

“WALKING IN THE LIGHT”

John 9:1-41; Ephesians 5:8

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Japanese artist Makoto Fujimura once wrote: “The most courageous thing we can do as a people is to behold.” To see the truth that lies before our eyes can be a courageous act. John tells us the story of a man who had literally never seen anything in his whole life and what happens to him when he is given the gift of sight. With the exception of Jesus, the man born blind demonstrates more courage than any other character in any of the gospels. He is given no name because his importance for John’s readers lies solely in the fact that he was born blind, but now he sees. John wants us to understand that “the mighty works of God” are being displayed in him, or as other translations put it, that the glory of God might be seen. For me, that glory is twofold: the gift of sight to one born blind and the presence of courage in one who now sees.

We see that courage in his stubborn refusal to adapt his story to the interpretation that some Jewish leaders would give to the event. When they question whether he was in fact the man born blind, he insists that he was. When they suggest that Jesus did not come from God because he violated the Sabbath in performing this miracle, the man reminds them that no one could perform this sign apart from God. When they accuse Jesus of being a sinner a second time, he repeats his story, unchanged, “I was blind and now I see.” When they ask him to relate the details one more time, he sees through them, and risks offending them further by asking, “Do you want to become his disciples, too?” When they admonish him for being a disciple of Jesus instead of Moses, he says words that will get him expelled from the temple. “This is incredible! You don’t know where he is from, yet he healed my eyes! We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God’s will. No one has ever heard of a healing of someone born blind. If this man wasn’t from God, he couldn’t do this.”

In expelling him from the temple, these Pharisees ironically answer the disciples’ question upon encountering the man born blind: “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?” Whereas Jesus points to this as an opportunity to see the glory of God, the Pharisees say, “You were born completely in sin.” We see in this story how wonder, the ability to see God’s activity in the world, leads to courage; and how the failure to wonder leads to a failure of faith.

For Cole Arthur Riley, wonder is the essential practice through which we see God’s activity in the world. “Awe,” she writes in *This Here Flesh*, “is not a lens through which to see the world but our sole path to seeing. Any other lens is not a lens but a veil. And I’ve come to believe that our beholding – seeing the veils of this world peeled back again and again, if only for a moment – is no small form of salvation” (p. 31).

How we see the world makes all the difference in the quality of our faith. If all we see is the darkness, our faith will be but a shadow in the midst of life’s realities. At best, it will prepare us for a sterile world, where spirit is separated from the flesh, where the love of God is rendered impotent, and the goodness of God consigned to a place beyond

death. Such a faith longs for escape, not engagement. Such a faith sees danger all around it. Such a faith will close up the heart, reject compassion, and foster hate for this life. Such a faith despairs for this world.

But for those who want to walk as children of light, faith means seeing the mighty acts of God in the flesh. Riley writes, “Practicing wonder is a powerful tool against despair.” This is not easy. She feels “great empathy for those who have lost their wonder,” acknowledging that “we are not to blame for what the world has so relentlessly tried to crush in us...” (p. 37).

Practicing wonder is a key part of our Children in Worship program. We practice wonder in selecting a Peace Prize recipient in the Fall, in acknowledging the good work that various agencies are doing for those in need. We practice wonder in worship, in celebrating the sacraments, in welcoming new members, and in our commitment to the arts. We are perhaps most conscious of wonder in our encounters with the natural world, with mountains and oceans, canyons and rivers, sunsets and sunrises.

But for Riley, wonder at the level of the ordinary, is the most powerful and enduring. She writes, “... wonder is about having the presence to pay attention to the commonplace. It could be said that to find beauty in the ordinary is a deeper exercise than climbing to the mountaintop” (p. 32). She goes on to write, “To be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintop, the sunlight refracting – this manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other” (p. 36).

And again she says, “When we wonder, we loosen the cords that restrain our love” (p. 38). Wonder engages the world, the real world, the “in-the-flesh” world. It sees the activity of God, the love of God. It engenders courage and builds a faith that is relevant to our lives, to our bodies. Riley closes her chapter on wonder with these words: “My faith is held together by wonder – by every defiant commitment to presence and paying attention. I cannot tell you with precision what makes the sun set, but I can tell you how those colors, blurred together, calm my head and change my breath. I will die knowing I lived a faith that changed my breathing. A faith that made me believe I could see air” (p. 41).

For Riley, wonder is very earthy. It celebrates the body and the senses. The connection between the seeing of the man born blind, the courage that develops, and the manner of his healing is not accidental. That Jesus heals him with mud formed from dirt and his own spittle emphasizes the importance of the physical for the practice of wonder. Jan Richardson captures this nicely in her poem:

BLESSING OF MUD by Jan Richardson (pp. 114-116)

Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the dirt.

Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the earth
beneath our feet.

Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the dust,

like the dust
that God scooped up
at the beginning
and formed
with God's
two hands
and breathed into
with God's own
breath.

Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the spit.

Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the mud.

Lest we think
the blessing
is not
in the mire,
the grime,
the muck.

Lest we think
God cannot reach
deep into the things
of earth,
cannot bring forth
the blessing
that shimmers
within the sludge,
cannot anoint us
with a tender
and grimy grace.

Lest we think
God will not use
the ground
to give us
life again,
to cleanse us
of our unseeing,
to open our eyes upon
this ordinary
and stunning world.

Amen.

Resources:

Richardson, Jan. *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*. Wanton Gospeller Press: Orlando FL, 2015.

Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. Convergent New York NY, 2022.