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Lent 4: Show us our Blindness
Transcript from March 22, 2020, Mennonite Church Canada worship service video

Worship Participants:

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Worship Leader: Judith Friesen Epp
Scripture Reader: Kathy Giesbrecht
Children's Storyteller: Doug Klassen
Preacher: Doug Klassen
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Focus Statement:

On this fourth Sunday of Lent, we enter the story of John 9. It is the story of the man who was born blind, who received sight as Jesus anointed his eyes with mud, and whose life was turned upside down by this new reality. This story was an important one in the early church because those who came to "see" the way of Jesus also had their lives upended and learned to find God in the midst of complexity and chaos. May the truth and beauty of this story also unfold among us today.

Call to Worship:

In the barren landscapes of Lent,
we come, O God.

Together with people
from across the ages,
we seek you in difficult times,
in hard places.

Like Jesus,
tempted by Satan in the desert,
we come with all our fears and temptations.
Like Nicodemus,
a Pharisee searching in the night,
we come with all our doubts and questions.

Like the Woman of Samaria,
alone at the community well,
we come with all our thirst and loneliness.



Like the man born blind,
yearning for vision,
we come with all our confusion and disorientation.

In our own strange and barren landscapes this Lent,
we come, O God, in faith and in hope.
Show us your way. Amen.

Prayer:

We come, O God,
seeking and questioning,
thirsting and longing,
Meet us in our blindness,
and touch us with your healing.
Grant us new ways of seeing
and guide us into new paths of living.
Draw us together, as your people, united in faith and hope
in this Lenten landscape of our time. Amen.

Song: For the Beauty of the Earth (public domain)

For the beauty of the earth,
for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.
For the beauty of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale and tree and flower
sun and moon and stars of light:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.

For they church that evermore
lifteth holy hands above,
off'ring up on ev'ry shore
her pure sacrifice of love:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.

Prayer of Confession:

God, you always walk among us
inhabiting with us

each place of beauty and joy
each moment of fear and pain.
leaving traces of your Spirit,
hints of your grace.

Forgive us when we have failed to see.

When self-interest and self-preservation
narrow our vision...

When anxiety and fear
cloud our sight...

When grasping and hoarding,
blind us to our neighbour's need...

When grief and pain
dull our vision...

When we lose sight of you
and can no longer find our way...

Open our eyes once more, O God,
that we might see.

Now hear these words of assurance:

The God who walks among us
knows our blindness
heals our vision
opens our eyes.
This God appears to us
and empowers us to see. Amen.

Song: Fill us with Your Feast (Phil Campbell-Enns; used by permission)

Weary and tempted
we enter the desert,
desp'rately seeking your face—
lives that are thirsty and hearts that are lonely,
we will seek your embrace.

Chorus:

Find us empty and wandering:
we, the lost and the least.
Find us in the wilderness
then fill us with your feast.

Deep in our darkness

you enter in stillness,
offering comfort so bright.
Gathered together within your safe shelter,
darkness welcomes the light.

Seeking and trusting,
we turn from destruction,
wondering what you will bring.
God of the present, the past and the future,
come and do a new thing.

Children's Feature:

I would like to talk with the children for a few minutes. Good morning, I hope all of you are doing well. I know that for some of you, this week was a very strange week. You may have been going to daycare, and suddenly you don't anymore.

Maybe you were going to school, and now you have a long break. And while that might seem like a lot of fun, I am wondering if you are a little scared about what is going on in our world.

You have probably heard on the news or from adults that there are some people who are getting really sick, and some are even dying. You might be worried when you hear someone cough. You might be scared to touch a railing, or to go into a grocery store.

And it is okay to feel worried about that. But I think we should also remember that we have very good doctors and nurses and hospital workers, and parents who are caring for people, and keeping places very clean to try and keep us healthy. You are loved by many people, and those people are doing their best to care for you.

I also want to tell you something else. In today's Bible story that we will hear, there is a man who was blind, and Jesus healed him so that he could see. It is one of my favourite stories. But in the story, there are also religious leaders who thought they could see, but Jesus told them that they were blind.

Does that sound strange? Well, they thought so too. But Jesus was saying that just because you can see something with your eyes, doesn't mean you understand what is going on in our world.

There are two kinds of seeing. Someone in your house might say, "I can see that your eyes are blue, or brown, or hazel." That is one kind of seeing. But your Mom might say to you, "I can see what you are saying."

