

speak the same language and generally like to eat the same foods we do. But that didn't stop our members. Gail and Phil Meengs and Dave Nelson each invited part of their family over to the homes. The Meengs hosted the women and Dave hosted the men. They ate together around their dinner tables. Gail made her famous chicken biryani recipe. They found beds and blankets for everyone to stay cozy. They colored and drew together, and laughed at their miscommunications. They tried to keep the little ones from running wild in a new house. It was faith in action. It was not easy. It was the Kingdom of God. God's works, Christ's selfless love, a shining light - that was what was revealed in our community that weekend.

What was revealed *to* the man who was healed was God, in a human body, in a man named Jesus. Though the man was a person of no status or importance, he was the surprising person who was given eyes to see Jesus - not immediately, but through a process of discovery. One that we are all invited to join. The man was shown the light of the world.

What was revealed *in* him was the courage to be a witness to Jesus - in word and action, through his works and his love. As we share love, surely the light grows brighter inside us, just as it did for Lusseyran. As we do the works of God - service, generosity, sacrifice, sharing - surely the light of Christ is revealed more and more, in us and through us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church  
of Royal Oak

**March 19, 2023**

**Fourth Sunday of Lent**

***"Reveal: What does it mean to see Jesus?"***

**Rev. Emma Nickel**

**John 9:1-41**

Last week I reconnected with a cousin of mine who I hadn't talked to in a while. Carrie had listened to our church's *Forging Faith* podcast and we talked about her experience of it. In the last episode, she'd heard me say that the only criteria for membership in the Presbyterian church is believing that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior. That idea sparked her thinking. She was raised Presbyterian and had attended and even worked in churches for a number of years. But she hasn't been active for a while. Yet she told me she keeps all kinds of journals with prayers and meditations. She feels close to God, to the divine; she has an awareness of holy things. But Jesus? He hadn't much figured into her thinking. She'd never really felt close to him.

We don't talk about that disconnect a lot. But I would bet my cousin's experience is actually pretty common in our pews, among lifelong Presbyterians, and even a lot of those 'spiritual but not religious' folks out there. Which makes these weeks spent in John's gospel so interesting. Because John is laser focused on people knowing, believing, trusting that Jesus is the embodiment of God. John wants people to be in relationship with God through the Christ. All these conversations we keep reading - Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and today with the man born blind - show people in Jesus' day working out, in real time, who he was and what he meant to them. I am confident that the tent of this church and the broader church is wide enough to encompass a variety of views and understandings of Jesus. And I think it's healthy for us to wonder about Jesus and what he reveals to us.

My cousin has started pondering Jesus more. She's testing out what it means to say a prayer addressed to Jesus. Does that work? Does that feel right? Is she even comfortable with that? Then, about a week ago she was at a diner with a friend. They were eating their lunch and chatting. Out of nowhere, a woman across the restaurant got up out of her seat and walked over toward Carrie. This stranger put a hand on her shoulder and said, "I know this is strange, but God is urging me to come over here and tell you that you have such a pure heart." My cousin was a little taken aback. She responded with gratitude and a little confusion, too. Her friend thought it was quite the experience. She told Carrie that what the woman had said was

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, (Harper One, 2014), 102.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 108.

true, even if it was odd! Since then, my cousin has been thinking about that encounter a lot. What was that woman revealing to her? Maybe this had something to do with her exploration of Jesus? And what was God revealing in that moment?

The man that Jesus healed had a transformative experience with Jesus. Jesus took dirt from the ground, put his own saliva on it, and rubbed it on the man's eyes. When he washed, the man was able to see. Something new and bright and astonishing was being revealed to him.

