

“Panic and Calm, Darkness and Light, Fear and Love”

John 9:1-41; Ephesians 5:8-14; Psalm 23

Lent 4

John 9:1-41

As Jesus 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 the man 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: 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, 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.”

The Sermon

“Panic loves company.”

That truism was stated by the business writer and blogger Seth Godin just this week.ⁱ

He said, “If you’re on a crowded plane and *one* person is freaking out about turbulence, the panic will eventually peter out.

“If, on the other hand, *six* people are freaking out, it’s entirely possible that it will spread and overtake the rest of the plane. Panic needs

multiple nodes to spread.

“The same is true with a cabin of 10-year-olds at summer camp. One homesick kid usually comes around and ends up enjoying the summer, because being surrounded by others who are okay makes us okay. But three or four homesick kids can change the entire dynamic.

“While calm is a damping agent,” he wrote, “it’s not nearly as effective at spreading itself as panic is.”

In the age of ever-expanding telecommunications, “Calm is penalized, panic is amplified,” Seth Godin wrote. “Not to make things better, simply to spread anger and fear.”ⁱⁱ

He said, “If panic is helpful, of course you should bring it on. But it rarely is.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Something was loose in the world, and it had the authorities on edge. And the general reaction was something not a million miles removed from panic.

Which is something of a tragedy, because when Jesus came into the world, revealing God’s love for humankind and all creation in calling, forgiving, healing, transforming, feeding, sending—when Jesus came, embodying, in flesh and blood and word, God’s love for all people,

he came bringing light, and love, and calm, leaving healed and restored people in a new kind of equilibrium, where now they could live and move and act in the world as people made whole by God’s love.

But in this world of competition, where fear feeds darkness which feeds fear, that is not always easily understood or accepted.

Right now, we are in a time of justifiable concern. It is right to be “overly cautious,” to go “overboard” in protecting each other and especially the most vulnerable people among us. It is not shameful to have some fear: if there’s anybody in the world you love, it is not wrong that you are afraid enough to be spurred into doing the preventative things we should all be doing to help humanity get a handle on this thing.

Faithful care, and concern, and determination to protect ourselves and our neighbors with knowledge and thoughtfulness, can be the fuel for wise and compassionate decisions and actions, and they magnify life, and light, and love, and calm.

Those are among the gifts that the Son of God came to bring into a world of human-made darkness, where “calm is penalized and panic is amplified, not to make things better, simply to spread anger and fear.”^{iv}

Neighbors and others had long since become accustomed to seeing him as a beggar, had even become somewhat comfortable with it: “As long as the Temple is over there beckoning me, and that blind guy is in the street begging from me, I know I’m in my secure place in the world: beneath the towers of the Temple, but above the blind beggar in the street.”

So when he was different, now able to see and not so dependent on the whims of their charity, they were saying, “Isn’t this the guy who used to sit and beg?”

And some were saying, “yeah,” but others were saying, “No, but he’s like that guy.” One way or another, this is a strange situation to them.

Among the cruelties of life for the blind are at least two: one, you can’t see the people around you. And two, far too often, the people around

you can't see you, either. Or hear you. While they were debating among themselves, going, "It's him," "No, it's somebody just like him," he kept saying, "I am the man."

So they questioned, which is understandable; but it seems like they weren't willing to accept the answer from a man who was obviously healed but was making no extravagant claims for himself.

They kept saying, "Then how were your eyes opened?" And he would tell what little he knew: "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."

So they asked him, "Where is he?"

How would a blind person know where Jesus was? He went and washed in the pool; that was the first time he could see anything.

They said, "Where is he?" He said, "I don't know."

What do you do when you are in the darkness and fear of not knowing or understanding?

They brought the man to the authorities: the religious as well as socially and politically elite group called the Pharisees.

Something was loose in the world, some power of healing and light was making itself felt—and, like King Herod and all Jerusalem with him when it was said that a child had been born king of the Jews (according to Matthew), the idea of this uncontainable light brought with it the threat of something new and the fear of the unknown.

So maybe in their disorientation and fear, they were going to their

religious authorities in the hope of finding light, and comfort and calm.

It sounds like what they found was panic.

When the interrogation began, the first thing they did was fall back on legalism. They skipped over the miracle that someone born blind had suddenly been given their sight, and they went straight for, “Well, it happened on a sabbath day, which is against the Law.”

