

Easter 4A, May 3, 2020
John 10:1-10
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Once there was a man.

Well, he didn't start out as a man, of course. He started the way we all do: as a precious little wrinkly baby. Oh, his parents were so excited the day that he was born. He was the answer to their prayers, a sweet child for them to love. "He's perfect," they said.

Their family and neighbors and friends came out and celebrated with them, bringing a parade of casserole dishes and crocheted blankets and offering to take turns holding the perfect little boy.

It wasn't long, however, before the whispers started. Something wasn't quite perfect with the child. His eyes were kind of cloudy, it seemed. As he grew older he didn't make eye contact. And he didn't even flinch when you waved your hand right in front of his face. He was blind.

"I wonder what his mother did wrong?" the neighbors gossiped. "Maybe she drank too much while she was pregnant," one said. "I bet she didn't take any prenatal vitamins," another suggested. "I think it's punishment from God," a third said. "She clearly did something wrong to deserve this." This last suggestion got the most traction among the folks in their small town, and soon everyone was wondering why God would punish them in this way.

His parents were devastated. They still loved their little boy, of course, but this was a long time ago when there weren't the kind of resources and support for kids with vision issues and they didn't know what to do. They had prayed over and over for a perfect baby boy, but apparently God had not heard their prayer. They didn't know what they had done to deserve this, but it must have been something, for God to give them a child with this kind of disability.

But time went on, and more kids came along, and his parents turned most of their attention there. The young boy had to figure out his own way in the world, teaching himself how to navigate the streets of his neighborhood, and as he got older, how to scavenge for food. Eventually people decided that he must have done something wrong to cause his blindness.

There weren't many options for him, back then. As a grown man his parents couldn't really afford to feed him, so he mostly camped out with a group of other homeless folks and spent time each day by the side of the road, begging for handouts from passersby.

One day, a day that started out just like any other, the man was sitting by the road with his small collection cup and his sign asking for help and he heard a group of people approaching. He didn't recognize their voices—they must be travelers. Travelers could be good or bad. Some were generous, because they didn't know him, didn't know what people in town said about him. Others were cruel, taunting him or deliberately kicking him as they went by. He wasn't sure what kind of travelers these would be.

As they approached, he heard one of them ask another in the group, "Who do you think sinned to make this man blind? Somebody clearly did something wrong for him to be like this." His heart sank. It sounded like these travelers may be the cruel kind.

But then, he heard another voice. It sounded so different from any other voice he'd ever heard, but at the same time, it felt familiar. It was kind, but firm as it replied, "No one sinned to cause his blindness. You're looking for someone to blame, but instead you need to look for what God can do."

The man didn't know what that meant. But he could tell that the group had stopped, close to him. He heard someone spit on the ground, and he started to move away because he'd been spat on enough in his lifetime; he didn't need it to happen again. But then he heard that voice again, and words spoken in love, as the other man took the dirt that he'd gotten wet and rubbed it gently on his eyes. "Go," the voice said. "Wash your face."

The man wanted to be annoyed. He'd just gotten mud put on his face by a stranger, after all. But there was something about that voice that told him to listen. So he went and splashed some water on his face, and while the water was still dripping off him, he opened his eyes, and for the first time ever, he could see. He saw the pool in which he was washing, saw the spring that fed into the pool, saw the plants growing around it, saw the buildings of the town, saw people walking by. His heart started to race as he realized what had just happened, the miracle of healing for him, who no one would have thought deserved it.

He ran back to the spot where he'd met the man with the voice. He wasn't there. But some of his neighbors were, and he called out to them, "Look! I can see!" The people were astounded. They couldn't believe that this was the same guy that they'd known since he was born a wrinkly little baby, who'd never been able to see as they did.

They didn't know what to do, so they took him to the priest, who had all sorts of questions for the man. How had this happened? What sort of healer was this? Especially since that day happened to be the sabbath, and no one is supposed to work on the sabbath, even the work of healing. How could someone who broke the rules of God be from God? What kind of trickery was going on here?

The man who had been blind said, "All I know is that I was blind, and now I see." The priest and the other religious folk who were there that day kept asking him, "But what did he do? How did this happen?" And the man finally was exasperated and said, "Look, I keep telling you, and you won't listen. You can believe whatever you want, but if this guy weren't from God, he would not be able to open my eyes."