A big part of that something was Jesus. At first, all the man knew was that Jesus had acted in a powerful way. The man simply reported what Jesus had done - made mud, put it on his eyes, and told him to wash. Then, as the Pharisees and neighbors went round and round asking the man who had healed him, he started to see Jesus more clearly. The next time he was asked, the man said that Jesus was a prophet. Then, he told the group that Jesus was a man from God. Finally, he confessed his belief in Jesus as Lord and as the Son of Man, a term that recognizes Jesus' dual humanity and divinity. Slowly, as things moved forward, the man came to understand what he was now able to see in Jesus. More and more, he saw that Jesus was not just a nice guy, but someone who demonstrated God's particular care for those on the outside, such as a blind man like himself. So he became even more bold in his witness. He declared to the authorities that Jesus had not sinned; Jesus had demonstrated the very power of God.

This was the good news that God revealed *to* the man. God often uses surprising events to reveal something to us about divine power and presence. Maybe through an unusual encounter with a woman in a diner. Maybe through a new friendship with someone you first thought you wouldn't really like. Maybe through an opportunity to serve that seemed like a burden, until you realize the blessing it is. Jesus is willing to do just about anything, including getting down in the dirt with us, to help us see God.

For the man, Jesus was being revealed *to him*. But something was also being revealed *in him*. Through the man, we see that coming to believe and trust in Jesus the Christ is a process. We learn that it takes courage to go against those, like the crowd, who said that Jesus' ministry was bogus. The man also revealed what it means to be able to see God on earth, in Christ, and even in ourselves.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, about a French resistance fighter who had gone blind after a childhood accident.<sup>1</sup> In Jacques Lusseyran's memoir, he writes of the experience of his world initially going dark. His parents didn't give in to their society's assumption that blindness was essentially a death sentence though. They encouraged their son and wanted him to discover the world in his own way. A short time after his accident, Lusseyran found that although the sight had gone out of his eyes, "the light was still there." He felt the light in his

body and how it wanted to rush out into the world. He wrote, "The source of light is not in the outer world. We believe that *it is*, only because of a common delusion. The light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves." This wasn't just a lovely metaphor, it was his real experience of himself and the world. As he grew, he found that the light shifted depending on his emotions. When he was sad or afraid, the light dimmed right away, sometimes going out. Those were the times he felt truly blind. But when he found joy and focus, the light shined brightly. What really made the light sparkle was when he shared love.

This gift of an inner light allowed Lusseyran to truly see the world; to perceive it. He could tell trees apart by the sounds of their shadows. He could figure out how tall or wide a wall was by the kind of pressure it put on his body. He could attend to details that others never even noticed because of the light within him and how it illuminated the world around him. What was revealed in this man, who had supposedly lost his sight, was an ability to perceive the light in the world not just differently, but perhaps even more fully.

At the end of John 9, Jesus said, "I came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Reading Lusseyran's memoir, *And there Was Light*, completely reframed Jesus' words for Taylor. She writes, "Before reading Lusseyran, I always heard [those words] as a threatening judgment. Now it sounds more promising to me..I am not asking to become blind, but I have become a believer. There is a light that shines in the darkness, which is only visible there."<sup>1</sup>

Just before he spat on the ground, Jesus declared to the man, "I am the light of the world." Perhaps it was Jesus' light that was revealed in the life of the man healed from blindness. Perhaps Jesus' light is what illuminated Lusseyran's inner world after he became blind.

I am struck that both Jesus and Lusseyran focus on doing works and sharing love. Jesus wants us to work the works of God. Lusseyran found that the way to sustain the light was to love. When we do those things, what is God revealing *in us*?

I know I keep telling you about activities with our Afghan refugee family. It's because the stories are ones you need to know and because as part of this community, they are yours, too, even if you couldn't take part. As you know there were lots of power outages in our area over the past month. The Motakhasiv family's power went out in Detroit, too. After about 24 hours, they started texting the leader of our group, Benny, to say that it was too cold in their house and did he have any ideas of what they could do. Benny called every hotel within miles and they were all booked with other people trying to get warm and have some light, too. So then Benny went out on a limb and called some church members to see if they might let the family come over to their houses. Houseguests are not an easy thing, you know. Even when they