

“In Your Face”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 9:1-41
February 4, 2018
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

I was born a neuro-ophthalmological condition called nystagmus, and thus have been visiting eye doctors as long as I can remember. My mom tells the story of taking me to visit Dr. Kupersmith at NYU when I was about three or four. He was great with kids. He would let me play with Mickey Mouse toys and had me sit in my mom’s lap for the entire exam. He turned off the lights and turned on a projector and a bunch of cartoon characters in different sizes appeared across from us. He asked me to tell him what I saw on the wall.

“What wall? I don’t see a wall,” I replied. My mom’s lap immediately started shaking. It was worse than she thought. In a flash, she saw a very different future for me from the one she’d been imagining. “Oh no,” she whispered.

“Relax. The little twerp has his eyes closed.” Dr. Kupersmith explained. He chuckled. I burst out laughing. He got very specific with the instructions, asking me to *open my eyes* and tell him what I saw on the wall. I gave up the gag, but my mom has not let me live it down.

The question of what we see and don’t see is at the heart of this story. The mechanics of what happened are repeated four times: Jesus made mud, put it on the eyes of the man, sent him to wash, and the man regained his sight. And as we’ve noticed in the Gospel of John, things are always working on at least a couple of levels here. It’s about the man’s literal vision, but much more about the ability to see a person as a person, to spot a sign from God, to notice the light of the world shining right in your face.

The man who was blind sees more and more as the story goes on, and the people around him keep missing what’s before them. At first, the man is a bystander — an object for discussion. He doesn’t approach Jesus and he never asks to be healed of his blindness. He’s just a beggar about whom a theological question is asked by the disciples. The man doesn’t see Jesus in this encounter. Surely he heard them talking about him, and then Jesus is there, all in his face, taking earth and spit to do something miraculous. But the man doesn’t see instantly. He must go wash.

Back in May, I got to visit the site of the Pool of Siloam. It was originally built during the reign of King Hezekiah around the turn of the 7th Century BCE to provide a water supply inside Jerusalem as protection against a siege. While the pool was in Jerusalem, it was a bit of a stroll from the temple, which Jesus has just left when this story begins. It’s about a half-mile, downhill. That’s not so bad, unless you happen to be blind. I imagine that journey was emotional for the man. With spit-mud in his eyes, he must have wondered if it would work. He must have had to rely on some of his neighbors to get to the pool. He must have wondered if every step he took was upon ground that he would see be able to see.

He comes back and he can see, and this is contrasted with the inability of the people, most of whom had presumably just seen him walk by on the way to the pool, to recognize him. He wasn’t blind and he wasn’t begging, and it would appear those were his defining characteristics. Now they couldn’t be sure it was him. He

could have kept his mouth shut and distanced himself from his previous life. Instead, what has happened is too much to keep hidden.

“I am the man!” he repeats over and over, but they’re not convinced. He tells what happened, that “the man called Jesus” did this. And though they ask, the man doesn’t know where Jesus is. When he’s brought to the Pharisees, he believes Jesus to be a prophet. Then he argues with them and boldly claims that Jesus is, indeed, from God. When he again meets Jesus — seeing him for the first time — he calls Jesus “Lord” and worships him.

The man goes from “it’s worth a shot” to telling his story while pointing to Jesus (wherever he is) to calling Jesus a prophet to mocking the religious leaders to believing in Jesus as the one sent from God and worshipping him. He sees more and more. And as he does, the sight of the community and the religious leaders grows dimmer and their hearts shrink three sizes.

If we are in the first community hearing the Gospel of John, it’s at a time when Judaism and Christianity are making their split, and we are angry with the Jewish leadership as we are being driven out of the synagogue ourselves, and we find hope in the knowledge that while our sight is sharpening, theirs is getting clouded as they get farther from the light.

Of course, we’re not in that position, but we are about to head into Lent. Today marks the last Sunday of the season of light and revelation we call Epiphany. We need all the light we can take in now, for the forty days will bring so many shadows. The first chapter of John’s gospel stretches from “In the beginning” to Jesus and John the Baptist, and then the following nine chapters cover about two years. Next Sunday, time slows way down, as the next ten chapters cover about one week. As we take our steps toward the cross, we’ll be running on reserves of light and we’ll need every reminder to open our eyes and see what’s before us.

Keeping our eyes opened is one of the big jobs of the church. We are called to watch out for one another, to see when another is struggling, and to name the people we encounter as beloved children of God, rather than knowing them solely by the part of them with which we are most uncomfortable. We are called to be sure that eyes are wide open to the suffering and injustice of the world and to call it sin and to ask for holy strength to resist it. If we follow Jesus, we don’t have the option of turning aside from hunger and poverty and the cruelty and callousness that comes from greed. And we can’t avert our eyes from the ravages of war and violence and indifference. We can’t close our eyes and say, “What homophobia and transphobia, doc? What ecological disaster? What racism? I don’t see any wall.”

Now, Edgewood Presbyterian, y’all are great at keeping your eyes open for this awful stuff. Thanks be to God. Y’all kind of nerd-out on misery and injustice. But we can’t forget to keep our eyes opened for the signs of good in the world as well. What would it look like if our prayer list had as many joys as concerns? I know that we are under a constant barrage of bad news, but we can’t miss the signs of God’s work, like the neighbors and the Pharisees did, booing and pointing out all the problems we see when honest-to-goodness miracles are happening in our midst.

This is where I’m supposed to insert an inspiring story about someone very young or very old doing something to change the world in a small but beautiful way. Maybe it should be a Lenten discipline taken on by this congregation to lift up those stories of light throughout the forty days. But right now, I instead want to tell you about what I saw upstairs in Barron Hall on Friday night at our Chili-Cook Off and Board Game Party:

I saw people new to this congregation being embraced by relative old-timers. I saw parents patiently playing achingly slow-moving games *with other people's kids*. I saw families that are still being constructed giving and receiving love. I saw teenagers show up at the uncoolest place on earth to hang out with people that they know love them. I saw two teachers who'd worked their tails off all week at school, not to mention at home with their own kids, stay late to make sure everything got cleaned up.

Nobody had a life-altering experience. We tried hard not to track mud into the building. Nobody had a disability cured. I still need to print my sermon in 20-point font. But I have been with you all long enough to tell you that God was at work in that space on that night. I saw it. And I believe.

Don't you ever stop showing me the light of the world. Amen.