
Seeing in the Dark

John 9:1-41

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 30, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

We arrived at the restaurant with anticipation, some hesitation, but most of all, ready for a little exploration of the world we were about to enter. We entered the restaurant building with our eyes wide open physically. We read the menu on the wall before us. After making our decisions about what to order, we were ready to begin a dining adventure that would really open our eyes. Our waitress came for us and began to lead us into the dining area. All of a sudden we entered a pitch-black, totally dark room at the Blindekuh restaurant. The Blind Cow restaurant in Zurich, Switzerland. All of the workers were physically blind or visually impaired in some way. Because of the darkness, it was as if we entered the realm of the blind. We walked with our hands on the shoulders of the person in front of us, not seeing a physical thing, not quite sure where we were headed, not quite sure if we trusted one another to behave and not play tricks in the dark, not knowing what was in front of us, in back of us, or next to us, only trusting our waitress that she knew where she was going or we would definitely be in trouble. We believed in her sense of direction, though we could not see the direction.

Finally, the waitress sat each of us down individually as we began to feel around our place at the table—the utensils, plates, napkins; I was more at ease once I was seated and not walking in the dark. But then, the time came to place our orders. Eating and drinking was another story. Would I spill my food or drink and mess up my clothes? Would I have to eat with my hands? Actually, none of these things happened to any of us, I believe, though I wouldn't know since I could not see any of them. After conversation and listening to the sound of human chews and stomach growls, we were ready to leave this particular world. Once again, hands were on shoulders of the person in front us with our waitress leading us from the darkness into the light. What an eye-opening experience. You have to see it to believe it, or do you?

Throughout the book of John, one may infer this by the relationship between seeing and believing. This is so clear later in the book when people begin to see the resurrected body of Jesus and then believe what he had said is true. Mary Magdalene saw that the stone had been removed from tomb (20:1). The disciple whom Jesus loved outran Peter to the tomb and saw the linen wrappings lying there (20: 4-5). Peter sees the cloth that was on Jesus' head (20:6-7). Then the disciple whom Jesus loved entered the tomb, saw and believed (20:8). Mary didn't understand what happened at first, but once Jesus appears to her, she announces to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'(20:18). When Jesus appears to the disciples, showing his hands and side, then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord (20:19). People were seeing then believing. The disciple Thomas doesn't believe the other disciples; he has to see for himself—"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Even the formerly blind beggar in our story declares, "Lord, I believe" after Jesus tells him "You have seen [the Son of Man]." Yet Jesus responds to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Just when you think you understand Jesus, he makes statements like that about blind belief. In our story, he says that he "came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." You might be blinded in the light of day and actually see when in the dark.

Barbara Brown Taylor has a new book coming out this month titled, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. It offers a way to walk faithfully in those times when we don't have all the answers. She urges us to lay aside our fears and anxieties and explore what God has to teach us in the dark. She encourages a spirituality of the nighttime.

Darkness and night have generally gotten a bad rap in Christianity but God never sleeps nor slumbers. That means God even works at night in the darkness when we might not even be able to see our way clearly. Historically, however, goodness has been associated with lightness and evil wedded to darkness. This seemingly harmless constructed binary of light and darkness has travelled down a treacherous path in which anything that has been dark, even skin, has been deemed demonic thus easily dismissed as evil and not to be engaged but destroyed. There has been a sense that nothing good can come from darkness.

A deep-sea diver writes of his experience of diving. "Enroute to the floor of the ocean the diver first passes through the 'belt of the fishes.' This is a wide band of light reflected from the surface of the sea. From this area he moves to a depth of water that cannot be penetrated by light above the surface. It is dark, foreboding, and eerie. The diver's immediate reaction is apt to be one of fear and sometimes a sudden spasm of panic that soon passes. As he drops deeper and deeper into the abyss, slowly his eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness; what was fear is relaxed and he moves into the lower region with confidence and peculiar vision." So peculiar that the psalmist David can say, "If I say, 'surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night'" even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Ps 139:11-12). Darkness can be illuminating.

Seeing and not seeing, sight and blindness, are mentioned in 24 of this chapter's 41 verses. In fact, it appears that Jesus doesn't really want us to see spiritually but wants us to be spiritually blind. I know it sounds strange but "blessed are those who have not seen..." He wants those who don't see to see and those who do see to become blind. He links blindness with the lack of sin and sight with sin, inverting the typical religious teaching of his day. If someone says, 'We see' then sin remains. Those who are so sure that they are not spiritually blind ('We see') may actually be the most blind. Religious tenets may be the blinders ironically and not the lamps we need for our feet of discipleship. To say 'we see' may actually mean that you don't really see because it is an expression of human pride. A 'know it all' actually reveals a gap in their knowledge, that is, that they don't really know it all. They reveal how much they really don't understand by asserting how much they think they know and are enlightened. Yet, the light may be dim for them.

