

# THROUGH EYES OF FAITH

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## TEXTS:

Isaiah 55:12-23  
John 9 (excerpts)

I am grateful to Peter Carman and to all of you for the opportunity to assume the pulpit of my home church this morning. In anticipating this moment, my thoughts have been drawn simultaneously to experiences separated by fifty years. First, the extraordinary and alarming challenges we are currently facing in our public life, both in this state and in our nation; and second, insights that came to me as an almost-charter member of this congregation as I embarked on studies in divinity school in the early 1960s.

In the summer after my first year in seminary, I was back home in Tennessee and did what was called “supply preaching,” mainly in small country churches. I remember one experience especially well, at one of the smallest of these churches. Like any diligent seminary student, I had thought about how the worship experience should go and had picked hymns consistent with the theme of the hour. Then I met the pianist, just before the service. “Well,” she told me, “I know two hymns, ‘Power in the Blood’ and ‘Just As I Am.’” “I guess that means we open with ‘Power in the Blood’ and close with ‘Just As I Am?’” I asked. “Yes,” she said, “that’s what we do.”

My sermon that morning was based on a passage from John’s gospel that had powerfully caught my attention as I began to read the Greek New Testament. That experience was excruciating at first, but as I got past the mechanics of the language, it became a means of reading carefully and insightfully, sometimes devotionally, familiar passages that in English would frequently glide right by.

That’s the way it was with John 9, the story of Jesus’ healing encounter with the man born blind. It is on the surface a miracle story, although we note that receiving the miracle already requires of the man a primitive act of faith: finding his way across the city, with mud streaming down his face, to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Then the story begins to get complicated, and we realize it’s about much more than literally receiving sight; it is a parable about what it means, what it requires, to follow Jesus and to profess faith.

Far from rejoicing in the formerly blind man’s great good fortune, the religious leaders of the community take the man to task. Maybe he had faked his blindness, because it is impossible that Jesus, a sinner who has broken the Sabbath in performing this act, could have healed him? The man’s parents don’t offer much help; they testify that, indeed, their son was born blind, but in their fear they profess ignorance as to whether Jesus had actually healed him.

But then the man himself answers simply, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

The man is then expelled from the synagogue, the low point of the story. One dramatization of the story has him looking back and exclaiming, “Oh, warm blindness!” But at that point Jesus reappears, reveals himself to the man, and receives his profession of faith. Then John has Jesus deliver the point of the story: “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” The eyes of faith do not see as the world sees. In fact, they may negate the wisdom of the world and cast judgment on those who profess to see or speak with authority.

This is a hard truth, a radical possibility, to which we will return. We should not conclude, however, that it requires us to take an exclusive view of the truths we have received or the way we perceive the world. People of faith have no monopoly on wisdom or truth. Both our theology and our experience suggest otherwise.

I recently had occasion to reflect publically on the intellectual debts I owe for whatever insights I have on my work and on the juncture at which we find ourselves in American history. My focus was on the humanities—on the light that history, literature, political and social philosophy, theology and ethics shed on our public life. Let me suggest briefly three examples of such connections, all familiar by virtue of the history we share.

First, consider what one might call the “Antifederalist moment” we are now experiencing in American politics. I used to tell my students that if they wanted to understand our constitutional history they should read The Federalist, but if they wanted to understand American politics, they should read the Antifederalists. Historians have pointed out how distinctive American revolutionary thought was in its juxtaposing of power and liberty—fully aware of the dangers of oppressive governmental power, but with little sense of how such power might serve or expand liberty or that governmental power might counter power in other realms, such as economic life. The inclination rather was to fixate on the power of government and to regard it as unalterably opposed to the liberty of citizens. This proved problematic as a governing principle, both then and throughout our history.

