

For the second week in a row, we've just heard a very long passage from the Gospel of John. Last week's lesson contained thirty-seven verses, and this week we have forty-one. John is *not* Everyone's Favorite Gospel. Both his style and the information he relates through his writing differ greatly from the synoptic gospels, which share many stories among them, and which are fairly straightforward in the points they make to their first readers and now to us. All four gospels speak from a unique perspective to address their own particular audience and to emphasize a specific viewpoint about Jesus and his life and ministry. John's style is more literary than the others and uses more symbolism. It's believed to have been written several decades after the synoptic gospels, as evidenced by what scholars call a more "developed theology," that is, a more advanced understanding of who Jesus is and his purpose for being in the world.

Today we hear from John about the sixth of seven signs he uses to display the wondrous deeds of Jesus. It's helpful to remember that at the time this gospel was written, around the year ninety, there was conflict between Christian Jews and Jews who did not believe Jesus was Messiah. John interprets Jesus' life and ministry through the lens of his own day, a time when the followers of Jesus were being banished from synagogues, and in today's story we witness the tension between the two groups. That ongoing controversy may explain what some interpret to be anti-Semitism in John's gospel, particularly in the way he portrays the Pharisees, who always come across as Jesus' opponents regardless of what he says and does. Whenever we see or hear John's words about "the Jews," we should remember their disagreements were theological, but not a dispute to be carried into the twenty-first century.

Scholars and commentators neatly divide today's passage into a seven-part drama involving an array of characters: Jesus, the disciples, the man who was born blind, his neighbors and his parents, and, of course, the Pharisees. While the story is fairly straightforward in both the narrative and its meaning, it also gives us an up-close look at some of the beliefs of the day. The disciples' question about who was to blame for the man's blindness connects us to a common understanding of the cause and effect of sin in those days, the belief that when someone sins there will be punishment. When Jesus uses his own saliva to make mud to spread on the man's eyes, we're reminded that in the ancient world, spittle was believed to have medicinal value. But there are also similarities to us and our time. Like the neighbors who didn't recognize the man after his sight was restored, we may not recognize someone whose appearance has somehow changed, and, like them, at times we're guilty of talking about people, rather than to them. We're not always quick to welcome a new way of doing things or the person who introduces something new, any more than the Pharisees John so often writes about. We are separated by more than two thousand years, yet still so alike as human beings.

In a story such as this one, it would be easy to just look at the surface and learn what we can from the interactions between the characters, and there are plenty of lessons there. But when we read scripture, God's spirit is always calling us to go deeper. Jane Wolfe, an Episcopal Christian Educator from Little Rock, Arkansas, taught her students to study the bible by asking themselves three questions. First, "What Lord, are you saying to my heart?" Second, "What, Lord, is my response to this?" and finally, "What Lord, do you particularly want me to remember?" If we are to be open to God's answers, we must sometimes look farther than the surface. Hearing stories of other people's experiences may enable us to find God's wisdom and apply it to our own lives.

Such is the story of John Newton, a story you may already know. Newton was born in England in 1725. Two weeks before his seventh birthday, his mother died, and he was sent to boarding school for two years before going to live with his father and stepmother in her home, away from the city he knew as home. At the age of eleven, he made the first of six sea voyages with his father, who retired afterward. Newton was by then eighteen years old, and his father intended for him to go to Jamaica

to work at a sugar plantation, but instead he signed on with a merchant ship sailing to the Mediterranean Sea. Before a year passed, he was forced to join the Royal Navy as a midshipman. When he tried to desert, he was punished in front of the 350-man crew, and in his humiliation he considered murdering the captain or even killing himself. Eventually Newton transferred to a slave ship called the Pegasus, bound for West Africa, where the ship's goods would be traded for slaves to be taken to America and other British Colonies. But Newton couldn't get along with the crew of the Pegasus, so he was left with a West African slave dealer, who then gave Newton to his wife. She treated him—that is, mistreated him—just as she did the other slaves. After five years, when he was twenty-three, his father had begun to look for him and he was rescued. On his return to England, his ship almost sank during a storm, and Newton fearfully called out to God to save him.

Newton considered this experience—crying out to God—to be the first step in his conversion to Christianity, and after spending the rest of the trip to England reading the Bible and other religious literature, he accepted Christian doctrine. His life changed; he stopped drinking, swearing, and gambling. But he did not stop working in the slave trade, despite his confession that his spiritual life was lacking. During an illness he once again called out for God, asking God to take control of his life, but he continued to be part of the slave trade. Finally, after suffering a stroke, Newton was forced to give up traveling the sea and began to study religion in earnest. Eventually he was ordained a priest in the Church of England and over time became well-respected in the Church and in his country. Although he was no longer an active part of the slave trade and despite his role as pastor, preacher, and counselor to others who faced moral dilemmas, Newton remained silent about the horrors of slavery and England's part in it.

Finally, thirty-four years after leaving the slave trade, he published a pamphlet that strongly denounced both the conditions in which slaves were kept and the practice of slavery itself, noting that his “confession” was long overdue and stating “It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”ⁱ We know Newton's story because he wrote some beautiful hymns, including “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” and his most famous, “Amazing Grace.” His words “I once was blind but now I see,” capture the essence of Newton's experience and take us right back to John's story of the blind man, whose sight was restored through the healing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For both the blind man who literally could not see and for John Newton, who later judged himself to be morally blind, life changed when God entered their lives. Each of them experienced what we often refer to as a conversion, but what might be better described as a transformation of heart, mind, and spirit. For the blind man, the transformation was sudden; for John Newton, it was perhaps more subtle, but neither of them would ever be the same again. I wonder if that might be the essence of our own experience as well. After all, our lives are not unlike the blind man's or like John Newton's life either. We don't always see things clearly. But once Jesus becomes a part of who we are, everything changes, and we will never be the same again.

What about those questions I posed earlier: What Lord, are you saying to my heart? What, Lord, is my response to this? What Lord, do you particularly want me to remember? That's between you and Jesus, of course, but questions for thought and prayer in this season of Lent. My hope and prayer for each of us is that just like those men we've heard about today, our eyes will be opened to see clearly and our hearts moved to know Jesus in a new way.

Amen.

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton, accessed March 25, 2017.