

March 23, 2025

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Psalm 23; John 9:1-11

Faith In the Wilderness: Seeking Healing

We are continuing our Lenten journey of nurturing our faith in the wilderness times of our lives. This morning we hear a story of healing, renewal, and restoration from the Gospel of John – faith amidst the wilderness of being separated from others because of a disease of body, mind or soul, an ailment, an injury, a disabling condition.

Before sharing the story, I'd like to set the stage. Last Sunday we were in John Chapter 4 with Jesus in Samaria as he connected with woman who was thirsting to be seen, thirsting for the Living Water. Jesus was on his way back from Jerusalem to Galilee. It should be noted that Jesus does a lot of traveling in the Gospel of John. After returning to Galilee he does the second of his "signs" revealing his identity as the Messiah, the anointed one, the Son of God. This second sign was a healing of the son of a royal official. Jesus then returns to Jerusalem for the third of his signs – a healing of man who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus then returns to the region around the Sea of Galilee where he feeds the 5000 and walks on the water in the sea during a storm, his fourth and fifth signs. In Chapter 7, Jesus returns again to Jerusalem for the Festival of Booths, also known as the Festival of Tabernacles or Sukkot. It is on this trip that Jesus performs the sixth of his seventh signs, the healing of man born blind. Hear now this story from John 9 from *The Message* version of scripture:

Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light."

He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man's eyes, and said, "Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "Sent"). The man went and washed—and saw.

Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, "Why, isn't this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?"

Others said, "It's him all right!" But others objected, "It's not the same man at all. It just looks like him." The man said, "It's me, the very one." They said, "How did your eyes get opened?"

"A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I did what he said. When I washed, I saw."

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

"When I washed, I saw." What a powerful testimony. I suspect that the first he image he saw was that of his own reflection in the Pool of Siloam. Did he recognize himself? Did he look like he imagined he would look based on the descriptions of others, on what his mother told him from the earliest days of his childhood? Could he have possibly conceived the color of his eyes and the shape of nose and the way his lips curled in a half-smile? Imagine what he saw for the first time – the faces of family and friends; the soft dew on the morning grass, foods he had known by smell and taste. And he saw the faces of the disbelieving neighbors from the town who could not even remotely fathom how this man, a man whose name we never learn, who had been blind from birth, could now see.

The story of this healing actually continues through the last verse of chapter 9. The disbelieving neighbors bring the newly sighted man to the religious leaders. The leaders question the man's healing – first saying it must not be a healing by a follower of the Lord God because it occurred on the Sabbath, and that was just not done. Others disagreed, saying that something this miraculous must come from God. In their disagreement they turned the tables back on the man, asking him how this healing happened – after all, it was his eyes which were opened. And this newly healed man reported that Jesus is a prophet.

So the Pharisees – the religious leaders – take a different tact, saying that the man must not have been blind to begin with it. So they find his parents and ask them: "Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?" The man's parents confirm his identity and that he was born blind. The man's parents claim they have no idea who opened their son's eyes and the religious leaders should ask him, since he is a grown man and can answer for himself. The passage includes a parenthetical statement that his parents were afraid of the religious leaders because others who had claimed that Jesus was the Messiah had been dismissed from the synagogue. It is ironic that the religious leaders question whether the healed man was born blind, when they themselves were blind to Jesus' power.

The religious leaders call the newly sighted man back for a second time and tell him that he should give credit to God for his healing and that Jesus is some sort of imposter. With an open heart the man replies honestly – "I don't know whether he is from God or a sinner. What I do know for certain -- I was blind . . . I now see." The religious leaders keep questioning him, peppering him for information. In exasperation, he says: "I've told you over and over and you haven't listened. Why do you want to hear it again?" And they keep going at him, claiming

that while this newly sighted man may be a disciple of Jesus, they, the religious leaders of the day, are followers of Moses. That may not sound like a take down to our ears – but in that day and time it was a bold affront. So with a new found manner of confidence, the man responds that while the religious leaders may be well schooled in the laws of Moses, it was Jesus who opened his eyes – an amazing act that has never before happened – that one born blind is now able to see. And the religious leaders throw him out into the street, saying: “You’re nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!”

The man’s testimony was so simple, “When I washed, I saw.” And his words were simply rejected by the townspeople and the religious leaders. They literally could not see – they were blind to the healing love of Jesus. They were stuck in the wilderness of wanting explanations and reasons and details. They were stuck in the wilderness of wanting to control the narrative and justifying their role, their place in the hierarchy. This man who was born blind, who had spent his life begging in the street, how could he “see” the glory of God, how could he “understand” if they, who were so much more learned, couldn’t see to explain how this healing happened? Their eyes were closed, while the man’s eyes were opened. In the Greek, the verb used for “opened” (*anoigo*) is often used to refer to opening a door or a gate and metaphorically means “to give entrance into the soul”¹

The long dark nights of the soul are something those who are in the throes of illness, injuries, addictions, ailments of body, mind and spirit know a lot about. Long, dark nights when healing seems so painfully far away, a bridge that will never be crossed. The phrase “dark night of the soul” was used by the 16th century Spanish priest and mystic St. John of the Cross in the poem of that same name (in the Spanish *La Noche Oscura del Alma*). The poem narrates the journey of the soul to a mystical union with God. And while St. John of the Cross didn’t specifically refer to trials we face in life, the phrase “dark night of the soul” has become synonymous with life’s struggles, especially when one is in pain – physical, mental or spiritual and in need of healing². Times when the beloved words of the 23rd Psalm that we recited together provide a soothing balm. “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...”

