

First Presbyterian Church
John 9:1-41, “Wilderness: A New Perspective”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/15/2026

We are midway through our journey through the wilderness,
following the biblical pattern of 40 days and 40 nights.

Last week I noted the contrast of

Nicodemus, who misunderstood Jesus in the middle of the night
and the Samaritan woman

who was believed Jesus in the middle of the day.

I wouldn't blame you for being skeptical of my emphasis
on day and night in the wilderness,
because pastors are often guilty of overplaying such things
to make a sermon work.

But look – the theme just keeps showing up in John's Gospel:

Here in chapter 9, Jesus tells his disciples:

**"While it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me.
Night is coming, when no one can work."**

Commentator Gary Burge notes that all of these night and day, light and dark
references find their source back in John 1:5, which reads,

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

It's a consistent literary device that John is using, and if we don't pick it up,
we miss the message that links all the stories together.

Today's passage adds another layer:

Blindness and sight.

Which category would you put blindness in? Darkness / Light?

Which category would you put having sight in? Darkness / Light?

Yes, lining up blindness and darkness would be natural,
as is connecting sight with light.

As with other teachings of Jesus,

we must remember to not get stuck on the literal level,

but to recognize the spiritual parallels

Jesus is pointing to.

And even when we've done that,
the concluding message of Jesus in today's story *reverses our expectations*
about these categories with the goal of taking us deeper inside
the logic of Jesus' gospel.

Listen very closely to what he says to the Pharisees in v. 41:

**"If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin;
but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."**

Jesus has put blindness and sight *in the wrong places*. How does that happen?

As I began studying this story, I asked myself,

"Where is the wilderness in this passage?"

Is it the blindness of the man who was healed?

The man is bandied about like a ping-pong ball in this story.

Is his healing where we see the movement from wilderness into new creation?

In some ways, perhaps, but it also open up a pandora's box of new problems.

The wilderness in this passage does have to do with blindness and seeing,
but it has almost nothing to do with whether a person's eyeballs
are working or not.

I think the wilderness of this passage is life in a world
ruled by experts who think they know what's best for you,
they know what God wants for you,
and they know how God would do something
if God were ever to do anything at all.

Even more than the man born blind,
it is these know-it-alls who are in need of a new perspective.

At the beginning of the story, the disciples ask Jesus whose sin was responsible
for the man's blindness.

Jesus rejects the premise that sin is to blame at all,
but then he adds in v. 3,

"this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

I wonder how often we read stories of Jesus' healing someone and think,
"Well, I suppose the goal for Jesus is that all of us who have (or will have)
a disability should be healed?"

Reverend Zoe Hemming, vicar of St Andrews Church in the village of Aston in Shropshire, is a part-time wheelchair user who lives with chronic pain. She's had encounters with strangers offering healing prayer and says she finds this approach can be "spiritually abusive".

From <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>>
She told BBC news, "I've been in situations where I've been talking to another wheelchair user in church and somebody was so determined to pray for us and we just kept ignoring them because we were in the middle of a conversation. In the end he just put his arms on both our shoulders and just prayed. It was really annoying and very disempowering. I was furious."

From <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>>

Can you imagine?
This would-be-miracle-worker from Shropshire apparently believed that Jesus' words, **"this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him,"** are a universal explanation for every person in the world who suffers any kind of disability.

Yes, healing, when desired and received,
is a wonderful gift that we should be grateful for.
I don't want to tell anyone that they shouldn't seek
to be healed through prayer.

At the same time, we know that being blind or deaf or not able to walk isn't something that takes away from our humanity or consumes our identity as problem in need of fixing.

We have people in our church with various disabilities involving hearing, mobility, sight, speech, cognition, developmental disorders and probably much more.

These qualities set different parameters on our experience, to be sure, but they also open us up to deeper experience in other areas of life.

So why was Jesus so focused on healing those he met who were disabled?

We have to realize that in the ancient world (and too often in our own time),
people with disabilities were looked upon with disgust
and pity. They weren't considered worthy of being incorporated
into public life, and so they were often consigned to begging.

