

“Encounters with Jesus IV: The Man Born Blind”

Prayer: Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord. Open the eyes of our hearts. We want to see you, and love you and serve you. Amen

Where have you seen God today?

I’ve been thinking about Wayne Wiemer, God rest his soul. I say that not knowing whether he’s alive or dead; but even when I first met him nearly fifty years ago he looked as though his soul could use some rest: sunken eyes with dark circles, a nervous tick, perpetually dry mouth, an air of anxiety, a tendency to start at loud noises. Wayne Wiemer was my Driver’s Ed instructor.

I’ve heard it said that near death experiences will deepen a person’s spirituality. So I suppose Wayne Wiemer could return as the next Dali Lama: I’m sure he had an awful lot of near-death experiences; in fact, I shared a couple with him. I was not a great student driver, but at least my uncertainty came out as timidity. If I was going to be unsafe at any speed, twelve miles an hour seemed about right to me, scraping the curb with emergency lights flashing. But my driving partner, who shall remain nameless due to a merciful case of selective amnesia (thank you, Jesus) had only one instinct, and that was to stomp on the gas pedal. When in doubt, air it out. By now she’s either dead or she’s the little old lady from Pasadena.

Our Driver’s Ed-mobile was equipped with an instructor’s brake pedal on the passenger side, and poor old Wayne wore it out. His right leg was twice as big as his left leg from riding that life-saving device. The smell was awful and the car needed a brake job every two weeks; but I’m here telling you about it, so I have no complaints. What the Driver’s Ed-mobile did *not* have was rear seat seatbelts, which left the non-driver to hang loose back there, to be on your own like a rolling stone. I took to assuming a prenatal position on the back seat as we lurched toward street signs, lamp posts and parked cars. Lord, have mercy.

Through it all there was a continual barking of staccato commands from Wayne: “Check your mirrors... aim high... signal, SIGNAL, check your mirrors, check your blind spot, BLIND SPOT, **BLIND SPOT**, brake, brake, brake!!” Sometimes in my mind’s ear I can still hear him, God rest his soul, particularly when I’m thinking about blind spots. What you don’t see can kill you (and your Driver’s Ed instructor). And there’s always more going on out there than meets the eye.

Where have you seen God today? I see God in this crazy, exasperating reading from John, because it rings so true to life.

There are two movements taking place simultaneously in this lesson. The blind man moves from blindness to eyesight to insight. And the religious leaders move from lofty enlightenment as custodians of the nation’s godly wisdom to flesh and blood folks trying to make meaning of their experience to the total darkness of choosing to live in their blind spot—which is to say, choosing not to live at all. The blind man and the

religious leaders cross paths in the middle, where the action is in this story; giving it what scholars call a “chiastic” structure: from the Greek letter Chi, written like an X.

The story begins with a painfully dubious theological assumption and ends up at precisely the same dead end: round and round we go, dead heat on a merry-go-round.

The disciples launch this journey to nowhere by expressing a common belief in the form of a question. On seeing a man born blind they ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Masked as an inquiry, this is the age-old blame the victim ploy that people use to insulate themselves from the misfortune of another. “People deserve what they get”: it’s the self-justifying mantra of the privileged. Not only is this man blind; in the disciples’ painfully conventional estimation, he is a sinner, and/or the spawn of sinners; he is to be condemned and avoided, stepped around rather than respected, helped, pitied or even noticed. So who’s the real sinner here? And what kind of a God would it be who could inflict such things?

In Jesus’ eyes, this blind man is someone in whom lies the possibility of new life; someone in whom God can be revealed; as, in different ways, are we all. The healing is quick, direct and graphic: spit, dirt, mud. (Don’t try this at home.) Go and wash. He does. He returns seeing, thank God.

All of this takes a grand total of seven verses. The other thirty-four verses consist of people arguing over what happened. That balance brings to mind the words of T.S. Eliot: “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” The healed man comes back a new person: so new, in fact, that others can’t recognize him because they’ve never really bothered to see him before.

Let the games begin! Is it the same man? Yes! No! Let’s investigate! Call his neighbors. Yes it is! No is isn’t! Wait a minute... let’s call the authorities, the ones to whom we grant authority to tell us what we’ve experienced. Here they come: they just got off the air with their talk radio show. Bring in the Pharisees, who will tell us whether this really happened or not!

The story is told over and over, Jack Web style, just the facts: “The man called Jesus made mud [thank you for not mentioning the spit], spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I washed and received my sight.”

Really? Hmmm. Wait a minute! Today is the Sabbath! God wouldn’t heal anybody on the Sabbath! [If she floats, she’s a witch. If she sinks, she’s dead... but she’s not a witch! Flawless logic!] Let’s ask the man who claims to be healed what this means so we can tell him he’s wrong!

“What do you say about [the man who healed you]? It was your eyes he opened.”

“He is a prophet.”

Wrong!

Call the parents: “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”

“Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”

All right we will... but we'll lead the witness: "Give glory to God! We know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner."

"I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

"What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

I love this part: "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?" At this the authorities essentially resort to name-calling and name-dropping: Jesus is a sinner; we follow Moses.

Notice how the healing is not just physical, but emotional and spiritual, as well, as the man who is healed cannot believe that the Pharisees will not acknowledge what has happened right before their eyes: "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."

With that the Pharisees snap. They revert to default mode, clinging as to a life preserver to essentially the same empty theological assertion with which the story began: "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" Our minds are made up; don't confuse us with facts. Because I said so! Because I'm the parent, and you're not! Because I'm the pastor!

Upon further review... none of this ever happened. "We had the experience but missed the meaning." And so the experience went away.

But there's another half to that T.S. Eliot quotation: "We had the experience but missed the meaning. And approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form." The healed man approaches the meaning of his experience when he sees—really sees—Jesus. He asks to know the one who healed him. Jesus asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him?" "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him.

As the man draws near to the meaning of what has happened to him, the experience is restored to him in a different form. It's a familiar story, part of a far greater story, a story later experienced and expressed by that wretched old slave trader, John Newton, and embraced by countless others ever since: "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." Now I see: experience and meaning.

Where have you seen God today?

Questions of vocation are in the air today, questions about what God is calling us to do and become. The Confirmation Class is on retreat today, offering to God their decisions about whether or not they want to serve God with their lives and express that commitment by joining the church. Candidates for pastoral residencies are trying to discern their future today. The search for a new Minister of Community Engagement continues here, with a dedicated committee prayerfully at work, seeking to do God's will. Last Tuesday the Church Council held its annual nominating meeting, and now

candidates for church offices are fielding phone calls and trying to discern about invitations to serve.

Where have you seen God today?

The light streaming through the stained glass windows lifts our spirits. The faces of the choir children remind us we're all children of God.

Where have you seen God today?

When did your spirit sing, your heart ache, laughter well up within you and overflow in a joyous outburst that let you know you're alive? Did you find yourself wanting to dance? Did life take your breath away for a moment? Did you thrill at beauty... or despair of the world's incomprehensible, self-inflicted blindness? Did a voice within you say, "Somebody should do something about that?" and another voice respond, "*You* are somebody!?" Did something within you simply make you want to give thanks for the gift of life? Or to hold somebody and cry with them?

Then you've seen God today.

And if you don't think you have, for God's sake, and for your own, check your blind spot. What you don't see can kill you... or at least it can keep you from ever living, which may be worse.

Thank you, Wayne Wiemer, wherever you are. And thank you, God, wherever you are. Open the eyes of our hearts. We want to see you, and love you, and serve you.

Amen

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