How many nights did this man born blind spend reciting the words of that psalm, after he spent days begging in the street? How many nights did he lay awake wondering, “Why me? O, Lord.” Did he ask the question the disciples asked: “Who sinned? Did I sin or did my parents sin?” Or did his depth of understanding – his ability to see – give him insight into the answer Jesus would provide: “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.” Like the

¹ Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Accessed through Accordance Bible Software 13.3.2., Oaktree Software, October 2021 update.

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157984/the-dark-night-of-the-soul/>;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_Night_of_the_Soul

Samaritan woman at the well, this man who was born blind becomes a spokesperson for a faith that deepens in the face of questions, doubt, struggles, and obstacles.

Four of Jesus seven signs in the Gospel of John are healings, in one way, shape or form. I think that is instructive. Jesus recognized that those in the wilderness seeking healing were too often separated from their communities. That was the case 2000 years ago and it is still the case today. It is why we strive to make our services accessible, welcome those joining us on the livestream; it is why we offer bread at communion that all can eat together and why the Deacons have begun to extend communion to those who are unable to be with us on Sunday mornings. The healing that happened to man born blind was a healing that restored him to community, reunited him with family, helped him regain dignity and voice. The healing helped make him whole.

In our words of preparation, I share a quote from Franciscan sister Ilia Delio, emphasizing this aspect of Jesus ministry: “Jesus was a “wholemaker,” bringing together those who were divided, separated, or left out of the whole. He initiated a new way of “catholicity,” a gathering together of persons in love. ... He gathered together what was divided and confronted systems that diminished, marginalized, or excluded human persons. ... Faith in Christ should move us to be loving and free, to create new wholes, and in doing so, to create a new future for the human person, for society, and for the whole earthly community.”³

I appreciate this last phrase in Delio’s writing about how understanding Jesus’ ministry of healing is a call for each of us to work for the healing for the whole earthly community. We have a clue to this ministry call in our text today. Jesus tells the man born blind, “Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam.” It was curious to me that Jesus sent this man to the Pool of Siloam, for this pool was not one particularly known for healing in the scriptures. Its name comes from the Hebrew *shiloah* which means aqueduct or “the sent” of water. The pool was filled with water from the Gihon spring through a tunnel dug by King Hezekiah when the Assyrians were threatening Jerusalem⁴.

The Pool of Siloam was best known for its use in the Temple ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, which was why Jesus was in Jerusalem. It is one of the three festivals in which Israelites were commanded to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Like many harvest festivals, it is celebrated with abundant and elaborate feasts and hospitality is at the center, characterized by welcoming all guests.⁵ Part of this festival includes a water libation done at the beginning of the week. The priests would process to the

³ Ilia Delio, from *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love*, 2013; Center for Action and Contemplation; online at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/jesus-is-a-wholemaker/>

⁴ 2 Chronicles 32:2-4 and 2 Kings 20:20

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukkot>

Pool of Siloam to bring water back to the Temple in sacred vessels. Crowd of pilgrims waved bundles of branches which imitated the sound of falling rain, singing psalms of praise.⁶

To send this man to Pool of Siloam to wash the healing mud and spittle from his eyes would have told him that he was now to be welcomed into the community; to join the religious rituals and festivals he had been excluded from in the past; to become one of the crowds singing psalms of praise and waving branches; to feast abundantly. His eyes were opened – his soul revealed as a beloved child of God. And maybe, just maybe, he did not make the journey to the pool alone.

The First Nations Version is an Indigenous translation of the New Testament, designed to sound like the oral storytelling traditions of Native North Americans, shares verse 11 this way: “*With the help of others*, the man went and washed *the mud out his eyes* and returned with his sight restored.”⁷ The phrase “With the help of others” is in italics, which the First Nation’s version says “is an attempt to present scriptures as a living and moving narrative, at times reasonably implied statements were added within, above and below the text. For this we used our imagination as we tried to picture what may have been the reaction in the voices and faces of the participants. These added statements are not intended to change the meaning of the text but rather bring clarity.”

“*With the help of others*, the man went and washed *the mud out his eyes* and returned with his sight restored.” Whether we are the ones offering help or whether we are the ones receiving help, we travel the wilderness seeking healing together. As a community. As a people who “see” that sharing God’s love and mercy, grace and forgiveness lightens the load. We share each other’s grief and carry each through ailments of body, mind, and soul and we celebrate each other’s joys for each precious moment of healing received. May it be so.

⁶ John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav. *Jesus and His World. An Archeological and Cultural Dictionary*. Fortress Press., 1995 p157-161.

⁷ John 9. First Nations Version. An Indigenous Translation. Intervarsity Press p2021” p185; and pxii