

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **2020 Vision**

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." – John 9:1-7, 39-41

Among the most common causes of blindness used to be cataracts. Some people are born with cataracts, but they become more and more common the older you get. People have tried to help those with cataracts at least since the ancient Egyptians in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. But the ancient methods of dealing with cataracts left patients with pretty limited vision. It was only after 1949, just seventy years ago, when the English ophthalmologist Sir Harold Ridley pioneered the insertion of intraocular artificial lenses, that cataract surgery really became the miraculous treatment that has since become almost routine. I say almost routine, because for those with cataracts, it doesn't feel routine to get your sight back!

When surgeons first learned how to perform safe cataract operations, among the first operations they did were for people who had developed cataracts before or shortly after birth. People who had lived their whole lives without sight suddenly were given sight. But that didn't mean that they knew how to see. At first they didn't know what to do with these new sensations. They saw patches of colour and light, but they don't know what the colour and light mean. The mother of one young woman tried to help her daughter understand shadows. Without shadows, the mother explained, everything would look flat. "Everything does look flat," the daughter retorted. "Flat, with dark patches." There is an interesting little story in Mark's Gospel, in which Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida, but the man doesn't know what he is seeing. "The people look like trees walking around," he says. Like the early recipients of cataract surgery, just because his eyes work doesn't mean he can see. He has to learn how to see.

You see, when we are born, we do not know how to see. Our eyes send data to our brains, but the brain doesn't know how to organize all of that sense data into patterns that we can interpret. As babies we learn to see by grabbing things, feeling them, putting them, when possible, in our mouths. It

takes weeks before babies learn to focus on a parent's face. That's the first thing. Later, and this is the stage that Sadie is at right now, they point at things and ask, "What's this; what's that?" And their parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents and neighbours teach them to see more. "waddat?" Sadie asks, pointing to a picture on the fridge, and I tell her, "that's your uncle Sean, your cousin Lauren, your grampa doing a wedding." We do not see automatically. We have to be taught how to organize sense data into perception. We have to learn to see.

This new year is 2020, a number that we also use to talk about vision. 20-20 vision is pretty good. Hindsight is always 20-20, but foresight rarely is. And vision is a profoundly important spiritual issue. Jesus said that those who would **see** God's kingdom must be born anew, born from above. And throughout the Bible, there are repeated references to the way we see or don't see. Spiritual sight and spiritual blindness are critical issues. Maybe it is worth reflecting on our vision through 2020.

We see as we learn to see, and we see as we are taught to see. More specifically, we see what we are taught to see, what we are taught to pay attention to, what those around us consider important; what is not considered important, we usually do not learn to see. In the process of growing up, we develop a "worldview," a way of seeing the world. And we filter what happens to us through this way of seeing the world. It helps us to make sense of what happens to us. If everybody you meet has pretty much the same culture and upbringing as you, they will see the world the same way you do, so they will have a similar worldview. You may take your worldview for granted. It is like the air you breath; most of the time you won't even notice it. But when you meet people who have a radically different experiences and upbringing, you discover that they see the world in dramatically different ways.

I have a friend who goes out every fall to hunt deer. He has trained himself to see deer, and I am often amazed by how he can spot a deer from miles away. He will point one out to me, and it will take me several seconds to recognize that that speck of brown across the valley is a deer. When I am traveling with a farmer, I am always interested to know what they see on the farms we pass by. Often they see things to which I am oblivious. I suspect, although I cannot know, that there is always vastly more going on, than I notice at any

given time. My worldview allows me to see certain things and blinds me to others. And that is true for all of us: much of what goes on around us, we do not see, we cannot see. We are blind as bats, but we do not know it.

As we read this story of Jesus healing the man born blind, we ought to identify with the blind man. He is us and we are him. We are all blind as bats, but our eyes can be opened, just as his were.

This story is filled with paradoxes. There is a man who is physically blind, but is open to receiving sight, and there are people who physically can see, but are spiritually blind. There is this strange irony that the ones with good eyesight fail to see what God is doing. Some of the Pharisees, not all but some, criticize Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. They have been taught to see some things as being the signs of God's presence, and even when the evidence slaps them in the face that God is doing something new, they cannot see it. It becomes clearer and clearer as the story goes on that Jesus is more interested in spiritual sight than in physical sight. And at the end, Jesus puts the paradox plainly: "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Jesus came "to bring sight to those who cannot see, and to question the vision of those who think they do see."<sup>1</sup>

The way to see, the story suggests, is to become aware of the ways in which we are blind. When we are infants and toddlers, we are still learning to see, and so we are open to being taught. But when we become adults, we settle into established patterns of thinking and acting and seeing, and we are only usually open to seeing things in a new way when some crisis forces us out of our preferred pattern and makes us look at life in a new way. Most of the time we are quite comfortable with what we see and what we don't see, and it is simply too challenging, too threatening to try to see things in a new way. And so we resist the new.

There are many who are spiritually blind, who do not want to see: addicts who cannot imagine life without their crutch; violent and abusive people who enjoy the sense of power that hurting others brings them. They literally cannot see how much better their lives would be if they could learn a different and better way. There are many who know they are blind but who

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<sup>1</sup>WPOG blue sheet - March 17, 1996

cannot learn to see: the people who come out of jail wanting to live a new life, but end up falling into the same old ruts; the women who painfully extricate themselves from one abusive relationship only to get themselves right into another one, because they have become so used to that way of life, they literally do not know how to live another one. The grace of God comes through recognizing our own blindness and being open to having our eyes opened.

There is a special kind of blindness that afflicts those of us who are part of a dominant group in society. It is exceptionally difficult for us to really see what life is like for those in subordinate positions. It is really hard for men to see what it is like for women to walk alone after dark, to live with the constant fear of being attacked and sexually assaulted. It is really hard for white people to perceive what life is like for people of colour. It is really hard for straight people to understand what life is like for gay and lesbian people, for wealthy people to understand the struggles of those who live in poverty, or for those who can walk to get what life looks like from a wheelchair. The inability to see what life is like for subordinate groups makes life indescribably more difficult for people in those groups, and it is not too surprising that they are sometimes frustrated and angry at the lack of understanding they experience. What they find particularly upsetting is the unwillingness of people who do not share their experience to be willing to listen and to try to see life through their eyes. And so they ask in frustration, “How can you be so blind?”

As we live into this new year, let us also seek to live into this story of Jesus healing a person born blind, let us confess our own failure to see, and let us place our trust in the light of the world, who is able to help us see. Let us pray:

Healer of blind hearts, we confess that we see what we want to see and do not understand what we do not want to understand, and we become defensive when our definitions are challenged. We seek healing for ourselves, but are suspicious when it is offered to those we consider unworthy. Judge us into repentance, touch us with humility, and send us to wash in your pool of blessing, for you are the light of the world and you can restore our sight. Amen.