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**“Who do you say that I am: Son of God”**

**John 9:1-41, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=169546413>**

In the introduction to the book *This I Believe*[1] Jay Allison writes of the “simple, if difficult invitation” extended to “politicians, nurses, artists, construction workers, athletes, parents, students, the famous and the unknown, everyone”[2] who was behind the creation of this book. The invitation: to “write a few hundred words expressing the core principles that guide your life – your personal credo.”[3] He goes on to state, quite rightly: “There is risk in what they did. They wrote of their most closely held convictions and then spoke them on the radio to an audience of millions in a media climate that tends toward sound bites, potshots, and spin. To make such an earnest, exposed statement is itself an act of bravery.”[4]

We know he is right. An attempt to open ourselves up to others, to share our foundational beliefs and formative experiences leaves us a bit vulnerable: open to criticism or judgment, maybe even vulnerable to conflict. We know that we are all different, and while we generally rejoice in our differences, we also know that differences can be difficult. People don’t always like or agree with what we have to say – especially when our beliefs and experiences raise questions about the truth they hold as true.

A man who was born blind meets Jesus by the side of the road, and his life is changed. “This I believe,” he says. “He put mud on my eyes and I washed, and now I see.” As questions come from every angle, he simply states and restates the truth of his experience and the foundation of his belief – that it is Jesus who healed him. And that while he doesn’t understand how or even why, he knows that Jesus is a man of God, a prophet, the Christ. “All I know is this: I was blind, but now I see.”

It’s easy to see that our passage for this morning is more than a typical miracle story. The miracle itself serves basically as a preface to the real story at hand, an introduction to the conversation and controversy that follows. The man who is born blind can now see, and soon this miracle leaves everyone a bit afraid. The Pharisees fear the power of the one who healed the man. From where does his power come? And what does that mean for us? The man’s parents fear retribution or alienation from the community. The only one who is not afraid is the one who can now see, who stands firm under the tide of questions. He speaks the truth of his experience: he cannot explain it and he doesn’t even try, but he knows that his life has been changed through this encounter with Jesus. And his experience becomes a portal for faith and worship, and a profession that he believes that Jesus is the Son of Man.

Frankly, it is no wonder that everyone gets worked up in our story for today, for the questions in the heart of our passage are no light matter. The questions raised are not

merely about the mechanics of a miracle. The underlying question on the hearts and minds of the Pharisees – even though it is not directly spoken – is, who is Jesus? Who is this man who encounters a stranger by the roadside and miraculously offers him the gift of sight? Is he a prophet? An agent of God? Is he a magician, performing tricks for personal gain? Is he someone who has come to fulfill the law, or is he someone who comes in opposition to all they know and believe and understand as truth? Who is Jesus?

We ask this question even today, in our Sunday school classes and coffee shop conversations. We ask this question in our personal prayers and in our life of mission together: Who is the Jesus we gather to worship each week? Who is this man, this God-in-the-flesh, whose life and death and resurrection somehow compel us to worship? Who is Jesus – a rabbi? A king? A martyr? A God?

The question at the heart of our passage is a question at the heart of theological discussion throughout the centuries. Theologians from Paul to the Council of Nicea through the 214th General Assembly and beyond have discussed, debated and discerned faithful answers to this question. Like many investigations of this type, a journey down this road often finds us asking more questions: the origin of Jesus, the nature of Jesus, the meaning of the ministry of Jesus in the 1st century and in our day, the significance of the death of Jesus, and the impact of the resurrection of Jesus. Who is Jesus? And how do we know?

