

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him...[H]e spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man...."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 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." 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.

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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 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." 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see...Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes....Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

John 9:1-41, excerpts

+++++

Seeing Possibilities

What a difference when we can see possibilities!

There are people who can walk into a space, and instantly envision how it could be reconfigured - a wall moved here, color added there, and voila, the former shoe store is transformed to a new restaurant; the battered old dresser stashed for years in the attic corner is refinished and admired - its delicate inlaid wood patterns now able to be seen again. But who could have imagined that possibility?

How good are you at seeing possibilities?

+++++

I've been struck in the last several weeks at the imagination - the way of seeing new possibilities - that enabled the recent scientific discoveries regarding the creation of our universe. Once unfathomable possibilities, that someone was able to envision, long before it could be proven...

As the New York Times¹ reported two weeks ago, physicist Alan Guth 30 years ago was struggling to understand why some things he should be able to see in the universe weren't there. Why was there no trace of some exotic particles that should have been created in the Big Bang?

Then a new possibility occurred to him, as he labored over his equations: what if there had been an enormous blooming of the universe, faster than the speed of light for a fraction of an instant. If that were the case then what he sought wasn't missing; it was diluted, like a drop of rain in the ocean. The huge explosive reaction he postulated came to be called the theory of "inflation" at the time of the Big Bang.

Thirty years later, the Times published this front page story:

Radio astronomers at the South Pole reported that they had **seen** the beginning of the Big Bang, and that Guth's hypothesis looked right.

...Reaching back across 13.8 billion years to the first sliver of cosmic time with telescopes at the South Pole, a team of astronomers led by John M. Kovac of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics detected ripples in the fabric of space-time - so-called gravitational waves - the signature of a universe being wrenched violently apart when it was roughly a trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second old. They are the long-sought smoking-gun evidence of inflation, proof, Dr. Kovac and his colleagues say, that Dr. Guth was correct.

Alan Guth had seen the possibility before technology allowed anyone to observe it. He'd seen - not yet with his eyes - but in his brilliant imagination. And even now, what Kovac and others say they *see* - backwards into time - isn't it astonishing, what we might even call "miraculous."

What a difference when we can see possibilities!

When all of us together, here at King's Chapel, can. When we're willing to even imagine things most people would label Miraculous.

+++++

All our scriptures today are about this: whether we live seeing possibilities or whether we prefer to remain blind. The great prophet Samuel – known literally as a “see-er,” looks for a King who is tall and strapping, evaluating each of Jesse's mature and seasoned sons, but he comes up empty. God sees the possibilities in the smallest little brother David, who wasn't even in the room yet: David, fresh from the field, with dung on his sandals and a stray pieces of grass in his hair, because he slept outside at night. God saw possibilities in David that even the experienced prophet missed.

What possibilities does God see for King's Chapel – possibilities that aren't even in the room yet, that we've not even thought of, maybe haven't been willing to voice, because they'd be so preposterous. Ideas that might seem to come with a whiff of dung, or a bit grass-stained?

What possibilities does God see for you – especially when you feel small, just a little David who's been left out in the field, not even called into the room to meet the visiting prophet.

God does not see you as the world does, because God doesn't need a diamond already polished. God sees diamonds in the rough.

What's important is not how *we* see ourselves, or how *others* see us, but how *God* does. What are *God's* dreams for you, this Sunday morning? For us?

“The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

What a difference when we can see possibilities!

+++++

I am the kind of person who can sometimes focus too much on outward appearances. This blindness is deep in me, probably because I am a minister's kid. It was never spoken to me that I can recall, but I learned early on that it was important how I appeared, how I behaved, how I acted. My outward appearance would have an impact on how my father was evaluated in his role as minister.

At home, we put importance on looking tidy, on the appearances. The rest of the house might be a disaster, but the public space – the entry hall or living room - where a parishioner might arrive unexpectedly, needed to be neat and clean.

This struck me several years ago as I gathered for a birthday of a neighbor, whom I'll call Miriam. Miriam is *not* someone who worries about outward appearances.

She dresses casually and comfortably, and her home and car are rarely neat. It's just not that important to her. Once there was a fire in her home, and the insurance company later assumed that a huge tossed up pile of junk in the corner of her bedroom had been caused by the firefighters needing to upend things as they put out the fire. Nope, Miriam told the insurance adjuster, that jumble has been in that corner for years.

Miriam's son and mine were fast friends, so both families were together the night of the birthday. For our present, each of us there shared something about Miriam that we loved. When it came to my boy's turn, he told her: "You're always so glad to see me. Every time I come to your house, you always make me feel special."

Miriam always saw my child's *heart* – how each of us yearns to be seen, to feel special. And for my boy, the outward appearances - the jumble in her house – was completely invisible.

Miriam acts as God does: seeing into our hearts, loving *you*, seeing *you* as special.

What a difference if we can see *that* possibility!

+++++

Jesus was good at seeing people, too, according to today's text from John. The very first words that Karen read are these: "As Jesus walked along, he *saw* a man blind from birth."

Jesus *saw* him.

