

## + SERMON TRANSCRIPT +

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Cassie Houtz

Seeing God/Knowing God: A Sermon on John 9:1-41

Since I was young, I have loved the Gospel of John (perhaps an unpopular opinion) – its mystery, its strangeness, the way it drops us into a world so different from our own, and into a vocabulary and set of images that are foreign, yet at the same time intimately recognizable. The Gospel reading for today brings me that jolt of the unfamiliar, combined with a feeling of deep recognition.

On its surface, the story is another of the several healing narratives in the Gospel of John, but the main action happens in the absence of Jesus, after the man gains his sight, and consists not of an act of healing, but of arguments and questions: Is this really the same man who used to beg on the street corner? Who did this? How did this happen? How is this possible? Is this even legal?

And this somewhat chaotic questioning is bookended by theologically and symbolically rich dialogues between Jesus and the man born blind that I think encourage us to understand sight and blindness here as metaphorical, not literal.

To me, today's text is at its heart about what it means to know God. The text presents Jesus as the "light" that enables true knowledge of God, a knowledge that transcends familiar modes of knowing and reverses our usual human expectations about who gets to be an expert and about whose knowledge should be trusted.

In their first encounter, Jesus says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." These words echo the opening verses of the Gospel of John, which describes the One who is coming into the world as the "true light," who "gives light to every person." And at the end of the narrative, we are given a hint that this story is not only about physical sight and blindness, but about a metaphorical seeing. Jesus says, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

The sight Jesus offers here is not the sight of our human eyes, but an interior form of "sight" that allows one to know God. Just like our eyes need light to see physical forms, Jesus is presenting himself as the "light" that allows us to "see," recognize, and know God.

The narrative suggests that the knowledge of God is not something that can fit easily within our familiar categories and assumption. The neighbors and the Pharisees

illustrate an approach to knowledge that is highly rational and quite confident: they think they understand how the world works and what is possible within it.

They cannot believe what is right in front of them: that this man was blind, but now he sees. The man repeatedly tells them what happens, but they fail to listen to him, and keep asking, “who did this? How did this happen?” They are clearly on the wrong track – not open to the mysterious wonder of what is, but instead hung up on trying to make rational sense of what they are experiencing. They are so confident in their own ways of knowing, in their own logic, that they cannot open themselves to what defies their comprehension.

I am reminded of my friend Sam, a talented musician who regularly performs throughout Philly. Sam is gender non-binary. When they introduce themselves to a crowd who has come to listen to music, they say “I use they/them pronouns, and I thank you in advance for trusting me when I tell you who I am.” Sam, like many gender-non-conforming folks, has faced endless questioning about their gender identity, about their clothing and hairstyle choices, about why they can’t just decide to be male or female. In the face of this aggressive questioning, Sam has learned to say simply: please listen to me and trust me when I tell you who I am.

The people who aggressively question Sam, like those who question the man born blind, believe that their understanding of the human experience is essentially correct, and can’t fathom that their way might not be the only one. Or, as Jesus says in the final section, they believe that they “see,” yet they are closed off to anything that defies their expectations, and so they are in fact, within this symbolic framework, “blind.” They “see” and therefore are “blind” because they presume to already know, and therefore are not open to revelations of truth that don’t fit into their pre-established notions of what is real or legitimate.

And then there is the Man Born Blind, who is, in fact, the only one in this scene who can truly “see.” At first, his newfound vision seems to be simply physical. Yet as the narrative progresses, he becomes increasingly aware that he has encountered God. He moves from affirming that the man who gave him sight is a “prophet,” to claiming that he is “from God,” to, in the final interaction with Jesus, proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God. He moves from a literal and metaphorical “blindness” to a literal and metaphorical “sight”; from ignorance into knowledge.

Yet throughout the story, the man is consistently sure of one thing: the man knows that he can now see. Against an onslaught of doubt and questions, he keeps insisting: I was blind, and now I can see. He trusts his own lived experience, his own perceptions, his own knowing.

Sometimes it feels to me that contemporary culture is doing everything it possibly can to talk us out of our own knowledge. We are encouraged to count our steps rather than trusting our body's cravings for movement or rest; to tally calories rather than trusting our hunger and fullness. Women – especially Black women – who present to doctors with inexplicable pain or exhaustion are assumed to be lying if a scan doesn't show anything visibly wrong. We are exposed almost constantly to advertisements that tell us that we should be something other than what we are, and that our best route to becoming someone different is to buy some new things.

Our culture encourages us to not see – to not see the damage our economic system causes, to not see the harms of white supremacy and systemic racism, to not see anything that might make us want to alter the way things are.

Yet there is so much to see and to know beyond the confines of our own certainties, and it is a powerful thing to listen to someone when they tell you who they are and what is true for them.

Today's Gospel shows us that knowledge of God comes through encounter, relationship, and openness to the unknown, rather than certainty and logic. A man who was an outcast, whose own parents even avoid associating too closely with him, becomes an object of care and attention. Jesus touches him, and wipes his eyes, and from this moment of human touch comes an experience of the divine. I imagine great tenderness in this act – dirt and saliva carefully mixed and placed gently over the eyes. The narrative illustrates the knowledge of God as something that is available to us from within our human bodies, and that nearness to God is available to all: even to those who have been outcast, who have been called sinners, who have lived on the margins.

It is a beautiful mystery of our faith that the God who defies conceptualization, who cannot be understood, who overturns our ideas of what it means to “know”, can also, paradoxically, be found in the most deeply human moments: in being touched when we have been deemed untouchable; in being listened to and trusted when we have been deemed incompetent or untrustworthy; in dirt and spit.

The unexpected truth revealed by Jesus is that the divine is with us, here and now, in our earthly life. This human being, who lives in a fully human body and will suffer a fully human death, is also the “light of the world,” the Life of the world, the one who lives in us and in whom we live. This is a mystery that cannot fit within our rational minds. The incarnation of God in Jesus – both fully human and fully divine – is not something we can know or understand or believe in any familiar sense. This kind of knowing requires a radical break with our world of concepts and language. In John's terminology, it requires a kind of “blindness” to truly “see” God.

God's nearness may surprise us, in moments of grief, or in moments of laughter, or moments of stillness and quiet. God is with us in our neediness, in our flesh, in our vulnerability, in our moments of not-knowing.

I want to close with some lines from a poem by Jan Richardson, an Episcopal priest and poet, called "How the Stars Get in Your Bones," which I think speaks beautifully to the way that the Light of God reaches us. Richardson writes:

"I tell you, this blazing in you— it does not come by choosing the most difficult way, the most daunting; it does not come by the sheer force of your will. It comes from the helpless place in you that, despite all, cannot help but hope, the part of you that does not know how not to keep turning toward this world, to keep turning your face toward this sky, to keep turning your heart toward this unendurable earth, knowing your heart will break but turning it still. I tell you, this is how the stars get in your bones. This is how the brightness makes a home in you, as you open to the hope that burnishes every fractured thing it finds and sets it shimmering, a generous light that will not cease, no matter how deep the darkness grows, no matter how long the night becomes."

AMEN.