St. Augustine, like many, explored these questions in his many works, particularly as he shaped his doctrine on sin and on the trinity. Yet his late 4th century devotional work, *The Confessions*, the story of his life and his spiritual awakening, remains his most famous writing. One theologian remarks that in *The Confessions*, “Augustine gave devotional expression to what he asserted and defended elsewhere as dogma: that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, the source of grace, the ground of hope, and the worthy object of prayer, adoration, and confession.”[5]

And indeed, God’s grace pours into the pages of St. Augustine’s spiritual memoir. He gives voice to the truth of who God is in a particularly profound way by sharing the personal truth of his faith life. St. Augustine writes of his conversion:

*I went on talking like this and weeping in the intense bitterness of my broken heart. Suddenly I heard a voice from a house nearby ... singing over and over again, ‘Pick it up and read, pick it up and read.’ ... I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to my feet, believing that this could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon ... I opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted ... No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.[6]*

Sometimes we, like Augustine or like the unnamed man in our passage can best answer the question “Who is Jesus?” by recounting the moments in our own lives when Jesus shows up. Sometimes that to which we can point with greatest certainty is not language that clarifies the mystery of the trinity or even our understanding of the atonement, but to a moment in our life where Jesus’ presence is so tangible that it transforms us, where the love we feel is so real that we know we have been saved from others and from our very selves. Sometimes the best answer we can produce is simply to point out how we met Jesus and how we weren’t the same.

Because, you see, God is a God who shows up. In Christ, God runs the gauntlet, overcoming any distance between humanity and a God who loves us. In Christ, God is with us – showing up by the roadsides of our lives, ministering to us in our broken places, changing our perspective and sometimes even changing our very identity. Our Lenten Gospel narratives show us over and over that Jesus shows up where he is least expected, and changes the lives of the least likely. Our Gospel shows us that God just will not leave us alone!

Anne Lamott writes of how Jesus came chasing after her as she was embroiled in the destructive cycle of addiction and self-loathing. She writes of lying in her bed one night:

*I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn’t. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. The experience spooked my badly, but then everywhere I went I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in.*

*One week later, when I went back to church, the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape it. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me.[7]*

See, God shows up in Jesus, freeing us from that which binds us – our sins, our addictions, our quest for success, our wounds, our shortcomings, our pains, our limits. God’s call is persistent – even if it is subtle.

And sometimes people look at us with fear and doubt when we find ourselves sharing the stories of our faith, of our transformation, of our hope. Sometimes we feel misunderstood when we speak with certainty about a God who loves us when we – and those around us – know that we still act unlovable at times. Sometimes we are afraid to confess our faith in a world where such a faith is no longer popular, and often misunderstood or unaccepted. Sometimes we too take risks when we put our faith into action, welcoming the outcast, crossing the lines that get drawn to divide us, standing up to systems that oppress or persons who abuse. Sometimes people look to us with

suspicion when we tell of moments when the mysteries of God intersected with the routine of our lives.

We are challenged in our passage to speak up – to give voice to the reality of our faith and the struggles of our lives. We are challenged to tell the truth, as simply as we know it and as plainly as we understand it within the context of our daily walk. We are challenged to do so individually and also, quite necessarily, in community – for we are enriched in this conversation.

Yet we are likewise challenged to put ourselves in the place of the Pharisees, recognizing that in our own daily life of faith we often walk in their shoes. We often come to the table with a certainty about how God acts that we close ourselves off to a fresh insight into God's love. We are challenged to explore with honesty how an encounter with Jesus might challenge our understanding – of ourselves, of the world, of God.

Whether it has disoriented us, encouraged us, or changed us in any way, God in Christ shows up – when we've been left by the side of the road, when the crowds swarm around, and when others have given up on us.

Sometimes all we can say is:

- Jesus was there, in the bedroom where my loved one died, as we held her hand and prayed.
- Jesus was there, when in my heartbreak I opened the Bible and found the words I needed in that very moment.
- Jesus was there forgiving me when I couldn't forgive myself, giving me the courage to change.
- Jesus was there, protecting me when it felt as if the world was turning against me, giving me the courage to stand.

Sometimes all we can say is that we saw Jesus, and that has made all the difference. That is miracle enough for me. Amen.

[1] Allison, Jay and Dan Gediman, Editors. *This I Believe*. New York, 2007.

[2] *Ibid* p 1.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*. p 1-2.

[5] Pelikan, Jaroslav *Jesus Through the Centuries*.

[6] St. Augustine, *The Confessions*. P 168.

[7] Lamotte, Anne, *Traveling Mercies*. P 49-50.