

There are four primary types of healing miracles recorded in the Gospels. Jesus made the lame walk, the mute talk, the blind see, and the deaf hear. While all four are amazing in their own right, blindness certainly entails the greatest degree of difficulty because of the complexity of the human eye. But the sixth miracle is in a category all by itself. Jesus doesn't just heal a blind man; he heals a man *born* blind. The significance of that is this: there were no synaptic connections between the optic nerve and visual cortex in this blind man's brain. This healing miracle wasn't as simple as correcting an astigmatism, healing a corneal scar, or removing a cataract. Jesus hardwires this blind man's brain by creating a synaptic pathway that did not exist.

This is nothing short of synaptogenesis. On day forty-two after conception, the first neuron is formed in a baby's brain. By birth a baby will have an estimated eighty-six billion brain cells. As a newborn experiences new sights and sounds, the brain begins to form neuronal connections called synapses. Almost like telephone wires that crisscross a city, synapses crisscross the cerebral cortex. By the time a baby is just six months old, each brain cell has about eighteen thousand connections. This miraculous process is called synaptogenesis.

During the developmental process, windows of opportunity open and close like clockwork. Vision is primarily wired between birth and eighteen months, and synaptogenesis in the visual cortex peaks at about three months. That's where the miracle gets fascinating. If you were to place a patch over the eye of a newborn baby and leave it there during the first few years of life, that baby would be blind in that eye for the rest of their life, even if there is no physical deformity or genetic defect. The reason is simple: no synapses would form between the visual cortex and optical nerve.

Now double back to the man born blind. Ophthalmologists would call his condition irreversible. The natural window of opportunity had closed. But it's when that window closes that God performs some of the greatest miracles. If you've ever felt like you've missed your window of opportunity, remember this: with God it's never too little and with God it's never too late. When Jesus gets involved, never say never!

My father-in-law is a crack shot with a rifle. He has a wall filled with trap shooting trophies. It was Sid who taught me that we all have a dominant eye. Make a triangle with your hands, fully extend your arms, and find an object on which to focus. Now close one eye, then the other. With one eye, the object will move: that's your weak eye. If you aim with that eye, you'll miss every time. But with your dominant eye, the object will stay in the triangle.

I think many people are looking at life through their weak eye! If you have a critical eye, you'll find something wrong with everything. And that's exactly what the Pharisees did. They were so focused on the law, they couldn't see past it. And Jesus called them on it: *For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may be made blind* (John 9:39).

The irony of the sixth miracle is that the man born blind ends up with physical and spiritual sight while the sighted Pharisees end up spiritually blind. Faith isn't just a way of living. Faith is also a way of seeing. If it's true that seeing is believing, then the opposite is even truer: believing is seeing. The Pharisees saw the miracle but didn't believe, and they couldn't believe what they were seeing!

Right before performing the sixth miracle, Jesus reveals one dimension of his true identity: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). The Pharisees rejected his claim because they said Jesus was bearing witness about himself. So Jesus turned the man born blind into his eyewitness, literally.

After pronouncing himself to be the light of the world, Jesus spit on the ground and made mud with his saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with it. This upset the Pharisees (the Greeks and Romans associated saliva with magical power) and it annoyed the Pharisees because Jesus did this on the Sabbath day (violating the prohibition against work). I wonder if Jesus was just pushing their buttons again? Jesus does seem to be asserting his genesis power. He originally formed humankind from the dust of the earth – genesis. Now he spits on the dust and makes mud to make blind eyes see – synaptogenesis. The One who created everything in the first place is the One who can re-create anything in the second place.

When it comes to miracles, be very careful about focusing on the methodology. The methodology behind the miracles of Jesus isn't the point. The point is Jesus' power. There is nothing he cannot do. But once again, we have to do our part. Like many of the miracles Jesus performed, this one comes with a set of instructions. He tells the man to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. No easy task: the man born blind would need to descend hundreds of steps to get to the pool, and wade through thousands of pilgrims gathered for the Feast of Tabernacles. Why would Jesus send this blind man on a scavenger hunt? Why not just heal him on the spot? A trip to the Pool of Siloam seems unnecessary. Hold that thought.

