



St. Mary's Episcopal Church

[1 Samuel 16:1-13](#) ; [Ephesians 5:8-14](#) ; [John 9:1-41](#) ; [Psalm 23](#)

Well. THAT was a long Gospel. In fact, that was the *entirety* of the ninth chapter of the Gospel according to John.

And there is a LOT going on there.

In fact, if you do a simple Google search “What is the point of the ninth Chapter of the Gospel according to John,” it will come back as:

“Jesus heals a man born blind, demonstrating his Divine power, stirring up controversy among the Pharisees, and highlighting themes of spiritual blindness vs physical sight.”

It may not always be a great idea to go to Google with your theological questions.

Yes, those things are perhaps true, and you’ve probably heard a dozen sermons with those three points, but I don’t think that even begins to scratch the surface of what’s actually going on here.

Before we unpack some of what is hiding in plain sight in today’s Gospel, let’s back up a bit.

John’s Gospel is unique among the four Gospels. For decades, it has been taught that was the last Gospel to be put down in written form, likely about 60 or so years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

When I went to seminary, back in the 1990s, the scholarly consensus was that this Gospel was written by what was called *the Johannine Community*, a community excluded from the synagogue but centered around the memory of John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved”. But in the last twenty years, biblical scholarship on John’s Gospel has been undergoing a huge change, and there has been a resurgence in scholarly interest in the Gospel as more directly reflecting the trustworthy accounts of actual eyewitnesses to the events.

And in general, John's Gospel is more concerned with the *meaning* of the things Jesus said and did, and is less concerned with preserving the original chronology of events.

John's Gospel is also written on multiple levels¹: one rather straight-forward and the other largely hidden, or symbolic. A somewhat similar example known to fans of modern literature might, perhaps, be George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. It is about a farm of animals – but its also about the events leading up to the Russian Revolution.

In other words, using such a rhetorical strategy “the speaker could conceal his or her thoughts and at the same time reveal them to audiences who were able to detect the hidden meaning of his or her words.”² Scholars believe that the audiences of John's era were much more used to listening to a story in this way, and much more adept than we are in catching hidden shades of meaning and subtext.

And so... the narrator of John's Gospel tends to say what they mean... but there are also deeper hidden meanings as well, that we should be careful to listen for.

What appears to be a simple healing story is so much more... but we should expect that, in a Gospel where things are always deeper than they appear to be, and much *more than* what they first seem.

I have placed copies of a much longer and more detailed examination of this passage out on the counter in the narthex, but here is the (really) short version:

¹ See *A Historical-Hermeneutical Study of παροιμία and παρρησία in the Gospel of John. A Contribution to the Interpretation of Johannine Language in Its Ancient Rhetorical Context*, PhD, KU Leuven & PThU Groningen. Defended by Thomas Tops on June 11, 2021. Promoters: Prof. Dr. [Reimund Bieringer](#) (KU Leuven) and Prof. Dr. [Annette Merz](#) (PThU Groningen)

² *The Revealing and Hidden Language of the Gospel of John*, Theological Research News, < <https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/press/theologyresearchnews/2022/01/10/the-revealing-and-hidden-language-of-the-gospel-of-john/> > accessed March 14, 2026.

Jesus is journeying away from Jerusalem, the seat of power, when he encounters a man who experiences a disability. His disciples ask him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

So the man described as “the man born blind” enters the story not as subject, but as object. When the disciples engage him, it is as the object of a theological riddle, essentially, “whose sin caused this punishment?”

If you accept the common assumptions of the time (and everyone except two people in the story apparently seem to do so), there are two logical possibilities: either his parents sinned, and the sin was visited upon the children (compare Exodus 20) or even, that the man himself sinned *in utero*.

Notice that the disciples address **Jesus** with this puzzle, and no word of acknowledgment is even spoken by them to this man.

