

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
27 February 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Eighth Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Double Vision: Sight & Insight”

Final Sermon in the Eight-week Series: *What Jesus Serves Up*

John 9:1-41

New Revised Standard Version

It's been a week when we've not wanted to believe what we're seeing. And yet, the explosive images of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine are devastatingly clear. Putin is laser-focused on the expansion of his power, no matter the cost or collateral damage. In Putin's autocratic vision, people are expendable¹ – certainly the Ukrainians, but also his own military personnel, and even Russian civilians protesting on the streets, being arrested and removed immediately. In Russia, you are not allowed to see things differently than Putin, not without severe consequences anyway.

Putin says that this is about protecting a threat against Russian life from Ukraine, but no such threat exists, as President Zelenskyy has reiterated. These leaders are painting two very different pictures of reality. And while the democracies of the

world can see through the thin veil of Putin's lies, they are still powerful enough to have all of us on edge as we watch this invasion unfold.

Putin's vision is impaired by his insatiable hunger for power and control, which is exercised by flexing fear in the faces of all who stand in his way. He's been doing this for years. We should not be surprised by what we're seeing, even though we're still shocked it's actually happening. And because, up until this point, few have been willing to stand up and obstruct his vision – he feels that whatever he sets his sights on – he can have. Unchecked power emboldens greed.

From the loss of human life to the destruction of democracy to the demolition of cities and communities – the cost of this insatiable power is immense, and immeasurable really. You can count bodies. You can walk

¹ Credit to Mark Wingfield, editor of *Baptist News Global*, for this commentary in his Friday News Roundup Email from February 25, 2022.

through the rubble of collapsed buildings. But you cannot quantify the trauma that an entire country is experiencing, and the generational trauma that these types of wars create and pass down.

The editor of Baptist News Global, Mark Wingfield, was on a Zoom call Thursday with European Baptist Federation leaders hearing a firsthand report from a leader among Ukrainian Baptists. Mark shared what the Baptist leader said:

““What I was feeling (today) was like a big black hole that tried to absorb your soul and destroy you completely. You feel helpless. Everything you lived for can be quickly destroyed. Humanly speaking, it is terrible...Ukraine is surrounded by the Russian army shooting everywhere. Some of the bombing already has hit near Baptist churches and organizations...In Odessa, a bomb exploded about 100 meters from a Baptist-run orphanage that is home to 60 children.””²

² Mark Wingfield, ““The situation here is terrible,’ Ukrainian Baptist leader tells European allies,” *Baptist News Global* (24 Feb. 2022), accessed on February 27, 2022 at <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-situation->

After nearly an hour of conversation, the Ukrainian pastor was asked to summarize his thoughts, and he replied: “Please keep believing that God will be glorified, [that God’s love would prevail]. As Ukrainians we want to say we would win. But our hope is that *God* would be glorified.”³

Wingfield then reflected: “Do you see the difference between the Ukrainian pastor’s worldview and Putin’s worldview? One wants to glorify himself, the other wants only to glorify God.”⁴

“To quote the Hebrew prophets, [we must], *Choose you this day whom you will serve...We cannot serve two masters.*”⁵ In all place, at all time, we must ask ourselves *who* we serve, and the answer must affect our politics, our purchases, our positions, and our posts (social media).

We, of course, are called not to serve any political leader, but to serve the God who came as a human person – humble in spirit, compassionate in heart – who cared more about healing

[here-is-terrible-ukrainian-baptist-leader-tells-european-allies/#.YhtbCPXMLaU](https://baptistnews.com/article/the-situation-here-is-terrible-ukrainian-baptist-leader-tells-european-allies/#.YhtbCPXMLaU).

³ Wingfield, *ibid*.

⁴ Wingfield, *ibid*.

⁵ Wingfield, *ibid*.

and love, than heeding any certain law or staking a claim on any kind of love.

