

## **Through Many Dangers Toils and Snares**

The Presbyterian Church of Palatine

April 3, 2011

Abby Mohaupt

As I read and reread our Scripture today, a particular and very familiar song kept coming to mind.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.<sup>1</sup>

I've always been taken by the concept of God's grace, that we can do nothing without God, that we cannot hope to be anything but locked in the darkness of our sin without God's grace shining a light into our lives through Jesus. Yet it can seem impossible to see God's grace in our lives—it can seem easier to focus on everything else and not see the work of God's grace. The story of the man who was blind but then healed by Jesus points us to the reality of God's grace in our lives and how we can respond to it.

### **Context of the original Text**

Before we bring our own story as a community into conversation with this Scripture, I think it would be helpful to meet the community that first read the Gospel of John.

The audience of the fourth gospel was a community around 90 AD when the Jews were trying to sort out their identity. The Temple, the center of Jewish worship and symbol of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Newton

faith, had been destroyed about twenty years earlier. For a contemporary comparison, it would be like being Catholic and the Vatican was destroyed. Out of this destruction came a vast diversity in beliefs in the Jewish community, so just sorting out what they thought about Jesus was complicated and messier than putting mud on your face.<sup>2</sup> “The first readers of this story, the Johannine Christians, discovered their experience in this story [of the blind man who regains his sight within a community that didn’t see him]. They had forged their identity within a context of hostility and conflict.”<sup>3</sup> They didn’t know who they were as Jews or as Christians or as people of any faith at all. As they read or heard the words of Jesus’ healing of the blind man, they saw themselves in both the man who was healed and in the community who tried to respond to Jesus’ miracle.

Knowing this about the community, then, let’s turn again to the story.

### **Retelling the Story**

A man who had been blind his whole life was begging in the streets because his neighbors wouldn't help him find work or provide for him. As he was begging one day, he heard a crowd of people surround him and he could hear that they were talking about him.

Someone said, "Teacher, who sinned so that this man would be blind--his parents or he himself?" Someone else spoke and said, "Neither... he was born blind so that the world may see the work of God."

---

<sup>2</sup> Smith 178

<sup>3</sup> Moloney 294

Then he felt a weird gooiness on his eyes and the second voice said, "Go and wash." So this man, this man who had been blind his whole life, felt his way to the nearest pool, washed his eyes and suddenly something happened. He was not shuttered in darkness, but bathed in light. He was amazed!

As he went home, he heard whispers around him. "Isn't that the blind beggar?" "It can't be him--this guy's not blind!" And he spoke up, "No it's really me!! I can see now!" But no one believed him. They kept asking questions.

"How did this happen?"

"Who did this?"

"Where is the person who did this?"

He replied, "I don't know. All I know is that now I can see!"

So the crowd went and got the leaders of the church—the Pharisees—who asked him more questions. He was beginning to wonder at all this attention, since no one had paid attention to him when he was blind and really needed help.

The Pharisees said, "Look, the man who made this man see is a sinner because he worked on our day of rest." But the people were arguing over who could possibly do something wonderful like make a blind man be able to see.

So the Pharisees asked the man about it and he said, "Look, he's a good guy. He made me see!" They didn't believe him. They went to his parents, who said they didn't know anything.

They went again to the man who had been blind and asked him again, "Tell us the truth. This man who made you see is a sinner, right?" And the man who could see said, "I DON'T

KNOW. All I know is that I was blind and you didn't help me and then this guy came out of nowhere and now I can see. Why aren't you listening to me?!"

But the Pharisees continued to argue with him: "Who did this? How? Where is he?"  
When the man didn't say anything else, they threw him out.

As he stood outside the city, once again cast out of the community, another man approached. There was something familiar about him. When he spoke, the man who could see recognized him as the man who had made him see.

The man said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

This was not what the man who could see expected, but because of who was asking he said, "I don't know who that is, but if *you* tell me who it is, I will believe in him."

And the man said, "I am he."

And the man who could see saw that this was true and he was grateful for the man who saw him when no one else would.

## **Two responses to God's grace**

At first reading, this story seems to center around the huge miracle of Jesus gift of sight to the man who was born blind. Certainly, the man doesn't even ASK to be healed—Jesus sees his need and heals him without the man needing to ask. But the miracle of the blind man's healing is not the point of the story; instead, it points to the real heart of the story.<sup>4</sup> How we

---

<sup>4</sup> Lewis 119

respond to God's grace and God's work in our midst reveals who we are as God's people. Two examples of how we can choose to respond to God's grace are suggested in this Scripture.

First, the way of the man was born blind. He doesn't quite understand what has changed in him or why he can suddenly see—but he believes.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes we cannot understand; we can only believe that God meets us in those moments. I think it's important to note that this man's healing is not just about his physical disability. This man has been ignored and left alone by the community (after all, he was begging!) and perhaps Jesus' healing is an act of restoration to the community, of saying "Look, you belong with the people." When the people eventually drive him out anyway, I wonder if Jesus didn't think to himself, "Seriously? What is wrong with all of you!? You wouldn't love on him blind and you won't love on him sighted. The problem's not with him. It's with you!"

