

Lent IV A

This is the saddest miracle story I have ever heard.

Not because the man was given new sight. That was awesome. Happy for him!

No, the sadness comes because of the reactions of everyone else in the story.

How broken and terrible they are, from the disciples' first question, to the neighbors' anxious questioning, to the Pharisees' last condemnation.

The curtain parts on a scene in which the disciples speak about the blind man as though he were an object, not a subject, a jumping-off point for theological conversation and philosophical speculation.

Why is he blind? His sin or his parents' sin?

There are, of course, many assumptions, a frame of reference for the question.

That this is how God works, how sin works, how the world works.

You might call it a loaded question, and it is certainly not one that treats the man with the dignity and compassion, even the basic recognition he deserved.

His neighbors were no better.

Once he was given sight, after Jesus had recognized him and paid him proper attention and even touched him,

The neighbors began to talk, about him, at first.

It is him; it is not!

Again, treating him as thing to be discussed,

They spoke to him, eventually.

And whether about him or to him, there was no element of celebration in their talk.

How did this happen? Who did this to you?

This looks like crab mentality, named for the creatures that pull each other back into the bucket as any one of them tries to escape.

If I can't have it, neither will you.

If things are bad all around, let's keep them that way for all of us, their anxious questioning seems to say.

The cause of their anxiety is explained in the next section, when they took the man to see the Pharisees.

The neighbors seem to have feared their religious leaders and were quick to turn over a spiritual dissenter to them for interrogation.

If this scene were a church, it would be an anxious and authoritarian one, in which snitching and punishment were regularly meted out.

This is probably not fair to the actual, historical Pharisees, but by the time of this Gospel's writing, after much struggle with the leaders of the synagogue,

John the evangelist remembered them that way.

And religious people can be this way, often are.

God does something amazing, something wondrous, and the leaders gather,

With sharpened pencils, and the stroking of beards, and a committee,

To quench the Spirit, to investigate the violation of expectations and boundaries, to get God back under control.

It is hard to do that, however, and so we see in the story that the religious leaders are themselves terribly divided by their inquiry.

Was God at work in this Jesus or not?

If the ground seems to be shifting under your feet, if your trusted colleagues are not seeming so trustworthy, then find someone to blame.

Let's get his parents in here, someone said.

And so two scared old people were dragged before the leaders and questioned.

How can this be, they were asked? Was he even really blind?

Thus they grasped at a naturalistic explanation for the miracle; it was a long-running fraud.

He'd never been blind at all!

They would have preferred to believe that, rather than that God had healed him through Jesus.

The old parents, in a moment worthy of Orwell's *1984*, said "don't ask us; go get our son."

Again, all could have been celebration.

The fattened calf could have been slaughtered, bells rung.

Jesus would have come and turned more water into wine; the primordial joy at the center of all things could have flowed over the scene.

If only people of position and people of anxiety had not come together in such a tragic way.

You may have read an essay by the English philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who took up a Greek fable about a fox and hedgehog to make a distinction about two ways that human beings think.

A fox, he says, is a curious and resourceful creature.

It figures out many ways to find and kill its prey, and it is willing to eat many things.

A fox knows many things.

A hedgehog, on the other hand, knows one thing: get in the hole.

That is safety and life.

The hedgehog does not know many things, but he does know the one, most important thing.

Some thinkers, Berlin writes, are foxes; they know many things, use many ideas and concepts to make sense of life.

Aristotle, Shakespeare, Erasmus.

Others, no less intelligent or well-read, are hedgehogs, and view the world through a single, defining idea.

Plato, Dante, Nietzsche, among them.

When the man born blind appears for his interrogation, it is as a brave, brave hedgehog.

He knows one thing, and it makes all the difference.

"One thing I do know, that though I was born blind, now I see."

Everything else he knows is organized by that fundamental conviction.

From this conviction, he is empowered to challenge the religious leaders, telling them that he knows Jesus to be from God.

He is not overcome by fear, like his parents.

He is not awash in anxiety, as were his neighbors.

His singular conviction, that he knows the one thing, is enough to keep him steady in the face of other's wavering.

This is the way of martyrs and heroes, the way of integrity, the way of losing one's life to save it. And then he confessed Jesus as the Messiah and worshiped him.

I wonder if he knew this thing so deeply and well because he is the only one in the story who got close enough to the Lord to be changed by him.

For Jesus had spat on the ground and made mud-spit and smeared it on the man's eyes.

The dust from which we are all made; the spit of the incarnate God, these mixed together and applied to the eyes.

Before the man believed, before he confessed his faith, before he was healed,

before he clung to his one truth, he was touched, smeared, pressed upon by the Lord.

The rest were carried away by anxious thoughts, desperate in their attempt to get God back into the box.

The one who knew one thing, and who knew it in body as well as mind,

he was the only one who could really see, who could really know, anything at all.

Our seeing and knowing depends on similar encounters,

offered at the table, offered at the font.

That we might endure as his followers, come what may.