But, we too, are human, and we cannot point the finger at political leaders without realizing that the hubris that limits their vision and leads them to war to get what they want, is the same hubris that leads us to our own kind of spiritual and social blindness. Pride is pride, and it always leads to a fall. Maybe not of a nation of people, but certainly of the notion that all people are beloved. We let that truth fall, time and time again, and for what? Often for the sake of saving ourselves, preserving our way of life, insulating our way of thinking, promoting our way of believing or being. But pride obstructs compassion and empathy, growth and learning. When we are *so sure* that we are “right” in how we see the world, we lose our capacity to “right the wrongs” that we have yet to see that are all around us. None of us is seeing the full picture of our lives or the world right now. We cannot; we all have limited vision. If we would accept this, rather than deny it, we might just be a more peace-filled planet.

Our text today speaks of this limited vision in terms of blindness. But I prefer to speak of this reality in terms of sight and insight (or lack thereof). For as we see in our text today, physical sight is one healing, but spiritual insight is the other. The former is immediate and considered miraculous. The latter is gradual and is considered questionable at best, heretical at worst (by the authorities at least). God sees both as beautiful.

Before we dive into this text, a word about the physical ability to see and what is sometimes called a disability of blindness. In biblical times, blindness was considered bad. There was not a consideration that though one might not have the ability to see, that means they probably also have much deeper abilities in the other senses – sharper and more nuanced hearing, more sensitive touch, and so on and so forth. Even more, as the disciples’ question reveals, blindness – or any kind of illness or disability or perceived difference or weakness – was understood to be connected to sin: “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” (vs2). This was the theological worldview back in biblical days, but if we’re honest

with ourselves, we have remnants of this theology within us still today. How many of us, when our lives seem to be falling apart or full of bad luck, have found ourselves wondering, *“What did I do to deserve this? I’ve been nothing but faithful or good, I’ve tried my best to do everything right, etc.”* OR perhaps going to the opposite extreme we say, *“Serves me right. This must be what I deserve given that I did X or Y or Z a few years ago. Karma is a ‘you know what.’”*

Even if we’re joking when say such comments, or think them to ourselves, there is a kernel of truth in the humor that reveals that many of us still try to equate our behavior or our ‘strength of faith’ to our health or our circumstances. We will most likely never be able to answer most of the Whys of our life, but our Worth has nothing to do with those Whys. Our worth is not an answer to any question of what we have done or haven’t done, how much we believe or do not believe. Why this has happened or hasn’t happened. Our worth in God’s eyes is bestowed on us at our birth. We are worthy of love and wholeness – no matter what we do or do not do. Yes, sometimes our actions have consequences.

Other times, tragic things just happen. Oftentimes, we can’t even parse out which is which. But at ALL times – we are worthy of God’s love and we are held equally and fully in the gaze of God’s love.

But we get this bad theology about sin and circumstance in part because of how we have read scripture through the years, and how interpretations have been passed down to us. There are all kinds of interpretive issues we face in terms of the context of Then versus Now, just to name one issue, but in particular, the translation of verse three that we read today in the New Revised Standard Version – is one of the most poorly translated verses in all of scripture. Why? Because it reads, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him,”* as if God needed to show off how awesome God was, so God made this man blind *so that* one day he could be healed as an example of God’s awesomeness...but NOWHERE in the Greek are the words *“he*

was born blind [so that]."⁶
Those words are added.

In the original text, as Jo-Ann Brant translates the Greek it reads: "*Neither did this one nor his parents sin. But in order that the works of God might be manifest to you, it is necessary for us to work the works of the one who has sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one is able to work.*"⁷

Jesus simply says "*No, neither the man or his parents sinned.*" Period, end of sentence. Unlike autocratic leaders, God does not need to use humans as expendable means to prove God's power. Rather, after Jesus debunks the sin correlation, he begins a new sentence and a new thought altogether: "*In order that the works of God might be revealed, we must work the works of the One who sent me.*"

In other words, sin isn't the issue. (It never is with Jesus!) The issue is whether or not *our* actions are making manifest the works of God in the world. This is why John doesn't call the miracles in his gospel miracles – he calls them signs (*sēmeía* in

Greek) because they always point to something beyond Jesus himself, revealing something about God that we are supposed to learn through the person of Jesus. The sign is not just about what we SEE happening in front of us, it's about Jesus pointing us to something we have YET TO SEE, but need to learn, about ourselves or the world.