It wasn't the same for the townspeople. It was as if they'd never really seen the blind man before, though they'd passed by him many times. When the man returns from washing his eyes, John writes:

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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."

The townspeople had seen him "*before as a beggar*," as his illness, his limitations, reduced to a label: Beggar. Homeless. Loose cannon. Troublemaker. They hadn't seen the man, his face, his possibilities. But Jesus did.²

What a difference when we see one another – with eyes no longer blinded. What a difference when we can see one another's possibilities!

+++++

But there is even more to this story, to all the stories this morning.

Remember Dr. Guth: developing his new theory of the big bang required him to see new possibilities. But it also required him to imagine that the power behind the universe could act in an wholly unexpected, improbable way.

So, too, our Bible stories are not just about what God saw *in David*, what God through Jesus saw *in the blind man*, what the Holy is able to see *in all of us* -- our possibilities.

These stories are also about *our* ability to see *God's* possibilities. All the things God can do through and within us.

How do we see *God*? What blinds *us* to what *God* can do -- God's possibilities?

+++++

John's Gospel today names three things that blind people to God's possibilities: Blame. Fear. And certainty we're right.

Blame, fear and certainty we're right – well, thank goodness we never experience those things!

+++++

Did you notice? The disciples see the blind man and immediately focus on blame: "Jesus, who's to blame for the man being born blind – was it his parents who sinned or the man himself who sinned?" Those were the prevalent religious theories of that time, to explain tragedy – a human must have done something wrong, that caused the woe.

Jesus responds to them: "The issue isn't who is to blame; the issue is what God can do!" When the disciples focus on blame, Jesus shifts the focus to possibilities.

Every organization that's fallen on hard times, every business or church or family, can fall into this trap. We do need to learn from our past, but at some point, the focus on who's at fault for the troubles we're in, strips away our energy to look ahead, toward the possibilities, for what God is able to do, moving forward.

Playing the blame game blinds the disciples from seeing what God could do going forward.

+++++

For the man's parents, it is fear that blinds them to the miracle that has happened. Can you imagine having a child blind from birth who now is seeing? Wouldn't you want to know how it happened, who had cured him, what made all this possible? Of course!

Unless, that is, you've learned that it's safer to lay low, to stay out of the limelight, to avoid speaking up, because you fear being rejected by your community, as the parents did. They had a lot to lose if they were thrown out of their place of worship, a synagogue that accepted them, people who didn't make them the scapegoat for their son's blindness. If the parents took a stand, if they saw – recognized -- the possibility that God had acted through Jesus to cure their son - they'd worried that they'd lose what they had.

But oh, what might they have gained?

What is the possibility of God acting in some new way, making us like new, *if we weren't so afraid?*

+++++

“Certainty that they knew best” -- that was the stumbling block for the religious authorities. It's understandable at one level, isn't it? The authorities were certain that God had given them the Ten Commandments, so when Jesus violates one – when Jesus fails to honor the Sabbath by curing a man on that day – the authorities are certain that Jesus is a sinner. And this certainty blinds them to other possibilities.

They were so angry about their law being broken, that they couldn't stop to see beyond what they knew. They couldn't see that the *good* thing they'd been taught to follow – the commandments – might now blind them to a possibility *even better*. A possibility that God could break open their religious lives and shine within them with even more light, more joy.

So on the debate went -- as fear or certainty or the blame-game or old labels and limits prevented nearly everyone -- the disciples, townsfolk, religious authorities, and parents of the man – *all* from seeing the forest for the trees: that God had acted right in front of them, that very day, in their own sight.

The blind man cut through it all: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

+++++

What a difference when we can live open enough to see the possibility of what God can do – what God wants to do – in our lives: to take some place where we have been blind, and let us see! To move us from darkness into new light! From utter impossibility into reality! Though I was blind, now I see!

These stories are about what *we* are able to *see*. But they also are about what God is able to do. Can we trust that?

Can we be like the shepherd boy David, who saw God as *his* shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..for anything. The Lord is my shepherd and that is all that I need.

It's enough to see that God knows me, and will journey with me, even when I walk through a valley called death. I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me.

Friends, Is that a possibility? Can we do the hard thing – see beyond the appearances of this life, of what seems to be, on the surface. Can we imagine possibilities of how the very Power of the Universe may act, beyond what can now be proven? Can we trust in a Shepherd who walks with us even through death?

For when we can, it is as if we were blind before, but now see. There's more lightness to our step, and less fear.

God sees in each of you remarkable possibilities, far beyond outward appearances. God sees for King's Chapel great possibilities. Now the choice is ours: how do *we* choose to see *God*? As trustworthy, able to act in us and through us, toward new possibilities?

Could it be? Oh, could it be?

What a difference when we see God's possibilities!

¹Dennis Overbye, "Space Ripples Reveal Big Bang's Smoking Gun," The New York Times (March 17, 2014)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/18/science/space/detection-of-waves-in-space-buttrresses-landmark-theory-of-big-bang.html? r=0>

² John Shelby Spong, The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic (Harper One, 2013), pp. 143-151. I commend this as a marvelous book through which to see John's gospel afresh.