McCormick professor Deborah Kapp writes that "almost everybody fails the man born blind.... The community fails. The religious authorities fail. The family fails. The only trustworthy figures in this story are the man born blind and Jesus. The man tells the truth, and even in the face of threats, the abandonment of his community and family and expulsion, he sticks to his guns. I was blind, but now I see. Again and again and again, the man witnesses to the saving grace he has experienced in Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus has changed everything for him. I wonder how he can stand it. He has been begging—not to be healed, not to live, but to simply *survive*. To be in that situation of struggling to survive suggests to me that he must have been fearful. Everyday would have brought the fear

---

<sup>5</sup> Stroup 120

<sup>6</sup> Kapp 120

of having enough to eat, having enough to drink, finding a place to sleep, not to mention that his dignity and sense of self worth must have been hanging by a mere thread.

I imagine that after he's healed, he just wants to lift his voice and sing:

T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear.  
And Grace, my fears relieved.  
How precious did that Grace appear  
The hour I first believed.

I wonder how he contains himself. He should be celebrating, and he does in a way. Again and again, he points to the wonderful work of this man who has changed him. But the people keep asking him "who did this?" They do not see the change in this man as the work of God, but as a work of something they must question and distrust.

So, the second way to respond to God's grace is the way suggested by the man's community. Alexa Smith, Associate for the Presbyterian Hunger Program, describes the community like this:

It is easy to picture folks pushing and shoving to get a look at a man who can suddenly see after a lifetime of blindness. Gawkers and gossips are to be expected. It is the kind of scene that ought to pull the neighbors into the streets, grinning like crazy and praising God for the grace bestowed on one of their own. You might expect tears of joy at witnessing a man made [able to see]... But that is not the reality. There is no celebration here. It sounds more like a court-martial that prompts even his frightened parents to betray him, else risking shunning by

the neighbors. At one point, religious leaders hurl accusations at the once-blind man implying that he is a heretic.<sup>7</sup>

The Pharisees and the people are more interested in *how* the miracle occurred than *that it occurred at all*. This fascination leads to division among the community, pitting Pharisees against the parents of the man who can now see, parents against their child, the whole of the community against the man.

The irony in this story is that “the blind man receives his sight, but everyone else in the story loses theirs—not their physical vision, but their capacity to believe and understand what they have witnessed.”<sup>8</sup> They are so focused on the how and the why that they miss the beauty and work of God in their midst. They allow themselves to be broken and distracted instead of being moved by God's work. I don't think they do this because they don't want to believe. I think they are afraid because they don't understand. While the man who can now see experiences faith when he doesn't understand what has happened to him, his community experiences fear. They don't understand what has happened, and they don't know what will happen next.

When we fear, when we grieve, when we feel frustrated, when we cannot see a way, when the world seems broken, when we forget God's grace—we can fall apart. We can focus on the questions to which we don't have answers instead of focusing on the gifts that God has given us. We can turn on each other, gripped by a fear of the world and all the things we do not understand, like this community in John did.

---

<sup>7</sup> Smith 28

<sup>8</sup> Stroup 120

Or we can trust God's grace even without the answers. We can echo the conviction of the man who can now see: "I don't know who or why or how. All I know is that I once was blind, but now I see."

In the face of great change in their midst, the community in John fell apart. Now, our own community faces a great change. I do not believe that we are like the community in John. I believe that we are like the man who can now see who, in the face of those who ask too many questions or lose sight of the work of God's grace, trusted what his eyes told him and believe what his heart knew when his mind did not understand. On this communion Sunday, we trust God's grace in *this* community, trusting that through many dangers, toils and snares, God's grace will lead us home.

Before we join in communion, I invite you to lift our voices together to sing that first verse of Amazing Grace.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

Amen.

### Bibliography

Kapp, Deborah. "John 9:1-41: Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Year A. Vol 2. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2010.

Lewis, Karoline M. "John 9:1-41: Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Year A. Vol 2. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2010.

Moloney, Francis J. "Jesus and the Tabernacles." In *Sacred Pagina: Gospel of John*. Vol. 4. Edited by Daniel J. Harrington. Collegeville: Liturgical Press. 1998.

Newton, John. "Amazing Grace." 1772.

Smith, Alexa. *A Lenten Fast: from Insight to Action in the Gospel of John*. Louisville: Presbyterian Church (USA). 2011.

Smith, Susan Marie. "April 3, 2011: Fourth Sunday in Lent." *New Proclamation: Year A 2011: Advent Through Holy Week*. Edited by Robert P. Hoch, Mary Kin Hudson, Susan Marie Smith, and Craig A. Sutterlee. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2010.

Stroup, George W. "John 9:1-41: Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Year A. Vol 2. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2010.