Do you see the difference? One has to do with what we can see with our eyes. The other has to do with what we can see with our hearts. When someone says, "I can see what you are saying", that means, they are seeing with their heart or their mind.

Jesus wanted everyone to be able to see with their eyes – to see the trees, the birds, the rivers, to and to see people smiling. And he also wanted people to see with their hearts and minds, to see that God created them beautifully, that God loves them no matter what, that God wants only good things for them, and that God is with them no matter what happens.

Jesus shows us that God is not somewhere off in the clouds watching the bad things happening in our world. Jesus is the face of God in the story you will hear today, right there, coming close to be with people who are suffering. We are never alone. God is always with us, holding us, loving us and working to wipe away tears and make all things new.

Offering:

In these times of stocking our own homes with supplies, of social distancing, of communities dispersed and scattered, there continue to be acts of kindness and generosity, people reaching out to those in need, churches continuing their ministries to the marginalized, International Witness Workers walking alongside churches in other nations. Whenever you are able, we invite you to continue in this spirit of generosity, caring for others, and supporting your local congregation and the wider church in its many ministries.

Most of us are accustomed to an offering as part of our weekly worship service; when we are not physically gathered, that is, of course, no longer possible in the same way. So we invite you to embody new forms of this ritual through electronic donations and mailed cheques. May this, too, be a spiritual practice of love and care in these times of need.

Scripture Reading: John 9

Message: Seeing in Times of Pandemic and Apocalypse

(Please note that the sermon transcript was posted before it was recorded and therefore may be slightly different from the video.)

We were driving down the dusty, rutted roads of Orodara, Burkina Faso. We passed kids kicking a ball through the streets, some guys fixing cars, others welding, right along the side of the road. Soon we were on the main road heading north toward the border of Mali.

As we were driving, Josue said to me, "Let's stop and say hello to some of the missionaries who work up here in the village of Tin. They do Bible translation."

About 15 kilometres along, we were approaching this little village. You could see clay/brick buildings on the left side of the road.

Suddenly Nicodeme, the driver, turned the vehicle to the right and we drove down a driveway that was carved out of the bush.

Branches were scraping the side of the vehicle, and some vines were like fingers running over the roof of our 4x4.

Soon we pulled into this clearing and out of the house came the first white person I had seen in days. He introduced himself and told us that we had arrived at the perfect time – it was time for morning tea.

We sat under his gazebo and talked about his call to ministry, his move with his wife from Manitoba to Burkina Faso, building his house, and the painstaking work of translating the Bible into the Siamu language – a language that was not a written language, until he set himself to the task.

As we were visiting, another man came up through the vines and branches and came to the gazebo to join us.

He introduced himself as Pastor Solo. He became a Christian through the Bible's translation into Siamu, and he was on his way back to his village.

Later another elderly man, came up the driveway. He had a walking stick, and at times he would put his hand out in front of him to either brace or protect himself, I couldn't tell which.

When he got close and greeted us, I could see that he had cataracts in his eyes...his irises were so cloudy, they were almost white. He was a Muslim man from an all-Muslim village across the street.

We visited a while longer, drank more tea, ate some oranges, and then Josue said it was time for us to go.

Just when we were standing up to leave, the Muslim man put his hand out to stop us. He pointed at me but spoke in Siamu. The missionary turned to me and said, "This man would like you to pray for healing for his eyes. He is almost completely blind."

In John 9, Jesus and his disciples were walking a dirt road. On the shoulder of the road there may have been people working, but there was a blind beggar, minding his own business, likely just trying to collect enough coins to be able to eat that day. Many knew him and would help him out.

The disciples decide to use the man as a case study in their discussion. It was common belief in Judaism at the time that God's favour and God's punishment worked by "cause and effect."

If you did good things, you would be blessed, if you did bad things, you, or maybe even your descendants would be punished. "Look at this blind man, Jesus. Whose sin caused his blindness?"

Jesus replied, "You are missing the point" and he made some mud, puts it on his eyes, heals him, and then Jesus and his disciples leave.

A short while later, this former blind man is walking around town looking good...maybe a little too good.

Finally, someone asked him what happened.

Suddenly the scene changes. The neighbours haul the man before the religious leaders. This healing happened on the Sabbath by someone unauthorized.

"Are you sure you can see?", they asked him. "Were you really blind? Who healed you? Can you imagine?"