As a young man, Episcopal bishop William Frey tutored a student who was blinded in a chemical explosion. The student felt as if his life was over: the only thing greater than his self-pity was his loathing for God. For six months after the accident, all he did was feel sorry for himself. Then one day his father said, “John, winter is coming and the storm windows need to be up – that’s your job. I want them hung before I get back this evening or else!” Then he pretended to walk out of the room, slamming the door.

John got good and angry! In fact, he was so angry that he decided to do it. He thought, *When I fall, they’ll have a blind and paralyzed son!* But John didn’t fall. He discovered that he was capable of doing far more than he realized, even with blind eyes. Only after completing the job did he discover that his father was never more than five feet away. He shadowed his son to make sure he was safe, but he knew that helplessness was a far worse curse than blindness.

I’m not entirely sure why Jesus had this blind man go and wash, but I’m guessing that he had lived a relatively helpless life. He depended upon everybody for everything. So Jesus didn’t just heal his blind eyes: he restored his dignity by rebuking his helplessness.

Scripture is explicit when it comes to the sequence of this miracle. It says the man “came back seeing” (9:7). If he hadn’t taken this step of faith and gone to the Pool of Siloam, I don’t think the miracle would have happened! And that’s one secret to experiencing the miraculous: - *most miracles require an act of blind obedience.*

You cannot manufacture miracles, but you can wash in the Pool of Siloam. One step of obedience can open your eyes. One step of obedience can reverse the curse. One step of faith can open new ways of seeing yourself and your purpose. One step of obedience can begin a whole new chapter in your life!

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes, that I may see you in my brothers and sisters. Lord, open my ears, that I may hear the cries of the hungry, the cold, the frightened, and the oppressed. Lord, open my heart, that I may love each one as you love me. Renew in me your spirit. Lord, free me and make me one with Christ. Amen.

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Never Say Never Again

Sunday, April 10, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN 56537

John 9:1-11

Scientists tell us that at about six months of age, children start developing internal pictures of external realities. Like a slow-moving Polaroid, those internal images are developed in the darkroom of your mind’s eye. The first internal image is Mom, which develops at about six months of age. (Dad doesn’t enter the picture until about eight months!) Give children a few years, and their entire vocabulary will have a matching picture; but if your eyesight doesn’t develop normally, neither will your mind’s eye.

To the seeing eye, words prompt pictures. If I say *the White House*, a picture of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue pops into your mind. If I say “lake,” I might envision Lake Alice. If I say “car,” I might think of my first car, a Plymouth Reliant station wagon. If I say “dog,” I might think of our dog, Lily. We all fill in the blanks differently, but we have images to match those words.

The man born blind had as many words in his vocabulary as we do, but no images. Zero. His photo album was empty: his was a picture-less existence. He couldn’t picture the faces of his mother or father. He’d heard his friends describe the beauty of the flowers and the splendor of the Jerusalem sunset, but he couldn’t imagine them because he had never seen them. He’d never seen himself in the mirror, so he literally had no self-image.

Imagine closing your eyes and never being able to open them again. Your world would go dark; but in the darkroom of your mind you can still develop pictures of images you’ve seen before. But if your eyes had never been opened to begin with, your mind would draw blanks. This was the only world the man born blind had ever known.

It’s hard to imagine this miraculous moment because we cannot un-see what we’ve seen, but I think we’ll experience something similar when we cross the space-time continuum. Our glorified bodies will include glorified senses. We’ll hear angelic octaves that were inaudible with earthly ears and we’ll see celestial colors that were invisible with earthly eyes. What will we see first? I like to think we’ll see what the man born blind saw first: the face of Jesus.