After six perilous years under the Articles of Confederation, the drafters of the Constitution sought to strike a better balance between what they called “energy in government” and the checks and balances that would keep that government within its proper bounds. But the Antifederalists were having none of it, and the political paranoia and conspiracy theories they marshaled to oppose the Constitution have reverberated ever since. The Tea Party movement is only Antifederalism’s latest manifestation, ironically posing as the defender of Federalism and the Constitution. Understanding the power of such thinking throughout our history can help us grasp the appeal such ideas have today to many of our people and how they have gained such sway over one of our major political parties.

Religious ideas are crucial, both to understanding this history and to dealing with its current manifestations. Realism as to people's sinfulness and will-to-power figured directly in the Constitution's checking of political power—Madison in The Federalist sounds like a good Calvinist—but taking such beliefs to the extreme can erode all trust and hobble democracy. As for current politics, as Jim Wallis asks in his new book, why should Christians believe in sinless markets any more than they believe in sinless governments? Some, he observes, “seem to think that the self-interest of business owners or corporations will always serve the interests of society, and if they don't, it's not government's role to correct it.” Bad politics, he says, but also a bad reading of human nature (On God's Side, p. 235).

A second connection is the idea of community, a recurring strain in American political thought that has often provided a counterpoint or corrective to the dominant themes of liberal individualism: interdependence alongside independence, responsibility as well as rights, a need for identity, solidarity, and obligation as well as for freedom and autonomy. The communitarian tradition in our society is rich and diverse, but here too religious roots run deep, from the Social Gospel to the Puritan vision to Paul's instruction to the Corinthians: “There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (I Cor. 12: 4-7).

A third connection involves what also may be regarded as a dissenting strain of American thought, a sensibility at odds with prevailing views, although the text I will cite is among the most familiar in the American lexicon:

Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully.

Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural—words all the more remarkable for being uttered after almost four years of civil war, words that lead us to reflect on our own fallibility and the perils of absolutizing our ideology or cause, no matter how righteous we may think it to be.

Lincoln leaves no doubt as to his moral revulsion at slavery or his determination to see the war to completion. But then we hear the reservation—the recognition that ultimate judgment belongs to God alone, the refusal, even in this extreme instance, to presume an absolute identification between his own cause and God's will. A powerful lesson to take into political life: a humility that declines to claim ultimate sanction for our own ideology or cause and that rejects the pretensions of those who do make some claims.

Areas of experience and thought such as these three—our view of the uses and abuses of power, our sense of community, our wariness of self-righteousness in politics—can be vitally important to us, shaping our perception of the world and of our responsibilities in it.

Sometimes the religious source is clear and powerful; it is hard to imagine Lincoln's Second Inaugural being composed by anyone who was not steeped in scriptures and in the Jewish or Christian world view. At other times our religious insights may confirm or complement or correct those from other realms of life and learning. But we do see the world distinctively through the eyes of faith. And that faith not only conveys perception and insight but also confronts us with obligations and calls us to commitment.

As Richard Niebuhr wrote, reflecting on the character of revelation, "Whatever others may say, we can only confess . . . that through our history"—that is our journey of faith—"a compulsion has been placed upon us and a new beginning offered us which we cannot evade" (The Meaning of Revelation, p. 191). The prophet Isaiah writes ecstatically of the way nature itself is transformed through the eyes of faith: "The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (55:12). I will forever associate those beautiful words with the longtime chaplain at Yale University, William Sloane Coffin, who regularly used them as a benediction after the grand Christmas service at Battell Chapel.

For most of us, most of the time, however, I suspect that the words we have just sung are considerably closer to our everyday experience:

I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,  
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,  
No angel visitant, no opening skies,  
But take the dimness of my soul away.

This is, I believe, a prayer for our times, as we are tempted by apathy, indifference, discouragement: deliver us from "dimness of soul."