Next the parents. "Is this your son?" "Yes." "Was he born blind?" "Yes, he was born blind, but now he can see.

We don't know what happened. He is an adult, go ask him." "Thanks a lot, Mom and Dad."

They couldn't take the risk of upsetting the religious authorities. Expulsion from the synagogue was a huge social disgrace and they were not willing to risk it. They abandoned him.

The scene changes again. The man is now grilled a second time now, but even more intensely. Jesus must be a sinner, they said.

The poor man shoots back, "Well, here is a fine thing! This man has the power to open my eyes, and you have never heard of him! Something like this has never happened before. If he wasn't from God, he couldn't do anything."

Outrage! They yelled at him and threw him out of the synagogue. Healed now, but excommunicated, an outcast, also forsaken by his parents, and now all alone.

What do you think was going through his mind? He didn't ask for this healing. He was just sitting minding his own business. It all started with the disciples using him as a case study.

And the blind man is thinking, "This is the grace of God?"

After it was all over, Jesus heard what had happened to him, so he comes to see him. And it is interesting how he begins the conversation. He says to him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Interesting question.

In other words, "do you believe in what the book of Daniel says about God's son (God's Messiah) coming to redeem the world?"

The blind man is so confused by now he says, "Who is he?" "You have seen him," Jesus said. "I am he." The man replied. "Lord, I believe."

And then comes what I think is the most curious and intriguing line in the whole story...verse 39...Jesus says, "I came into the world so that those who CAN'T see WOULD see, and those that CAN see WOULD become blind."

The story ends with the Pharisees becoming blind, and the blind man now able to see.

Under that gazebo in the village of Tin, the Muslim elder reached out his hand to me and said, "Pray for the healing of my eyes." I hesitated; this was not a case study.

I looked at the missionary, I looked at Nicodeme and Josue and then I looked at the man who looked at me like he was staring into my soul.

In my journal I wrote down that I prayed, "Lord Jesus, when you walked on the earth, you healed the sick, you cast out evil spirits, you shared the words of eternal life, and you put your hands on blinded eyes. Sitting with us is a man who has asked for healing for his eyes.

We believe in miracles; we believe that you want healing for every person. So, work your will in this man's life, we pray. Most of all though, give him the awareness of your presence in this world.

Give him the eyes to see your love and your care for him. Reveal yourself to him in a way that fills him with hope and encouragement, give him vision to see you at work in his life and in this world. In Your Name, AMEN."

When I returned from Burkina, I thought about that man often, and prayed for him often. I wondered if his cataracts suddenly or eventually disappeared.

Some months later, I shared this story with a friend who wanted to hear about my trip. He was dying of cancer.

The friend was so moved by the story that he said to me, "Doug, find out what it would take for this man to be flown to France for the surgery. I will pay for it."

I was overwhelmed. Maybe this is God's healing coming to him now. The next day I wrote the missionary and told him of the offer. I checked my e-mail the day after, and the day after that...a week later.

Finally, after about 3-4 weeks I wrote him again. He answered a couple of days later. He said, "Doug, this is an exceedingly generous offer, but it is complicated.

This man has never been beyond the large city that is a two-hour drive from here. He doesn't have a passport; he may not have the identification needed to get one. He likely doesn't know which day is his birthday.

Having him take a trip like this at his age would be extremely stressful. Further to that, he is not the only ailing person

in his village. This offer could start a firestorm of desperate pleas for help that could upset the entire social order.

He is a respected and revered elder right now. If we would follow through with this, he could end up being ostracized because he was given something that others were not able to have. I really feel that we don't want the last years of his life to be as an outcast."

No, no, I thought - the man in John 9 became an outcast...and that was all good. Or was it?

The story of the man born blind was often told to catechumens in the early church as they were preparing for baptism. "If you receive sight, you may lose everything. If you say, 'Lord, I believe', your world might be turned upside down, because while you can now see, you may also be oppressed by the blindness of others."

What do we make of this? How do we understand this text in the midst of the pandemic that we are living in?

COVID-19 is an apocalypse – an apocalypse in the truest sense of that word. It is an unveiling, or a revealing, of things unseen but deeply known.

What has been unveiled for us is the level of fear that exists in our culture; the hoarding, the greed, the concerns about self-defence, the blaming of certain people groups – they sinned, or at least their parents did.

No, Jesus said, "Let the works of God be revealed."