What matters is for God's works to be made real in the world, we are the ones who have to make those real in the world, and to make them real...we have to *see* them...not just with our sight, but with new *insight* that God is giving us through Jesus.

Here's the Cliffs Notes version of this sign, or these 41 verses. I don't even know if they still make Cliffs Notes but it's what we used when I was in high school and college to give us a synopsis of something that we should have read in full but didn't have time to read (these are the days before Google and Wikipedia, of course.

In any case, here's the Cliffs Notes version:

⁶ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 484: The Man Born Blind - Feb. 27, 2022," *Working Preacher* (22 Feb. 2022), accessed on February 27, 2022 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/484-the-man-born-blind-feb-27-2022>.

⁷ Jo-Ann Brant, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2011), 153

The man who is blind from birth enters the story without physical vision and with limited spiritual vision, but by the end, he can see clearly, both spiritually and physically. The authorities, the teachers of the law, the most overtly religious people – they enter the story being able to see physically and *thinking* that they are able to see spiritually, but by the end of the story, they are revealed as being spiritually blind. They are without the insight that would give them true sight.

And while the 41 verses of this passage provide many preaching directions, I can only pick one for today. And it's this: *vision is a continuum*. And how we see either progresses or regresses depending on our willingness to have our vision refracted. None of us are 100% spiritually blind, nor do any of us have 20/20 spiritual vision. Rather, like the eye doctor asking us to focus on the itty bitty letters on the bottom line of the screen, flipping lenses in front of our eyes, asking, "Is 1 clearer or 2, 2 or 3, 3 or 4?" We must always ask ourselves, *and allow others to ask us*, how our vision might be refracted to more clearly see the world as Jesus invites us to see it.

And here's a fair warning: the more we clearly see the world as Jesus sees it, the fuzzier and cloudier our previous ways of seeing can seem. In other words – it's gonna get blurrier before it gets better!

So let's take a look. Throughout this story, the man who was born blind has a spiritual progression. His insight gradually deepens and develops. First, he explains what happens to his neighbors saying, "*the man called Jesus*" put mud on my eyes and told me to go to Siloam and wash (vs 11) and I received my sight. Later when the Pharisees are questioning him, he calls Jesus "*a prophet*" (vs 17). Then when the Pharisees are questioning him a second time, he says Jesus "must be from God," (vs 30-33), and finally when he speaks to Jesus at the end of the passage, he asks him – with a spirit of curiosity not certainty – "*who is the Son of the Man? Tell me so that I may believe in him.*" And he listens (side note: it's not all about seeing, hearing matters too!) to what Jesus says about it being the person standing right before him speaking to him, and the man says, "*I believe*" and he worships Jesus (vs 36-37). Physical sight might be

immediate, but usually, spiritual insight is gradual.

But with the Pharisees, the religious authorities, they believe that they have full spiritual sight already. Because they follow the law and see the world in one way, they feel they have the sight they need to determine how God works in the world to discern or judge who is from God and who is not. Of course, their vision is impaired by their pride and their “locked in” way of believing. They have no room for revelation. No willingness to let their vision be refracted by reality.

And the clearer the evidence of the healing becomes, the more the Pharisees believe that Jesus must be a sinner because he broke the Sabbath. Because this rule of working on the Sabbath was broken, a rule that they believe any “person of God” would keep, they literally cannot see, discern, or comprehend the action of God that was performed right before their eyes. Simply because this rule was broken. Their worldview was absolutely fixed.

“The Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious officials were frustrated. They were confronted by an apparent miracle, [but it] was at odds with their religious beliefs and political aspirations. Rather than question their beliefs [or] change their politics, they attempted to disprove the miracle. [To not see what they were seeing.] Their tactic to do this was to force the man, who was once blind, to admit that it was a trick and that Jesus was a charlatan. The man refused to play their game. Instead, he simply bore witness to what had happened. He had been blind, but now he could see.”⁸ It was fact, not fake news.

