

## **How Do You See Things?**

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 9:1-38

Delivered on March 22, 2020

We begin with a man born blind. A man who all his life used to sit and beg. And it is assumed by everyone except Jesus that if he is blind he must have done something wrong, either him, or his parents, that is. Otherwise, why would he be punished this way? And so the disciples ask Jesus, who sinned that this man was born blind. Was it he? Was it his parents? Jesus says neither he nor his parents sinned, but he was born blind so the works of God could be displayed in him. So next, in a detail from this story you know couldn't be made up, we hear that Jesus spits on the ground, mixes the spit with some dirt to make mud, and spread it over the man's eyes. He tells the man to go wash the mud off his eyes and so he does, and suddenly the man can see. Well, all of the sudden everyone who used to see this man begging starts seeing this same man walking around with his eyes wide open and seeing just like everyone else. And their reaction is typical for something like this. Some of them say that's the same man who used to sit and beg, and others say that can't be him, it must just be someone who looks like him. But he says, "you know what, actually, it is me."

How were your eyes opened?

A man named Jesus opened my eyes.

Where is this Jesus?

I don't know.

Well, the Pharisees then wander onto the scene and that's when we're told that all this happened on the Sabbath a day of rest, not a day of working and healing. And some of these

Pharisees say, this man who healed you cannot be from God because he doesn't keep the Sabbath. They ask the man what he says about this Jesus, and he says he is a prophet. But they still didn't believe the man was really blind or if he was that Jesus really healed him, so they interrogate his parents. Well, his parents are intimidated by all their questions, because the Pharisees have the power to kick them out of the synagogue, so they don't really say much of anything, except why don't you ask him. So they turn again to the man and say we know this Jesus is a sinner.

Whether he is a sinner or not, I do not know. All I know is that I was blind and now I can see.

What did he do to you, how did he open your eyes?

I have already told you and you will not listen. Why do you want to hear it again, do you want to become his disciples too.

Well, naturally at that they became angry, and so the conversation now takes a more insulting, more personal turn.

You are this man's disciple. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this Jesus guy, we don't even know where he comes from.

What do you mean you don't know where he comes from? He opened my eyes. He cured my blindness. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, he only listens to people who do his will. If this man weren't holy and sent from God, he could do nothing.

You were born entirely in your sins and you are trying to teach us? They say. And with that, they threw him out of the synagogue.

Jesus who had disappeared from the scene now comes back. He heard they had thrown the man out, and when Jesus find him he says "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

Who is that, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.

You have now seen him. He is the one speaking to you.

The man said, Lord, I believe, and he worshipped him.

If you ever took a class in astronomy, you may know the word EPICYCLE. But if you haven't or it's been so long that you don't remember, we're going to learn this new word today. So all of you out there in TV land, I want you to repeat this word after me. EPICYCLE. Some of you way out in Hartville and Canton, I didn't quite hear some of you, so I want you to say it a little louder this time. EPICYCLE. Ok, that's better.

What, you ask is an epicycle. Well, the word epicycle is a word that has a story attached to it. And the story goes like this.

Way back in the time of ancient Greece, long before even Jesus was born, astronomers decided that the way the universe was set up was that all the heavenly bodies, the moon, the stars, the sun, the planets, all these heavenly bodies orbited the earth in a circular motion and the earth stood fixed and motionless at the center of the universe. Now when you think about it, that makes some sense. The earth, after all, doesn't feel like it's moving, and it clearly looks like all the bodies like the sun are going around the earth. And in fact, even though we know

better, we still talk as if that's the way it is. We say the sun rises in the east and the sun sets in the west, even though we know it's not the sun doing the rising and the setting, it's we who are making it rise and set. So to say that the earth was the stationary center of the universe that everything else went around made a lot of sense.

But then as people started looking more and more up at the night sky, there came to be a problem. Some of the planets like Mars for instance, well, some of them were doing something a little strange. Sometimes the planets in the night sky looked bright and sometimes they looked dim. Sometimes that is, the planets seemed like they were closer to the earth, and sometimes they seemed further away. And that didn't make sense if everything was going around the earth in a circular motion. So let's say this index finger on my left hand is the earth, and this one on my right hand is Mars. If Mars is orbiting the earth in a fixed circle like this, it's always going to be the same distance away. But alas, that's not what people saw when they looked up in the night sky. What they saw was that sometimes a planet like Mars looked closer like this, and then further away like that—closer like this, and further away like that. And that was a real problem.

So along came a guy named Apollonius of Perga, and he had a nice little solution to this problem. And what was born was the epicycle. Now to think about an epicycle, think about the times when you were a kid and you got on the Merry Go Round. When you got on the Merry Go Round if you remember, you know that there some animals you could get on that didn't go up and down, but who wanted to ride those? The fun animals were the ones that went up and down, and they went up and down in a circular motion while the Merry Go Round was going in its own circle around and around. And that my friends is an epicycle. An epicycle is a circle on

top of a circle. So what Apollonius of Perga said was that the planets didn't go around the earth like this, they went around the earth like this. And that's why sometimes they look closer, and other times they look further away.

