

Reading and Sermon by Mark Pries

New Song Episcopal Church  
Coralville, Iowa

The Fourth Sunday of Lent  
March 22, 2020



“Jesus, Light of the World”  
(The 100 Guilder Print)

An etching by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn  
1647-49

*“With church doors shutting across America, it is time for us to show that the church has never been about the building.*

*WE are the church!”*

Isolated as we are due to COVID-19,  
 nevertheless, we gather in the name of Jesus,  
 at our homes,  
 in our thoughts and prayers,  
 via technology

Let us pray

*Discerner of hearts, you look beneath our outward appearance and see your image in each of us. Banish in us the blindness that prevents us from recognizing truth, so we may see the world through your eyes. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel according to John, the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter

**Glory to you, O Lord**

<sup>1</sup>As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup>We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” <sup>6</sup>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, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. <sup>8</sup>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?” <sup>9</sup>Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” <sup>10</sup>But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” <sup>11</sup>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.” <sup>12</sup>They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

<sup>13</sup>They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup>Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup>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.” <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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.”

<sup>18</sup>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 <sup>19</sup>and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” <sup>20</sup>His parents

answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; <sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

<sup>24</sup>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.” <sup>25</sup>He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

<sup>26</sup>They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” <sup>27</sup>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?” <sup>28</sup>Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup>We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” <sup>30</sup>The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup>We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. <sup>32</sup>Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup>If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” <sup>34</sup>They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

<sup>35</sup>Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” <sup>36</sup>He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” <sup>37</sup>Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” <sup>38</sup>He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. <sup>39</sup>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.” <sup>40</sup>Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” <sup>41</sup>Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

The Gospel of the Lord

**Praise to you, O Christ**

*Grace to you and peace from God as revealed in Jesus.*

Grace is the radical reality and power in which God gathers and sends us

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When hearing the witness according to John, let's remember why we have it:

**Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of GOD, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (20:30-31)**

Jesus

Signs

Written

Believe

God

Life

Dr. Karen Jones at Westminster Theological Seminary observed, “*The richness of John’s verbal artistry has led many interpreters to conclude that (John) is shallow enough for a baby to wade in and deep enough for an elephant to swim in.*”

There are 7 signs recorded in **this** book – narratives with layers of teaching

- Changing water into wine (Jn 2:1-11)
- Healing a royal official’s son (Jn 4:46-54)
- Healing a paralyzed man (Jn 5:1-15)
- Feeding 5,000 (Jn 6:5-14)
- Walking on water (Jn 6:16-21)
- Healing a man born blind (Jn 9:1-7)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:1-45).

Jesus healing a man born blind, this 6<sup>th</sup> sign, like the others, is a story

It is not a transcript – not an audio or video recording

A storyteller needs to tell it

This telling is so we **may come to believe ... and that through believing (we) may have life in his name.**

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER we’re told of a time when scribes and Pharisees (institutional preservationists) brought Jesus a woman caught in adultery (8:3)

they recall Mosaic Law: she should be stoned and they ask Jesus to teach.

He does

**“anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her”** (7b).

Then we read, Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground

Not on stone tablets but in the life-giving earth

Jesus is confronting the religious establishment;

Showing how deadly it had become

Remember, the writer is teaching **through believing (we) may have life in (Jesus’) name**

Within a few sentences Jesus announces, **“I am the light of the world.”** (8:12)

Soon, amid the debate with scribes and Pharisee, Jesus tells the ones who did recognize him as a *teacher-worth-learning-from*,

**“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”** (8:31-32)

In the story about synagogue leaders ready to stone a woman, our storyteller has set us up for another sign: The Healing of a Man Born Blind (9:1-41)

Remember, Jesus just said, **I am the light of the world**

Jesus as light of the world, is portrayed by Rembrandt in what's come to be known as the 100 Guilder Print (on the cover)

This is an extravagant amount for a print that could be reproduced countless times. Look at it



There, in the bright light of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees are exposed:  
well-dressed, standing upright, smiling, in conversation over a manuscript, a  
pet resting comfortably at their feet

    Focused on Jesus – unaware of the others

The light of Christ also radiates behind Jesus to show the populace:  
poorly dressed, sick, stooped, crippled, blind, outcast

    Focused on Jesus – yearning to be near him, for him to touch them

I've always liked this print by Rembrandt

    I've studied it, read about it

        Had a copy framed for my office

    It shows so clearly that Jesus is the light of the world

        And how people focus on Jesus, light of the world

The story of Jesus healing the blind man *challenges* this

The teller brings images hinting of new truth:

**he saw a man blind from birth**

Disciples are wondering for us, *where's the cause/effect?*

must be a reason this fellow's blind from birth

sin (broken relationship with GOD) must be in there somewhere – right?