Then they went for a line of questioning that the formerly blind person, as the object of the healing, couldn't possibly know, which was how it could have happened.

He said, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.”

Then one of the familiar steps in panic set in: someone said the healer couldn't have been from God, because this happened on the sabbath, and a bunch of them agreed; but others said he must be from God, because how else could it have worked?

“And they were divided.”

Panic loves to divide and subdivide and subdivide. Panic will keep dividing people as long as there are still people left to be divided.

Then they went the route of putting the responsibility on the one whom they were interrogating: “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

When he didn't have what they considered an adequate answer, they chose now to doubt that he had ever been blind in the first place.

So they found somebody else they could put on the spot: namely, the

parents.

When the parents were hauled in, the Pharisees transferred their fear onto them—which is another thing panic tends to like—and the parents became as afraid of the Pharisees as the Pharisees were of the mysterious, uncontrollable power to heal which had made itself known in their community.

And in their fear, the parents told what they knew, and then put it back on their son: “He’s legally old enough to testify for himself; leave us out of it.”

Panic doesn’t give up that easily. So, the Pharisees recalled their star witness.

The last item of testimony given by the man formerly known as the blind beggar had been his opinion that the person who had miraculously given him his sight was a prophet.

Now, they brought him into this second round of interrogation by contradicting that and saying, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.”

When the man repeated the only piece of testimony he could give them—“though I was blind, now I see”—the panic seems to have kind of re-booted itself:

They said, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

And finally, when they could get nothing out of this poor guy that they could find acceptable, they did what panic ends up doing:

They reviled him; the Greek word is ἐλοιδόρησαν (eloidorēsan)—one

translation says they “railed at” him; it’s like they threw words at him, you might say they barked at him:

“You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.
We know that God has spoken to Moses,
but as for this man, we have no idea where he comes from.”

And when the formerly blind person gave his concluding testimony and ended by saying, about Jesus, “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing,” Panic played its usual winning hand:

they reverted to the rotten theology that Jesus had already dismissed with the disciples at the very beginning of this story. And as usual, rotten theology makes you say—actually gives you license to say—dumb things about people who are not like you.

And they said, as if it were a well-established, incontrovertible fact:

“You, ex-blind-man, you were clearly born entirely in sins,
and are you trying to teach *us*?—
elevated, educated, privileged *us*?”

And, of course, they drove him out.

Because when the darkness of our fears meets the darkness of our uncertainties, whether as individuals or societies or whole countries or whole cultures, we do the thing we think our instincts are telling us to do: we drive out the people we don’t understand, of whom we are, reasonably or unreasonably, afraid.

Even if they didn’t do anything, but only represent that over which our hatred and fear and panic have no control.

Historically, how many non-white people have been driven from white-controlled towns, communities, even churches?

How many LGBTQ Christians have at least one story, and often many more, about being driven out of what had always been their church?

How many times, in your whole life, back to childhood, have you, trying only to bring and offer the most precious thing you have—yourself—in friendship: how many times have you felt the sting of being driven away?

And, because it is Lent, I have to ask, as the guilty face in the mirror asks me: how many times have you participated in driving someone out, or away?

Isn't it good to know that the God of Love, the God who is love, who created and saturates the world, and is both greater than and deeply interested in the welfare of everything that exists and the whole cosmos itself—isn't it good to know that God cares enough about you, about us all, to offer us wholeness and forgiveness and redemption, even at the cost of God's only Son?

The writer of a first-century document we now know as the Letter to the Ephesians testified to an audience of Christians when Christianity was still trying to find ways to articulate itself to the world:

“Once, you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.

Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Ephesians 5:8-14).

In what I can only picture as a profoundly touching moment of divine, human compassion,

when Jesus heard that they had driven out
 that poor man whom Jesus had healed
 so that God’s works might be revealed in him,
 and, in so doing, had apparently gotten him into some trouble,
 he went and found the guy.

And in his calm and his light and his profound love, he said,
 “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

And the guy said, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”

And Jesus said—to one who until yesterday was blind to everything—
 “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”

Jesus said, “I came into this world so that those who do not see may see.”

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

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ⁱ Seth Godin, "Calm also has a coefficient," Seth's Blog, March 20, 2020

ⁱⁱ Godin, "Calm," 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Godin, "Calm," 2020

^{iv} Godin, "Calm," 2020