



“SEE-CHANGE”
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 9: 1-41
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Stephen Breckenridge Lander was a Presbyterian minister, ordained in 1908. He served several churches in Kentucky in his ministry. He prepared three different sermons every week: one for Sunday morning, one for Sunday evening, and one for Wednesday evening.

Rev. S.B. Lander was my great grandfather on my father’s side. And the word is he preached without any manuscript or notes. One Sunday night he was preaching away. Now even though my great grandfather had a reputation as a sought after preacher, he had a parishioner who seemed to find his sermons to be a good chance for a nap. And this particular Sunday night, this parishioner was fast asleep in his church pew sitting next to his wife, Delores.

During my great grandfather’s sermon this one Sunday evening the power in the church went out and the sanctuary went completely dark. Rev. Lander preached on. With no notes and no manuscript, he did not need light to preach.

Something must have awakened this sleeping parishioner, because he woke with a start, surrounded by darkness. But he could still hear my great grandfather preaching and assumed Rev. Lander and everyone else must still be able to see.

In a terrified voice the parishioner shouted out for the whole church to hear, “Delores, I’ve gone blind.”

I have a feeling my great grandfather preached on.

Jesus says, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

And he says all this to some religious officials who were anxious about the way Jesus did ministry, they were anxious about losing their power.

Now before we go and demonize these religious officials, let’s put ourselves in their shoes. These were faith leaders in a fractured community. And they were of the school of thought that believed everyone was responsible, in their every day lives, for observing God’s law in everything we do. They were more “priesthood of all believer” types than they were focused on observance being only about what you do in the Temple.

These were leaders who were out and about teaching, interpreting, and holding believers accountable when actions violated their understandings of God's law. And their understandings had authority in the formal structures. They had credentials and people listened to them.

But that was changing—things were fracturing, and even some religious officials trained the same way they were, were starting to see things differently. So, before we demonize these religious officials who were anxious about losing their power, think about how you feel right now as some of the things that orient your life, some of the things that define our systems of authority and normalcy are crumbling.

When the foundations begin to shake, we all reach for something to hold on. I wonder what you are holding on to these days?

Jesus says, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

We need to acknowledge how loaded these six vignettes are in John. Even though the passage itself disrupts some dangerous theological constructions about not being able to see, using the physicality of blindness as a trope for being mistaken is profoundly problematic.

And load on top of that the rhetoric in the passage connecting being without sight to sin, and we've got layers of problems even though these concepts are challenged in the passage. These problems can keep us from being able to see what it is Jesus is doing here.

It can be hard to know where we fit in the story. It can be hard to see where we are in the story.

Imagine for a minute that the man in this story had all of his physical senses fully functioning, let's find another way to tell this story that helps us to see ourselves in it more clearly.

Let's choose another layer of identity that can come with birth that impacts our capacity to navigate the world with full clarity. Let's choose privilege.

Now privilege can manifest in many ways in our particular cultural moment in the United States of America: whiteness, maleness, high wealth, identity as a Christian, being a citizen of the United States, having English as your first language.

Any of these things can profoundly impact your formation, your perspectives, and your capacity to move freely in our country without disadvantage, and in some cases even without as much physical danger as others experience.

And let's imagine for a minute that one of these accidents of birth really led the way in how people think of you, how people see you—like the man in the story. You are known by this trait. You are not the man blind from birth, but you are the person white from birth or the man male from birth or wealthy from birth or Christian from birth or English speaker from birth or US citizen since birth.

Any one of these things impact the way others see you and the way you see yourself, the way you see others, and the way you see the world.

And imagine that accident of your birth is something you decide to actively dismantle or to shed, and that you begin to shed even some of the privilege it gives you.

Imagine, for instance, that you begin to transition to a gender identity other than male. Imagine that you shed your identity as a Christian and become a devoted adherent of Islam. Imagine that you lose all of your wealth and can no longer pay your bills or house your family.

Whiteness is not an easy thing to shed completely, but remember whiteness is about more than your skin color; it is about culture and normativity. So, imagine you start to actively work against the norms of whiteness¹ in the way you move around the world, like: either/or thinking, productivity, perfectionism, power hoarding, sense of urgency, defensiveness, only one right way, paternalism, individualism, defensiveness, the right to comfort.

Imagine you forgot how to speak English, and relied totally on Spanish or French or Kiswahili or Mandarin to get around the United States.

Imagine how you would begin to see the world differently, how your perspectives would be changed, how the world would become a whole different place. Imagine the things you would begin to question, the things you would begin to push back against, the things you would begin to doubt about systems of authority and power.

And imagine how those with formal power in our culture would feel if a lot of us started seeing the world differently, started questioning the norms and power structures and economic systems and biases and institutions of this country.

So, maybe finding ourselves in this story isn't so hard after all. Maybe we are in this story right now. Maybe we are living it.

Faithful people in diaspora—scattered apart, unable to gather like we use to in our sanctuary. People who were already beginning to see the world differently, now

witnessing some of those with formal power lash out because they are anxious about losing their power.

People who were already beginning to see the world differently, witnessing some of those with formal power being severely diminished in their capacity to see the world clearly, diminished by the lenses of privilege that come from things like whiteness, maleness, high wealth.... you get the drift.

How providential that this story was what the lectionary had planned for us this fourth Sunday of Lent. Our time in the desert is growing long—and it will be longer. Being faithful right now means changing—radically changing. And we won't be going back to the way things were—we can't un-see what we see. Everything we've been talking about for the last going on 4 years at GCPC is laid bare before us as Americans, as citizens of the planet earth.

Jesus likes to keep us on our toes—he uses every opportunity to disrupt and dismantle.

To restore sight he puts mud in this man's eyes.

To practice righteousness he violates the law.

To amplify God's authority he disregards the church's authority.

To bring the man closer to God he does something that gets the man kicked out of his religious community.

Jesus says, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may no longer see."

This ancient story should sound even more disruptive to us now that we are in the grip of a global pandemic that is shutting the world's systems down. Now that the filters we were still clinging to are gone, the filters that obscured our vulnerability or our capacity to do harm and our interdependence are gone. This story is not a cautionary tale about seeing Jesus clearly, it is a moral imperative about waking up to who we are in a world that will never be the same—God help us not be the same when this is all over.

Just look at what this virus is laying bare—things we may have thought we knew, but now we see it unfolding before us in heartbreaking ways.

Everything we are seeing has been right in front of us all along—and the more privilege we have, the harder it has been for us to see.

But it seems the universe is telling us, it's way past time for us to take a closer look at the whole picture.

If we truly want to see, then we have to actively work to disrupt the things that limit our vision.

If it's news to you that our economy does not work for most people in America, let the scales fall from your perspective on things.

If you had been skeptical that our current power structures disadvantage black and brown-bodied people, take a look at a world that is no longer white-washed. It's a pretty stark picture that is coming into focus now for those who have resisted seeing the obvious.

If you figured you'd get around to changing your habits of consumption for the planet when it was more convenient, it looks like the planet got tired of waiting for us.

And if you thought health care for all was a nice but impractical and much too expensive idea, just look at what it is costing us now.

It is humbling. It is sobering. It is convicting. And with God's help, with Christ's help may it all be liberating, may it be healing, may we be transformed.

Those who think they see, cannot see. Those who know they can't see, can see.

The man is humble and he is also not afraid to speak the truth about how he's been changed by Jesus's earthy touch. And he won't let anyone tell him that Jesus didn't heal him of something he had lived with all of his life.

He's not going back to that way of being, no matter what it costs him.

Maybe waking up while things are dark all around us will be just the see-change God has been inviting us to be all along.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>