No, we're told – this event is about GOD being glorified

Remember, Jesus told us, and now again, **I am the light of the world** (5b)

The story subtly weaves old images into the narrative of light and sight

Spitting on the ground – making mud

**then the LORD GOD formed (adam) from the dust of the ground, and  
breathed into (adam's) nostrils the breath of life** (Gen 2:7)

In the beginning life-giving mud and breath

Centuries later the Psalmist would cry out to GOD,

**Create in me a clean heart, O GOD,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.** (PS. 51:10)

This becomes our Lenten prayer and among some, the offering prayer:

*Start over with me GOD; renew my life.*

*Touch me; let me see.*

There's more,

beyond the healing mud is the cleansing water at the pool of Siloam

Like a cleansing flood establishing a new creation

A pool named Sent (Siloam)

Like Reed Sea water parting to send Hebrew refugees to freedom

2<sup>nd</sup> Century Christians heard this like we hear it

We are baptized – like survivors of the flood – sent to establish a new creation

We are baptized – freed from all that binds us – sent as witnesses

We are baptized – claimed, loved, named

These truths wrap the narrative in a way that enabling the storyteller to confront any doubts or misgivings about believing in Jesus: having life in his name

Back and forth goes the narrative:

People who knew the man don't recognize him after the healing

Did he look different? He certainly was seeing the world differently

Leaders wondered what he thought of the guy who did this to him

He reported what happened and concluded Jesus *must be a prophet*

For the sake of stability in the community and needing other voices, they ask the man's parents

*"Ask him; he's old enough to speak for himself. Don't mess with our lives."*

This describes what happens when people come to believe in Jesus:

it could disrupt the family

The leaders want the man to give all the credit to GOD and name Jesus a sinner  
 This isn't a head thing for the one healed  
 He knows what happened to him since he met Jesus

If we're listening to the storyteller, we notice it's a creepy story

The storyteller doesn't name the emotions

But there's a whole lot of fear:

The institutional preservationists afraid of change

Parents afraid of losing their place in the community

Friends and neighbors who don't recognize the fellow

All this fear could have stood tall as anger: get more stones:

stone those sinners – the one supposed to be blind & the healer

BUT MOST – COULD WE CELEBRATE?

Could we shout for victory?

Could we cheer for a healer?

Could we cry some tears for a man made free?

Could our joy pour over our faces?

Could we hug and laugh and imagine tomorrows?

Would someone please shout, **“THANK YOU JESUS!”**

So let's own this story as our story: your story – my story

That *amazing grace* moment in your life when your eyes opened

When you could say, *“I was blind but now I see”*

The storyteller has brought us to that moment

That moment when WE began to see

That moment when WE began to look differently at life

Bring your testimony

Name and claim your story when Jesus started over with you

Mud and breath – Your truth and GOD's grace

My testimony is that I grew up in a house drenched with Lutheran Christian trimmings; my childhood had church at the center; my friends knew I'd be a pastor.

I was raised to be an institutional preservationist:

a Lutheran pharisee becoming a Lutheran scribe

Along the way I learned about artists and musicians and crafters

Their creations were evidence of their thoughts and their message

Linger, wonder, wait

see music, listen to images, taste fragrance, feel vistas

The Hundred Guilder Print is an example of what can happen when we wait

Certainly seems to announce loudly, Jesus **is the light of the world**

Certainly seems to invite everyone's adoration of Jesus

Certainly seems to include everyone – inclusive: Jesus for everybody

Jesus was NOT sent as light to be worshipped

Jesus came to reveal, expose, show, open: that we may **have life in his name**

The storyteller sends us all to the Pool of Siloam (which means sent)

Go wash; SEE; You are sent

You baptized ones, with opened eyes, see what the light of Christ reveals

The storyteller told us in the very beginning

**The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it (1:5)**

The closing words of Rabbi Esther's sermon for yesterday tell of what we all now do because we see

We are here together to ... lean into goodness and kindness. To remind ourselves and the world that GOD loves us through this. Coronavirus has neither will nor intent, is neither punishment or judgment. We are the ones who bring intention and encounter to this moment. We are GOD's hands, we are called to connect, heal and build. While our streets fall empty, dear ones, we will fill up with love. And do what we have always done; bear our light in a dark world.

Peace be with you.