Jesus answered his disciples, “**Neither this man nor his parents sinned / He was born blind / that God’s works might be revealed in him.** (And here it is helpful to understand something of the differences between classical Greek and the Greek spoken in John’s time. **He was born blind / That God’s works might be revealed in him.** In Koine, or “common” Greek of the era, as well as Hebrew and Aramaic languages `two clauses were often put together, side by side, but no causality was implied (unlike many Romance languages). In other words, there is no suggestion here in the text that God made someone blind, so they could later be healed.

But in answering as he does, Jesus raises the dramatic tension in the story. His reply to the disciples suggests that theirs is the wrong answer to be asked, and they are about to be *shown something*, not simply be *told* an answer.

Ironically, as we are about to see, it will be the religious authorities who illustrate the cause of blindness, not the man himself.

Jesus then says “**We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.**”

The reader is now fully on notice that something miraculous might occur here, but only two verses out of the chapter's forty-one verses are concerned with the physical healing act of Jesus, so we, as listeners, are alert that something more is being shown or revealed here. The narrator's previous use of light / darkness motifs sets up the oppositional tone of what is to come.

“When he said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes.”

Still, the man described here as “born blind” says nothing to Jesus. Jesus has, to this point, simply encountered a man and heard him objectified as an item in a theological riddle.

Key to that riddle is a broad-based system of religiously-enforced social dynamics which relegated persons with atypical bodies to zones of marginality, to the edges, out of the way, based upon ... what? The ancient purity codes.

The purity codes (Leviticus 21:18-20; Lev. 23:34-41; Deut. 16:13-17, etc.)³ established rules for maintaining (what they thought of as) “holiness”, the outward sign of which was adherence to certain prescribed dietary laws, ritual observances and hygiene practices. The religious establishment of the time linked this concept of “purity” with righteousness in God's eyes and with judgments of moral and ethical behavior in the eyes of the community.

Elsewhere, (In Luke's Gospel, for example) we have already learned that the purity codes and the Pharisee's attitudes about ritual purity have *everything* to do with the desire to preserve and maintain their privileged social status and rank. They are, after all, the mediators and arbitrators of what is pure and impure under the law, and also what behaviors should be inhibited and whose bodies should be either controlled or rendered a source of shame.

Jesus spits – mixing his own bodily fluids to make the mud he spread on the man's eyes. (In the story) this ratchets up the tension further, as Jesus is here attacking the

³ See Bruce J. Malina, The New Testament World: Insights From Cultural Anthropology, revised edition, Louisville Kentucky: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1993, 149-183.

foundation of the purity codes themselves, and is doing so in the most blatant and provocative way possible – with his own (“unclean”) bodily fluids.⁴

I’m going to skip ahead here, in the story, in the interest of time, but let’s just note that Jesus then sends the man, doubly impure now, under the customary theological system, to a pool to wash. And not just to any pool, but to Siloam, which means “Sent,” a pool rich with its own ancient symbolic meanings.

Jesus, at this point, has set up the encounter in such a way that it is clear he is claiming an authority in direct opposition to the prevailing symbol system. Such a claim would be a threat and challenge both to the internal structure which maintained social and religious class distinctions, but also to the rigid external boundaries by which the religious leaders of society distinguished themselves from those “outside” of God’s immediate promises, such as the Gentiles.

For us, as we approach the end of Lent, and the events of Holy Week, including the crucifixion, this might help us all understand why a man would be put to death for violating “some religious rules or teachings.” Here Jesus is pulling down the pillars of the religious system and symbols themselves.

So, the man goes and washes in the pool and comes back and he can see!

The neighbors and bystanders are incredulous. Some say it is the *same man*, some say “No, but someone *like him*.”

Note, now, that the man’s own neighbors don’t even know how to refer to him anymore. As the man has gained sight, now the crowd seems to be having difficulty in seeing him as the man they knew just a short time ago. Now **they** are struggling with a kind of metaphorical blindness, and they can’t even bring themselves to refer to him by name or even by family association, but only by the old social status as “the man who used to sit and beg.”