Now the thing I want you to understand this morning is that there would have been no need for these epicycles if people could have just accepted that the earth went around the sun as all the people you learned about in school like Galileo and Copernicus and Kepler said. That could have explained everything people were seeing. But people couldn't accept that. Instead they had these epicycles. And as people continued to look up at the night sky they started seeing things that even these epicycles couldn't explain. So they came up with more epicycles. So you didn't just have circles going around circles but you even had circles going around circles going around circles.

Now as you hear all this, you might be saying, Pastor Rich, how could people be so ridiculous? How could people go to such absurd lengths to explain how everything revolves around the earth? Why couldn't they just accept the fact that the earth is in motion revolving around the sun?

Well, if you're asking these questions, you're asking the right questions, and the answer is that's not how they saw things when they looked with their own two eyes. That's not how they saw things. They looked and they saw that the earth was not moving. It doesn't feel like it's moving, it doesn't look like it's moving. They looked and they saw that the sun goes around and around the earth, and when you see things a certain way, no amount of logic or reasoning or persuasion can possibly convince you that there's another way of seeing things. When you see

things a certain way, nobody can ever make you see things differently. You just have to learn to see things differently yourself.

As we look at our gospel lesson for today, and we look at Jesus' opponents the Pharisees, I think that what we find are people who are just like those early astronomers who were stuck in the way they saw the universe. For what we have here are people who look at Jesus, and they see someone who is a sinner, and no one can possibly say anything to convince them that the way they see the world is wrong. They can't be convinced. You see we have this story about Jesus healing a blind beggar as he spreads mud on his eyes and tells him to go wash the mud off and all of the sudden this man who is blind from the very day of his birth can see. But you see because all this happens on the Sabbath, to the Pharisees this act of healing is a form of work on the Sabbath, which is a big no-no. And so they say to themselves, this man is not from God because he works on the Sabbath, he doesn't observe the Sabbath. Now, you might think to yourself if these people were logical, you might think if they knew how to reason they would say hmm....you know, we've always thought that you're not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath, but we just saw this man heal a blind person, and if someone heals a blind person they must clearly be doing God's work, so maybe the way we've always thought of the Sabbath is wrong. But they can't see things that way. They can't be made to see things that way. This man heals on the Sabbath; this man is a sinner. Everything orbits the earth. The earth couldn't possibly be in motion, that's not how we see things.

And so as we look at this story, we can see the absurd lengths the Pharisees will go to in order to deny that Jesus is doing God's work, in order to deny this healing is from God. For if you are counting at home, I see that they go through three steps. First, they don't think this

man was really blind or that he had really been healed. So they went and asked his parents and his parents said yes he was born blind. So since that didn't work, next, they decided it must be some kind of trick. How did he open your eyes? How did he make you see? It's a trick. And when they can't figure out what the trick was, their last resort is to attack the man who was healed, to attack the messenger. "You were born entirely in your sins and you are trying to teach us?" If you don't like the message go after the messenger. First step, we don't believe this really happened, second, it must be some kind of trick and third, who are you to try and teach us. Epicycle after epicycle, epicycle upon epicycle upon epicycle. And we hear this story and we say to ourselves these Pharisees must have really been foolish, but they weren't foolish. They saw the world the way they saw it, and when you see the world a certain way, no one can make you see it differently, you just have to see it differently for yourself.

As we find ourselves in the middle of this COVID-19 pandemic, I think in the past few weeks, those of us in our two churches have become all too aware that this virus is an equal opportunity infector. The coronavirus does not care if you are white or black, it does not care if you are rich or poor, it does not care whether you are young or old, it does not care who you love, who you worship or what you believe. This terrible virus makes us all the same. But it has always been that way. We have always been all the same. We may be waking up to this fact right now, but it has always been that way. Two thousand years ago Jesus said your Father in heaven makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and he makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust. And if we are to be the true church during this challenging time, if we are to be the true body of Christ for this present hour, then I think we need to pray to see the world around us as God sees it. We need to pray to have our blindness healed, and to see the world not as

divided up between us and them, between my family and your family, or between me and my little group and everyone else. But we need to pray to see everyone in this world are breathing the same air and bleeding the same color blood, and all being children of God, because this virus makes no distinctions. Just like the switch from seeing the earth as the stationary center of the universe, to the earth being in motion—just like the switch from seeing Jesus as a sinner who works on the Sabbath, to seeing Jesus as doing the work of God, we need to pray for the same switch within ourselves. Won't you pray that we will do that? Won't you pray that we will do that and that the church wherever it may exist on this earth would do that? Because regardless of what else we may do in this difficult hour, I think any attempt to be the true church in this time, any effort to be Christ's true disciples, I think it begins and ends with seeing the world as God sees it.