Rather, Jesus wants us to claim blindness as the pathway to sight. By doing so, we reveal how much we really see illuminated by the light of Christ. Darkness is really as light to him. Walking in the dark is a form of spiritual humility. We claim lack of knowledge, which reveals how much we really know and understand. We acknowledge that there are gaps in our spiritual epistemology. We do not see clearly. We do not know everything. We are blind figuratively. But the healing of the blind beggar reveals that we will receive illumination gradually. Not from our own resources but from the one who is the light of the world.

The former blind beggar confesses that he doesn't know the answers to all of the questions posed to him, but he adds, 'One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' His experience is a critical source for his theological formation but he still acknowledges that there are some things he just doesn't know. He knows that he sees but he can't answer every question about Jesus. In some ways, he still sees in the dark. He recognizes the unknowability and unseen nature of God, which indicates that he really knows and sees God. Not to understand fully is to truly understand who Jesus is. When disciples are called to follow Jesus, they leave and believe in him though they don't see or know the way he is going. They travel in the dark with his presence lighting the way. They don't see everything. We don't see everything.

However, those we think are supposed to understand or see do not always. In one scene of the biopic film, *Ray*, blind musician Ray Charles is playing his piano music in a bar. A group of angry churchgoers barge into the bar and accuse him of blasphemy and say things like "you're turning God's music into sex"; they predict his and others' demise in hell. Here we have church members acting like church folks with psychological problems and Charles responds "everyone that wants me to keep playing let me hear an 'amen!' An 'amen!' rang out in the

crowd and he kept playing. He might have been physically blind but he had spiritual eyesight in that moment—that God does not so easily dichotomize the sacred and the secular.

This didn't make his situation any easier. Seeing in the dark didn't alleviate his suffering. Ray Charles was not born physically blind but experienced a gradual deterioration of eyesight at a young age. In the movie, he asks his wife, "You have any idea how it feels to go blind and still be afraid of the dark? And every day, you stand and pray just for a little light, and you don't get nothing." Seeing in the dark is not easy.

Many prefer to see in order to believe thus we say "I'll believe it when I see it." "I'll know it when I see it." "I have to see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my hand in his side" then I'll believe. It's an empirical form of faith that links seeing and sensory experience with belief. But what if all we see and experience is darkness and the unseen? There can be fear and doubt and uncertainty of faith because there is no apparent light in sight. One may be a Christian and still be afraid of the dark night of the soul because there is no little of mine to shine. There appears at times only to be nothing, no thing, and not even the presence of God. When we don't see we have to face our fear of darkness and of the unknown, but also face the state of our faith. In the dark, we see what we are really made of in the presence of the *mysterium tremendum*. We see in a glass dimly or not at all.

This is where God calls us—to the place of unknowing and unseeing. God may be using the darkness to lead us to our blind spots and to help us grow and to truly see. In the dark, you may really see yourself for who you are and who God is, finally. Many of us fear the darkness of blindness, but God has divine reasons human reason will never know. That is the point of darkness—we don't know it all or see it all. We cannot. The irony of knowledge gained through educational pursuits is that the more you know the more you learn how much you don't know.

Not knowing. Not seeing. Not saying 'We see' but claiming 'we don't see' is the *via negativa* of the Christian life. It is negative theology, an acknowledgement that God is not an object in the universe therefore it's ultimately impossible to describe God through human words and concepts, which are necessarily limiting. God's essence is unknowable or ineffable and all human language is inadequate in speaking of God. God is beyond the limits of our understanding. Thus it is more fruitful to speak about God based on what God is not because all of our descriptions will be false ultimately. Human definition cannot truly define an immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes. With honesty, we can say 'we do not see' or we are blind or see in the dark. The *via negativa* is a means of coming to know God and what God is through negation.

This negative or apophatic theology is a counterpoint to cataphatic or positive theology that makes clear assertions about God like the belief in the Incarnation. The danger of cataphatic theology is that we may assert all kinds of things about God that God would never claim about Godself. Cataphatic theology really implicitly says, "We see." Apophatic theology or the *via negativa* keeps other theological approaches honest and suggests that we do not see and cannot see and many times live in "the darkness of incomprehensibility" (Gregory of Nyssa). Fourth century bishop and doctor of the Church, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem teaches, "For in what concerns God to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge." What we know is that we don't know. What we see is that we don't see. No one has seen or can see God (John 1:18). God lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). God's ways are unsearchable and unfathomable (Job 11:7-8; Romans 11:33-36). Scripture leads us to the unknowable and the unseen, to the dark.

My name is Luke but I'm not talking about the dark side. But it is as if Jesus is calling for an apophatic spirituality, one in which we claim what we don't know or see. It is an apophatic vision in the dark. Seeing *via negativa*. An assertion of the negation. The embrace of the negative and even the light of and in darkness. Jesus calls us into the abyss of discipleship, not knowing, not seeing in the light, but seeing in the dark.

And God is in the dark. I know because Jesus travels the *via negativa* on the Via Dolorosa. He gave himself to the way of denial and the way of death nine chapters later. He embraced negation when he entered the abyss of a

death by crucifixion. "From the cross the radiance streaming; adds more luster to the day." Yet, the blood on that old-rugged tree, the "blood on the leaves and blood at the root," the blood on the bark was dark. Do you see it?