Now as we all know, we do not always get it right. In his recent book, A Public Faith, theologian Miroslav Volf portrays both the ascent, by which we encounter and apprehend the divine, and the return, by which we re-enter and try to live faithfully in the world, as fraught with peril, prone to what he calls "malfunctions." Some of these are familiar to us, which is not to say we always resist them: substituting a gospel of wealth or success for a prophetic faith, for example, or confining the work of faith to our private lives. As a young man in this congregation during the civil rights years, Robert Seymour helped me and many others get beyond a gospel focused almost exclusively on individual salvation and personal morality. In many churches at the time, it was almost as though the Hebrew prophets had been excised from the canon. We came to see the contradiction in extolling personal relationships that were kind and loving while enforcing or accepting social practices that denied others their humanity. To fail to pursue justice in our common life is just as surely a betrayal of the ethic of love as it would be to reject a neighbor's need face-to-face.

Faith's malfunctions can be particularly catastrophic if we lose sight of its non-coercive and nonviolent character. The Christianity of the Crusades and modern militant Islam have led

some to view faith, in the broad sweep of history, as a dangerous and destructive force. It is crucial to understand just how thoroughly such abusive invocations of faith contradict its very character and content. Such understanding will not immediately settle for Christians all contemporary issues of war and peace, but it will establish a burden of proof which any proposed use of force must meet.

As far as religious coercion is concerned, we must also be vigilant about less dramatic instances closer to home. You've no doubt heard about the proposal that North Carolina establish a state religion, one of the more exotic proposals to come out of the General Assembly. But more generally, religious conservatives have chafed at constitutional restrictions on the establishment of religion, seeing them as a secular imposition. In truth, the First Amendment and religious liberty are not secular impositions; they have deep religious roots. Roger Williams and other proponents of church-state separation were mainly focused on the church's integrity. What was and still is at stake is not only civil liberty but also religious faithfulness.

So our faith must continue to seek understanding, and our vision to encompass both the perils and the opportunities before us. We are living in a time when the imperatives of faith and the call to engagement are pressing upon us. I've thought a lot about the civil rights period lately, and I imagine you have as well. This was prompted in part by the Supreme Court decisions of the last week, lifting discriminatory barriers against gay and lesbian couples but *removing* protections against discriminatory barriers in voting. This comes precisely at the time, ironically, when states covered under the Voting Right Act, including our own, are enacting new obstacles with great ingenuity.

Indeed, much of what we've seen in Raleigh lately has prompted memories of the 1960s. These were formative years for many of us and for the Binkley congregation—years that engaged our faith and transformed our politics. I confess that I've sometimes spoken nostalgically about those years—sometimes observing that the mainstream religious communities have not been as energized since, and that the issues with which we must deal do not seem as clear-cut as civil rights did, at least in retrospect. But I'm feeling less nostalgic now, getting more of that sense that we remember, of people of faith coming together, often finding common ground with people of other faiths or people whose convictions do not have conventional religious roots. And the issues look more clear-cut with each passing day. There is little that's ambiguous about denying 500,000 people health insurance, or blocking unemployment benefits for 80,000 North Carolinians, or warehousing the mentally ill in prisons and homeless shelters, or slashing public education, or undoing decades of environmental protections, or erecting multiple barriers to the hard-won right to vote.

As we look at this gathering storm through eyes of faith, we are likely to feel that "compulsion" of which Niebuhr spoke, the calling we cannot evade. We should be sensitive to the promptings of faith that may be distinctive or unanticipated: Will Campbell's recent death reminds us of his insistence, amid the relentless struggle for civil rights, that "Mr. Jesus died for the bigots as well." When asked about his befriending of a Klansman and a murderer, Campbell

exclaimed, “because I’m Christian dammit!” And again, “If you’re gonna love one, you’ve got to love ‘em all.” Homespun truths, but that doesn’t make them easy.

Returning to the story of Jesus and the man born blind, we realize that responding to the call to discipleship may require us to stand up to respectable people or accepted wisdom, or to go beyond the comfort zone of family and friends. We will not always agree on tactics, and not all of us will or should play exactly the same role. But we cannot avert our eyes from the injustices and deprivations being imposed in our name and, having seen, we must find ways to respond. “I do not know whether he is a sinner,” the man born blind said of Jesus as the authorities prepared to expel him. “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

May God grant us the ability to see, and the conviction and courage to act on that vision in a broken world. Amen.