But I wonder if maybe the problem is not that Jesus doesn’t agree with our worldview but that our worldview is too small to accommodate, or house, what Jesus is doing, what God is up to in the world?⁹

Jesus keeps pushing his critics, those who are most sure of their spiritual sight, to see that maybe the problem is not that he’s the *lawbreaker* but that their worldview does not allow for the glory of God *to break in*

⁸ Kevin Ruffcorn, “John 9:1-41, Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind,” *A Sane Faith* (Feb. 19, 2022), accessed on

February 27, 2022 at <https://asanefaith.com/jesus-heals-a-man-born-blind/>.

⁹ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

through their lives in new, unexpected, and miraculous ways.

This text was timely for me this week because I had my annual eye doctor appointment on Friday. And it got me thinking:

When it comes to our physical sight, we have no problem going to the eye doctor the minute a cataract is obstructing our view or a change in the contour of our lens is making our vision fuzzy. We want to be able to see clearly, so we wear glasses or contacts, we have Lasik surgery or cataract surgery – we want to get our physical sight fixed. In fact, for those of us who were born able to physically see, it's quite a scary and uncertain thing to begin to realize we are losing our vision – we wonder how we will navigate the world around us – and so we do *anything* to correct our vision as quickly as possible. Our vision is too essential to just let it fade without trying to fix it.

And yet, when it comes to our spiritual sight – we are okay with having blurry, fuzzy, or even obstructed vision. We'd rather walk around in the world maybe not looking at Truth head on, because if we did, well then it means we'd have to change

something about our lives, or the way we spend our money, or what we believe, or how we vote. So we will intentionally allow our spiritual sight to be blurred or just tell ourselves that what we are seeing is the full Truth when the reality is – we know our peripheral vision is blocked, or we know that there is something we are not seeing. We like to assume that our spiritual vision, our moral vision, is 20/20. That whatever we've been taught is the only lens we need. We are far less open to corrective lenses when it comes to our religious, spiritual, political, or moral vision aren't we? We don't like to be corrected by others, we don't like to admit we may need a refraction.

But isn't that kind of absurd? We are not born with perfect spiritual vision or focused moral understanding or clear political beliefs. We have to continually refract our vision and allow ourselves to realize that the field of vision of what we need to be focusing on might indeed be vaster than we ever realized. And this is okay. There is no shame in saying, "*oh, I never saw something that way before, but now I see what you're saying and yeah, it does change what I think, what I believe.*"

This is what it means to follow Jesus. To allow Jesus to be the refracting lens that is always refining our focus, and giving us clarity, while also expanding our field of vision and our ability to see nuance and perspective. And that means – to keep the metaphor going – that perhaps we need to be optometrists and ophthalmologists for one another – helping each other correct our vision or see something differently. And even, seeking out and asking others, *“will you look at this with me? Is 1 better or 2? 2 or 3?”*

Today may we be humbly reminded the more we think we know, the more likely we are to be blind (or short-sided about) what we do not know.

So. Will we allow Jesus to serve us both the sight that we need to heal the hurting, but also the insight we need to change how we see the hurting world around us – and even ourselves?

As we are seeing in the case of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, it’s often easier to see something clearly when it is at a distance from us; we can easily point fingers and say, “How can this be? How can HE do this? How

can THEY let this happen?” But so many things in our own country’s politics and belief systems and the way we function and were taught...so many things have become like cataracts that cloud over our vision...it’s happened gradually, but it prevents us from having the clarity we need to stop or speak up against the powers that put profits and pride over people. History has taught us that good people can follow fallible leaders until they fall... not even realizing they are on a path that will lead to their own destruction until it’s too late.

May we actively seek to have our vision refracted. May we realize that not a single one of us sees everything clearly – we need each other to help refract and refine, focus and fine-tune our vision. Jesus invites us to see the world with the gaze of God, and to do so, we must allow our sight to be corrected, and to realize that such correction is not shameful or sinful, it is rather, a critical part of what it means to grow in the image and likeness of God.

Vision is a continuum. Sight is shaped in relationship, and insight is gained through community.

As the beloved Christmas carol
asks, (singing) "*Do you see what
I see?*"

The answer is: Probably not.

Which is why we need each
other.

Amen.