The priest derided him, saying, "Look at you, you were born entirely in sin and now you're trying to tell us about God?" And they threw him out in the street.

The man didn't know what to do. So he went back to the spot where he'd been begging to gather his things. As he did, he heard a voice. That same voice from earlier. "Do you believe in the Son of God?" the voice asked.

He looked up. He could see! He could see this man who had healed him standing right there. "But who is the Son of God? Tell me, so I can believe."

"You're looking at him," the man replied. "Don't you recognize my voice?"

The man who had been blind fell down at his feet, crying, and praising him.

And Jesus said, "I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind." (John 9:39, *The Message*)

There were some religious folks who were standing nearby who overheard what Jesus said, and they said, "Wait. Are you calling us blind?"

And Jesus said something to the effect of, "Look, if you were literally, physically blind (which you're not) then you would not have sin. But since you claim to see everything so well, yeah, your sin remains."

The Pharisees were not pleased by this. Who did this guy think he was, telling them that they were blind to God's work in the world? They had dedicated their lives to protecting the faith, to keeping it free from influence of people who didn't believe in God, to doing things the right way. They didn't recognize this man who had showed up and thought he could do whatever he wanted, claiming that he came from God. Who is this man?

But before they could even respond, Jesus kept talking.

"Very truly, I tell you, the sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd. He knows his sheep and calls them by name, and they follow him."

Once again, the formerly blind man's heart began to pick up pace. Yes, he thought, that's what happened. Somehow, I knew his voice. I heard him calling me, bringing me into relationship even when I wasn't quite sure what was going on. There have been plenty of others in my life who have threatened me, and taken advantage of me. But not this man, this Jesus.

He looked over at the group of religious leaders, who were furrowing their brows and exchanging skeptical glances with each other. They didn't get it. "He's crazy!" one whispered. "But can a crazy man open the eyes of the blind?" another asked.

But Jesus didn't seem to notice. He looked right at the blind man as he continued to speak. The blind man was pretty sure he knew what he was going to say. He knew that Jesus was his shepherd and he knew that's what Jesus would explain. He was going to tell them that he is the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep."

What? This was not what he was expecting. The idea of Jesus being a shepherd, well, that he could picture. He could imagine this man Jesus with some sheep, leading and guiding them. That image worked. But to imagine this man as gray, weathered wood dotted with knot holes and being swung open and shut...well, that was just strange.

He thought about his last experience with a gate, just a little earlier when the priest started yelling at him to get out of the temple, because surely he didn't know anything about God. The gate slammed behind him as they shoved him through, out into the street. They'd used their gate to keep him out.

But that hadn't been his experience with Jesus at all. In fact, in both of his encounters with this man, it was as if a door was opening for him, and Jesus was inviting him inside, into a safe place. A safer place, at least. Because now he could see. He was saved from everlasting darkness. He was saved from isolation and insecurity. Never again would he wonder where his next meal will come from or who might answer his pleas as he sat begging on the road. He would be able to know the safety and security of community.

Jesus was his entrance into a new fold, an abundant pasture, and eternal life, which he had never known before. He felt as though he was being born anew, and given the freedom to live in a world of vibrant color, of new creation.

Yes, Jesus is the good shepherd, and Jesus would go on to say that later. But the man who'd been born blind? He always remembered that gate, swinging wide open to welcome him into the fold, then sending him out to feast in green pastures.

Not too long after that, the man heard a story about Jesus, that a friend of his had died and Jesus showed up and called his name, Lazarus, and the dead man came out, alive! There he was, swinging that gate wide open and inviting another person into new life.

And of course, there was what happened after Jesus himself died, and rose. Mary heard him call her name and that was when she recognized him, and he invited her once more into abundant life with him. Jesus, the gate, Jesus, the shepherd, leading his sheep to sustenance and abundance of life.

Those of us who are feeling closed in right now, cut off from the abundance of community and forced to live in isolation, may feel like that new life can't come fast enough. But we can trust Jesus to lead and guide us as he opens the gate and shepherds us in to relationship with him. For he invites us in to open our eyes and see the living Lord in our midst, here and now.

Once, there was a man. He encountered Jesus, and never was the same. May it be so for us. Amen.