

...but Now I See

Sermon 54 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 22, 2020

John 9: 1-41

When a baby is born, it takes a while for their bodies to fully respond to their new, changed environment. They've spent the last 40 weeks being shaped and formed, created for life in this world, but the shock of the transition takes some time to set in. Part of the transitional phase happens early, right after birth as their senses awaken and adjust to all the new environmental stimuli. The muffled voices once heard in the safe darkness of the womb are now richer, more distinct and yet somehow, a little familiar. The eyes begin to open in the first moments after delivery, and although the newborn can see the room, it can take 2 to 3 months before clarity comes. These are some of the most precious moments for new parents as they can finally hold and connect with their babies. In these sweet moments, the sense of touch is awakened as newborns rest on parents' chests. In recent years, there's been a lot of focus on this important touch. The skin to skin contact in the first moments and days after birth deepens the bond between parent and child as both adjust to the overwhelming nature of this new reality. The feeling of that familiar touch is shown to improve all kinds of outcomes for the child in his or her earliest years.

The beauty (and some would say the sweet smell) of a newborn often overshadows the struggle that comes with the life-altering change of becoming parents, but anyone who's had the experience would tell you, life with a baby is a whole new world. Absolutely everything changes, in a matter of moments, and there's not much you can do except learn to adapt and survive the next 18 years.

This week many parents have been remembering those 8 weeks of bonding... with school out and workplaces closed, many of us are spending more time with our children than we have since they were born. Accountants,

researchers, engineers, restaurant workers, and software developers have suddenly become homeschool teachers struggling to figure out how to keep a child on task while still getting the work done from the home office.

This was a change nobody could have been prepared for, so this week, children's book authors, museum curators, and illustrators have hosted live learning events on social media to give parents a little reprieve.

Everything is different now and it's going to take us a little while to adjust.

Maybe this hasn't been the story of your week but as we think about our lives, whether it is becoming a new parent, changing a job, making a major move, losing a loved one, or graduating from high school, or adjusting to a new digital reality because of the Coronavirus... we have all had to learn the hard lesson that the only constant thing about life is change.

Sometimes the changes are good and easy to accept. Sometimes they aren't. Sometimes our social, political, and financial capital can shield us from the hard impacts of change... and sometimes all we can do is sit back and watch everything around us turn into something we never thought we would see.

As Jesus traveled through Galilee he came upon a man who had been blind from birth. Seeing a man in need of healing, Jesus bent down, spat in the dirt and smeared mud across the face of his new friend. He told the man to go wash off his face in the pool called "Siloam" which means "Sent," and the man did exactly as he was told. He went, he washed, and he came back with his eyes wide open, able to take in - for the first time - the sights of a whole new world.

Everything had changed.

The man who was healed wasn't the only one whose life was changed on that Sabbath day. When he returned to his neighborhood - the community that had called him a sinner because of his disability - they couldn't even recognize him without the stigma of his former life. "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"

He kept telling them that he was the same man, but they could not see it. It was too much to believe... too much to take in.

Then we consider the Pharisees who could not accept that Jesus, the healer, could be sent from God. "... He does not observe the Sabbath," they said, discounting all that the evidence suggested because it seemed that he didn't exactly follow the rules of the old world they had grown comfortable with. In fact, the whole religious community held firm in their disbelief until the man's parents were called in and questioned, "Is this your son? The one who was born blind?"

Then, even the parents - faced with an unbelievable new reality - could not accept what had happened and in their response, they distance themselves from their own child saying, "He is a grown man, let him speak for himself."

The man who was once a beggar spoke his truth for the second time, expressing his belief that the man, Jesus, was indeed from God... the evidence being his very own rebirth. He has been transformed from his old life into new life, everything he knew to be real and true was different now... He had been reborn... all because of mud smeared across his face...

The man born blind is just another unlikely disciple to whom Jesus offers new life. This story is just another in a collection of stories in John's Gospel about the power of change despite its necessary disorientation and disruption.

You may remember, in John chapter 4, the whole world saw a worthless, sinful, Samaritan woman, but Jesus saw a disciple in need of recognition. Here, in John chapter 9 Jesus is up to it again; he sees a man born blind, known only as a beggar, and relegated to a life of judgment and isolation. But Jesus sees a different reality, a new world of possibilities in which this man is a disciple. All that needs to happen is for this man to be reborn and set free from old realities into new life in God's kingdom, where all are seen and welcomed and loved and where all are made whole.

You and I have probably read this story a million times before. And I wonder if in our old readings of this story, we've focused too much on the blind man as if he were the only one in need of healing.

Despite the relentless testimony of the man himself, insisting that he had been reborn through an encounter with God for which there were no sufficient words, nobody around seemed to see and understand what was happening.

"I don't know whether he was a sinner... [but what I do know is I once was blind, and now I see.]"

I don't know how it happened but what I do know is everything I thought was true and real... is no more.

I wonder if those around him - the neighbors who didn't recognize him except as a beggar, the pharisees who questioned the validity of his healing on the Sabbath, his own parents who would not stand up for him, and those who asked a second time... tell us again, how is it so? - I wonder if they needed to be reborn just as badly, but they just couldn't bear the pain of life-altering change?

Sometimes we can choose whether or not we want to change. Certainly, it's easier that way, when we have a sense of control over the whole process.

But sometimes, there is absolutely nothing we can do, except put our faith in God and continue following one step at a time into the wilderness that is the human existence.

We find ourselves in a time of great change. And many of the changes that are coming our way are things over which we have no control. The global pandemic called Coronavirus has arrived, and it is forcing rapid and unbelievable change upon our rhythms of work and community. The virus is spreading and it is forcing us to consider a different kind of economy - at least for a little while. The pandemic is here and it demands that we face a reality none of us have ever known before.

Let me be the first to confess, there is so much fear about what we might become and how we must become it. There is so much fear about what will be lost and never recovered. There is perhaps, so much to fear with this change that we don't even know how to name what we are afraid of anymore... all we know is that the fear can be paralyzing.

In many ways we might be feeling like our eyes are bursting open and for the first time we are seeing our new reality... like the blind man in John's Gospel or the new baby adjusting to life in the outside world. New information is coming at us so fast from so many different directions that everything has begun to feel a little blurry, cloudy, without resolution or clarity. It is disorienting and anxiety producing... but even in the midst of this rapid change, we - like a newborn babe - can still hear the voice of our loving parent who spoke to us as we were being formed in the womb, who held us close in times of trouble and who has shown us time and time again that God can be trusted to deliver us through this season of necessary rebirth.

Even as the virus spreads and the whole world continues to change, there have been signs of hope. Even as the churches shut down their buildings the people are rediscovering one another and finding new ways to connect with

one another. Even in our new world of social distancing, the church - defined by the people - continues to serve the community insisting that we will care for our neighbors somehow, some way... And when we pause from our work, and look outside, we see the resilient and reliable bursting forth of spring... flowers in bloom, trees once again turning green, and that persistent coat of pollen on our porches and cars reminding us that there is a future beyond this current challenge, there is springtime even though it feels like the dead of winter, there is new life being re-born into our midst again and again and again... We just have to open our eyes once again, perhaps for the first time, and listen for the familiar voice of God, offering us healing and hope ... and perhaps even the opportunity to be reborn.