers began asking the rider to let them touch the great beast, for though they had heard about elephants, they had never been close to one.

About five of them were allowed to approach the animal, each being led to touch a different part of the body. After a time, the rider left, and the blind men hurried back to share their experience with the other villagers. "So what is an elephant like?" the people in the crowd asked their five friends.

"Oh, I know all about elephants," boasted the man who had touched the animal's side. "He is long and tall, built like a thick wall."

"Nonsense!" shouted the second man who had handled the trunk. "An elephant is much like a large snake."

A third man, who had touched the ear, chimed in. "It is nothing like a wall or snake. An elephant is like a gigantic leaf, made of thick wool carpet that moves when you touch it."

The fourth man shouted his disapproval. He had touched a leg of the great beast. "It is plain to me than none of you knows what an elephant looks like. It is round and reaches toward the heavens like a tree."

The fifth man, who had been placed on the elephant's back, cried out, "Can none of you accurately describe an elephant? He is like a gigantic moving mountain."

To this day, the argument has not been resolved, and the people of that village still have no idea what an elephant looks like.

One day a miracle happened outside the temple but no one agreed on what they had witnessed. Ironically, by the end of the story everyone seems to have vision problems but the cured blind man and Jesus.

When the disciples looked at the blind man, they saw a good opportunity to resolve a theological debate. They are baffled to hear Jesus say that blindness is not God's judgement for sin. They were even more confused when Jesus said God's goodness could be revealed and seen in one others consider to be damaged or objectionable.

When the town's people see the cured blind man they aren't sure they recognize him, even when he is jumping up and down saying, "I am the man! I am the man!" They only see the impossible. How could a man blind from birth get his sight? And with mud and spit yet?

When the Pharisee meet the healed blind man, they see a problem. If his sight has been restored, how could the man who did it be of God? A godly man wouldn't heal on the Sabbath. But how could an ungodly man heal? Then, as the man's witness becomes even more powerful, they see him merely as disrespectful, blasphemous or deranged.

When the man's parents are brought before the religious leaders, they see a dilemma to be navigated. They need to speak oh so carefully to avoid the leader's wrath or risk being tossed out of their Jewish community.

It's a wall...snake... leaf... tree... mountain. It's a debate...mistake... hoax... problem... nonsense...threat. No one celebrates with the healed man. No one says, "Glory to God," "Amen. God be praised" or even "Congratulations." Instead, the healed blind man is repeatedly grilled with questions. Jesus, the light of the world, has just provided a miraculous sign of God's mercy and compassion yet no one but the formerly blind man seems to be celebrating. Amid the humor and irony of the scene, it's a rather painful, embarrassing reminder that even the most faithful believers can be blind to the will of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit... especially when it doesn't suit our agenda or agree with our long-held beliefs or perceptions. What does a mission-centered church look like? Large, with

lots of people, programs and lattes in the lobby? Or older, with a great deal of history, unaffected by change in the world around it?

Two Sundays ago, I was in St. John Lutheran Church in Wilson, Texas, twenty minutes south of Lubbock. The church had invited former members and pastors to join them for a celebration of their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I was their pastor during my internship in 1998-1999. Founded in 1918, among the cotton farmers of West Texas, most of the services were conducted in German until 1938. During most of its early years, it was yoked with various other preaching posts and worshiping communities with a pastor traveling among them. In their 100 years, St. John had 37 pastors, many serving one or two years. As I read its history aloud to my sister as we drove, we both remarked that this small church in West Texas never skipped a beat as the members and lay leaders carried on the church's mission and ministry in all circumstances. Whether there was a pastor or not or the crops were good or not, they worshiped weekly, took on building and repair projects; ran a Sunday School program; helped resettle 8 displaced East-European families after World War II; made it through a tornado and countless dust storms, droughts and floods. They actively participated in local, conference and churchwide activities and ministries; sent youth to Lutheran camps and national gatherings; had active Women and Men's groups. When they or their town faced a challenge, they stepped up to it, holding on to the Lord and one another.

Here is where they stand today. Since 2012, they have been served by a talented Parish Lay minister, trained and authorized to provide all the pastoral need for the congregation. With no one to play the organ, guitarist lead the music... and the people of St. John sing out! There is a puppet ministry in which all the children participate. Each year they sponsor a Community Easter Egg Hunt and Hot Dog Lunch the Saturday before Easter. Over 100 children and adults attend each year. Their Lutheran Men in Mission and Women of the ELCA groups still provide Bible study, fellowship and sponsor service projects. They are a site for a Mobile Pantry. The Lubbock Food Bank brings a truckload of food to St.

John's once a month. Volunteers from St. John screen clients and distribute the food from pallets on the lawn into trunks. At Christmas, the congregation provide additional, special Christmas boxes and a turkey or ham. Thirty plus families are served each month. Now get this — St. John's average Sunday worship attendance is 19! If a stranger wandered into St. John sanctuary on an average Sunday, might he or she conclude, "There's nothing going on here. It's past dead." They might, but they would be seeing wrongly, wouldn't they? Wall...snake... leaf... tree... mountain. You don't always get the full picture when you only rely on your own senses, experiences or preconceived ideas. You could be blind to God at work right in front of you.

Jesus was once transfigured ---- shown like a brilliant light ---- on a mountaintop. He spoke with Moses and Elijah before he continued on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. Three of his disciples were with him. They saw but they didn't understand. Jesus once restored sight to a blind man. Those around him saw it but only as something that had to be explained. They could not see the glory and grace of God at work. Some may look around at Haven and only notice numbers and the walkers and gray hairs. We may be tempted to feel discouraged or powerless. But God does not see as we do. God looks at clueless disciples, blindness, declining churches and sees stuff ready for transformation and renewal. In the beginning, God took chaos and created light and a new world. By Easter morning, God had taken the chaos of Good Friday's death, sin and darkness and revealed "a new world of light and healing."<sup>1</sup> That, to show us that God is forever working in our chaos of fears, falters and blindness to bring light and a new creation.

Last week I asked you to pray with me during the coming season of Lent that we could become more courageous in publicly sharing our faith – even in such small ways as praying before you eat in a restaurant, wishing a cashier God's peace, sharing some of your own experiences of God's love when the opportunity opens. This week I ask you to add another prayer for our Lenten season. Pray for our congregation, that we seek God's light, that we ask our Lord

to put mud on our eyes so that we can see — not just decline and our fears — but what God’s hands can do with us and our resources to be a vibrant mission outpost for the gospel. Today, as you stand or kneel at the altar for communion, remember that you are being touched by Jesus like that blind man long ago. Pray for Jesus to open your eyes... to open our eyes. For the Lord IS here, sleeves rolled up, ready to use those creative, dynamic hands that created a universe to renew you, me, us and bring new life to Haven and Hagerstown so that more may know the glory of living in God’s light. Believe it with me. There’s no time to waste. Keep your eyes open. What, where is the next patch of light in which God wants Haven to step? Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 2/10/18

#### ENDNOTE

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1. N.T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 p. 135.