Additionally, there was often an assumed connection to the spiritual world
which led to people being *blamed* for their condition
as a result of a sinful action or a curse –
which is exactly what we hear from the disciples
at the beginning of this story.

With that in mind, I understand Jesus' healing of those with disabilities
as focused on their exclusion from society
and their experience of judgment on the basis of their condition,
rather than a focus on the condition of being disabled itself.

Healing may have brought about physical relief,
but primarily it signaled God's acceptance
and therefore urged communal acceptance for all of God's children.

I'd like to introduce you to the story of 16-year-old Becky Tyler,
who in 2017 preached to 6,000 people at the Christian festival Greenbelt.
Tyler has quadriplegic cerebral palsy and communicates
using eye-gaze technology and a speech synthesizer.

Her story was documented by Damon Rose in his article entitled,
"Stop Trying to Heal Me."

*According to Becky, "God says to me that He loves me a lot.
He says that I am made in His image and that my disability
doesn't make me any less than an able-bodied person.
He loves us all the same."*

*Perhaps unsurprisingly for someone born with a severe disability,
Becky hasn't always believed this.*

*"When I was about 12 years old, I felt God didn't love me
as much as other people because I am in a wheelchair
and because I can't do lots of the things that other people can do.
I felt this way because I did not see anyone with a wheelchair in the Bible,
and nearly all the disabled people in the Bible get healed by Jesus –*

so they are not like me."
She felt alienated by much of what she read in the Bible –
until she was given new food for thought.
"My mum showed me a verse from the Book of Daniel (Chapter 7, Verse 9),
which basically says God's throne has wheels, so God has a wheelchair.
In fact it's not just any old chair, it's the best chair in the Bible.
It's God's throne, and it's a wheelchair.
This made me feel like God understands what it's like
to have a wheelchair and that having a wheelchair
is actually very cool, because God has one."
From <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>>

When I first read this article, I thought,
 "‘What a heart warming and creative thing for this girl
 to think that God has a wheel chair. Of course she’s wrong,
 God’s throne doesn’t have wheels to help with a disability.
 But it’s nice she’s helped by thinking that.’"

Now I’ve changed my mind. I now think that "God has a wheelchair"
 might be one of the most profound statements
 about Jesus' incarnation that I've ever heard.

Jesus presence with us on earth reveals God’s total identification
 with everything that makes us human. Including our weakness,
 our fragility, and yes, our disabilities!
God has a wheelchair is a very accurate understanding
 of how Jesus lived among us.

With this shift in perspective,
 we can understand the surprising reversal of expectations that
 we find in Jesus final statement.

The man who was born blind accepted Jesus’ wisdom, acted on in, and was healed.
 But instead of accepting him into the community and praising God
 for this miracle, the Pharisees, his neighbors, and even his parents
 stand at arms length from the whole situation.

The reason the Pharisees refused to accept God's miraculous work
is that they wanted to be in control.

They wanted the power. They wanted God to be like them,
not like a blind beggar.

The Pharisees thought they were the ones who had everything figured out,
their perspective, their vision of the world was the ultimate standard.

What they really needed was not *more* of this vision, but *less!*

To walk in God's light, they needed to be blind.

They needed to accept their own limitations.

They needed to let go of their expert opinions and insights.

And so it is that at the conclusion of this story where Jesus heals a man's blindness,
we see that blindness is not the thing that needs curing at all.

**“If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin;
but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” (v. 41)**

We need to be cured of our self-assured perspective
that we have the world figured out, we have God figured out,
and everything would be better if people just did things
they way we told them to.

What if we all need to stop knowing so much about the way God is supposed to be,
and took time to consider what it means that God has a wheelchair?

What if we were healed of our insistence
that what God most wants is to fix our inadequacies?

What if we recognized along with the man born blind and 16 year old Becky Tyler,
that what God really seeks is to be with us, love us,
and cultivate a rich awareness of humility, faith, and courage
within us that nobody – and no disability – can take away?