To say, "Lord, I believe", is to say yes to an alternative story that is being told in our world at the moment.

I have been thrilled to read about how many of our churches are reorganizing their pastoral-care efforts. The phone calls that are being made....

Pastors, deacons, young adults...asking seniors for their shopping lists. Small groups checking in with each other asking about work and layoffs and if everyone is sleeping okay.

And what I know now is that through you, Jesus is showing up to those who are alone, isolated and even outcast.

In his ground-breaking book, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force*, author Rodney Stark asks, "How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western Civilization?"

He concluded that one important factor was the way the early Christians responded to two terrible epidemics.

To cities filled with homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments.

To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities faced with epidemics, Christianity offered care for the sick and dying.

I thank God for the health care professionals who are working tirelessly in this pandemic. It is best that we heed their advice and keep our distance from those who are sick and dying – they are handling it so well.

However, there are many who remain healthy, all around us, whose lives have been turned upside down because of this. And they need care as well.

The missiologist David Fitch invites us to be like Jesus and come to those, like the formerly blind man, whose lives are uncertain.

When Fitch meets new people, he asks them, "Are you lonely? Are you angry? Are you lost?"

How do you think the formerly blind man would have answered those questions?

Jesus shows up when there seems to be nowhere to turn. Jesus comes among us when the innocent are blamed, when fears abound and innocent people are dying.

Jesus comes among us when everything that used to make sense no longer does.

Do you believe in the Son of Man? Do you believe in the one who was sent to redeem the world? Who is he?

"I am he", says Jesus. And maybe I can add today, that "you are he." You are the ones, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that are the conduit of God's healing and hope for the world.

You are the ones, through your words and actions in this time that are living the good news of Jesus Christ to people who are lonely, angry or lost. Let us continue to live out of the courage and witness of our forbearers.

God's strength, wisdom and grace to you all in this time. Because of your living witness, may it lead to a chorus of the forgotten saying, "Lord, I believe." AMEN.

Song: Be Thou My Vision (public domain)

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;
I ever with thee, and thou with me, Lord.
Thou my great Father, thy child may I be,
thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.
Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise;
thou mine inheritance, now and always.
Thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, when vict'ry is won
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heav'n's Sun!
Heart of my heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Prayer for the Church and the World:

(Adapted from "Prayer in Virulent Times" by Carol Penner, based on St. Patrick's Prayer of Protection)

We bind onto ourselves
the loving power of God our Creator,

the enlivening power of the Spirit of Truth,
and the steadfast faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

We bind onto ourselves
the glories of the earth, this gift:
the power of heaven,
the light of the sun,
the brightness of the moon,
the splendour of fire,
the flashing of lightning,
the swiftness of wind,
the depth of the sea,
the stability of the earth.

Against the power of viruses,
against the sweep of pandemics,
against the selfishness that hoards for oneself,
against the anxiety that gnaws at our hearts,
good Lord, protect us.

For all who are ill,
bring healing.
For all who are grieving,
and cannot be comforted,
hear our prayer, O God.
For all who are afraid or alone,
send your love.
For all those who lose income and lack provisions,
extend your hope, O God.
For all who care for the sick,
preserve and strengthen them.
For all who create healthcare strategies, make policies,
and search for medical cures,
empower them, O God.

We bind to ourselves today
God's eye to watch over us,
God's ear to hear us,
God's word to give us speech,
God's hand to guide us.

Christ with us, Christ before us,
Christ behind us, Christ within us,
Christ beneath us, Christ above us,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in mouth of friend or stranger.

With the steadfastness of God, our Rock,
and the love of Christ that will not let us go,
and the Spirit of Hope, who gives us peace,
we entrust this day. Amen.

Benediction:

As we close our time of worship,
may we be people of vision,
may we grow as a community of healing and hope,
may we offer to the world ministries of courage and love.
God is with us everywhere, always.
We are not alone. Amen.

Song: You're Not Alone (Bryan Moyer Suderman; used by permission)

You're not alone, we are one body.
You're not alone, we stand with you.
You're not alone, your time of suff'ring is our suff'ring too,
and I know the day is coming when we will be rejoicing anew.

Many members in this body that we know,
some are great and some are small:
eyes and ears and hands and just a little toe,
one God who activates them all.

One body, Spirit formed and Spirit fed,
diff'rent genders, rich and poor;
a banquet where the least sit at the head:
one body broken for the world.