⁴ Alternately, Mary Douglass has suggested that spittle was regarded as an agent of blessing and healing in some specific ritual contexts. Thus the action of Jesus may well have been heard as a claim of his own special religious authority. See David Smith, “Jesus and the Pharisees in Socio-Anthropological Perspective” *Trinity Journal*, 6 ns (1985) 154 and Mary Douglass, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London: Barrie and Rockcliffe, 1970.

As they are all trying to figure out if he is the same man who was born blind, he keeps saying “I am the man!”

It is the first word spoken by him in all this encounter. It is a claiming of his personhood. It is also a phrase used elsewhere in the Gospel of John by Jesus himself, and it carries a lot of theological weight.⁵

There is so much to say about this, but skipping ahead again, we now come to the Pharisees.

They want to know what happened here. The man, now referred to as “the man who had formerly been blind” is interrogated. And it tumbles out that this healing was done **on the Sabbath**.

Now the full conflict bursts into view. Of course it was on the Sabbath! Jesus here is acting in a way that is as provocative as can be, as if he is intent on taking down the whole system of purity codes, insiders and outsiders, and the willful blindness of the system that is more about religious and social control, than about the compassion of a loving God.

But the man, (formerly “born blind”) ingeniously, swiftly, and quite subtly comes to Jesus’ defense. The dynamic is lost or obscured in English translation, but he actually changes his story as he answers the Pharisees. He changes the verb from one which describes Jesus’s actions in rubbing clay in his eyes, from the Greek for “anointing” (*epichriein*, or alternately *poiein*), which was clearly prohibited on the Sabbath, to something that a bit more ambiguous.

At this point, it is he and Jesus against the power of the religious system. The narrative tension in the story rises still further.

Some say this man Jesus is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath. Others say, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And the Pharisees were divided.

⁵ Contra Brown, [The Gospel According to John](#), 373. There is now of body of scholars who openly disagree with Brown on the use of this term, and its import.

Notice what is happening here. The shame of sin, previously directed at the man born blind, or his parents, is now firmly aimed by the Pharisees at Jesus himself. And on the basis of the very same system of moral and purity codes!

The testimony of man described as “born blind” is not accepted by the religious authorities, and the man’s parents are brought in to be questioned as to how this happened, but they dodge the questions by saying “He is of age, ask him!”

Back and forth and back and forth the argument goes. The Pharisee’s preoccupation with the *mode* of healing continues. Nothing is said about *why* Jesus might have healed the man, or what he might have said to him. At this point, the man’s carefully concealed answers give way to open sarcasm. (not unlike what we heard Jesus’ use in his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:10 – What? You are the teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things?”)

He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”

The Pharisees call for the man who was born blind a second time, and said to him: **“Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner”. He answered “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see!”**

The man claims the one thing he is most certain of: **his own experience.**

Whew! The story is not yet finished, but I am going to intentionally leave it right there.

In part, because we are out of time. But also because OUR story, in the here and now, also goes on. Our experience of this dynamic in our own religious lives continues as well. .

Spoiler alert, this man: who was called “the man born blind.” is, at the near end of the story, thrown out of the religious assembly.

But that is not the end of the story.

See, Jesus hears that they have driven the man out, and Jesus goes and finds him. He reveals to him that he, Jesus, the one who mixes his own spit with the red clay of the earth, is truly the “Son of Man,” and the newly-sighted man follows him.

The story closes, therefore, with one group, the Pharisees and perhaps some of the neighbors, formerly sighted, left in their own spiritual blindness.

If this is a healing story, please note that a lot of people here miss the miraculous healing.

And meanwhile the one they called “the man born blind,” goes off on a new adventure, and finds acceptance, and healing, and a life-giving relationship with Jesus in a new beloved community, far beyond the shaming culture that had wounded him so deeply, and had driven him away.

I’m sure, that for him, it was not an easy thing to grow through.

So choose your own adventure. Or maybe you already have.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the God’s people.

Scriptures Appointed for the 4th Sunday in Lent, Year A

The Collect

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - I Samuel 16:1-13

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

The Psalm - Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.

3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.

6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The Epistle - Ephesians 5:8-14

Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

The Gospel - John 9:1-41

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."