

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**Beyond Beliefs pt. 6: Unknowing and Worship**  
**John 9**  
**February 11, 2018**

*[read John 1:1-5 from the bible, behind the communion table.  
Light a large candle in vs. 4.]*

This is how John begins his gospel... this story that he writes to tell us about Jesus... the Christ. The story he writes so that we might come to know, to encounter Jesus...

And for six weeks now John has been leading us from encounter to encounter.

[candle 1]

It all began back in chapter 1 with Nathaniel sitting under the tree, skeptical of what he's heard about Jesus. It's a place where we all find ourselves from time to time.

And so Nathaniel's friend Philip invites us simply to "come and see."

That is the invitation of John's gospel to us all.

Remember, the tradition has called this gospel "the eagle." And legend has it, remember, that the eagle is the only animal that can stare at the sun. The eagle carries us up to see the horizon beyond the concrete in front of us.

And he does this through encounters, by inviting us to come and see.

[Candle 2]

After Nathaniel, John carried us with Jesus to a wedding at Cana.

A wedding where all the life and joy had run out.

A wedding where there was a deep emptiness.

And what we saw there was that when our deep emptiness encounters the presence of Jesus something profound happens.

There is a filling and a transformation... There is a new wine, new life, new joy... a wine that is even better than what was before...

[Candle 3]

From there John carried us to the temple where we encountered Jesus turning over the tables of injustice, turning over the tables of the status quo... and yes, even turning over the tables deep within us that need to be flipped upside down.

[Candle 4]

Then John took us to a meeting with Jesus at night with a Pharisee named Nicodemus... And Nicodemus names what they all can't deny. **"We know you come from God, Jesus."** That part is obvious. Nobody could do what Jesus was doing without God.

*But it just doesn't make any sense.*

*Nicodemus doesn't understand.*

And so Jesus tells him, in order to understand you need a new way of seeing. You have to be born again. You'll have to be born from above.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to Spirit.

[Candle 5]

From there John took us to the middle of the desert under the noon-day heat where Jesus encounters a **woman at the well**, a woman whose body has been used and discarded again and again...

And Jesus meets her there, thirst to thirst, body to body.  
That's how Jesus often comes to us,  
through our bodies, our 5 senses.

And when the woman encounters him, she doesn't know what to make of it. So the last thing we hear from her harkens back to Philip's words to Nathaniel.

She goes back to her community and says, "I've just had the most bizarre encounter with this person. Come and see. Come and see, he couldn't be the Messiah, could he?"

[Candle 6]

That question from last week is left hanging in the air as we come to our last story in this series, where Jesus meets a **man born blind**.

And in this encounter Jesus says aloud what John had said about him back at the beginning, "I am the light of the world."

Then Jesus takes mud, and in another very physical encounter, heals the blind man's eyes. This healing kicks off another round of questions and debates surrounding Jesus, as we heard earlier

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So here we have all these encounters with Jesus,  
encounters that stir up all kinds of different questions and different responses... and in a way, all those questions and responses come together in our story this morning.

In fact, the blind man's encounter is a kind of summation of everything that has come before:

all the encounters,  
the invitations,  
the confusion, and the struggles to make sense of it all.

John brings them all together in the artful way he writes this story. He writes it like a mini-play with a series of scenes.

As we move scene by scene through this story, the Light of the World is exposing more and more.

The blind man gradually sees more and more,  
while at the same time, the darkness is revealed more and more.

And that's really key to understanding this story.  
So I want to walk through how this happens.

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The physical healing is just the beginning of this story. It's **act 1, scene 1**. At the end of that scene his neighbors begin to argue about whether or not this man had even been blind.

And when they ask this blind-now-healed man what happened to this “Jesus” that supposedly healed him... all he can say about Jesus at this point is, “I don’t know.”

It’s an interesting part of the story. By the time the man washes his eyes and comes back, Jesus has disappeared from the scene.

Which is to say, the *man has never actually seen Jesus*. Sure, his eyes are healed, but his eyes haven’t encountered the light.

So, when he’s asked about the person that healed him, all he can say at first is, “I don’t know.”

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**Scene 2.** The religious leaders begin to debate with one another about Jesus and what just happened. And so, eventually they call the healed man back in as a witness. What does he think about the person that healed him?

And this time the man says something more. Well, “he must be a prophet,” the healed man says.

He’s drawing some new conclusions, connecting some dots.  
But the story goes on...

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**Scene 3.** And more of the darkness is exposed.

Now we have the parents called to the scene. The religious leaders still wanted to discredit Jesus. So they check with the parents.

“Was this man actually born blind?”

“Yes.”

“Who healed him?”

“Well...” They aren’t going to take the bait.... They won’t answer, and why? Because they know it’s a trap. Say the wrong thing, and they will be kicked out of church. Excommunicated.

Which is revealing something important:

***The religious leaders don’t really want the truth.***

***They want control.***

***They want validation.***

***They only want proof that what they already think is true.***

So in this little exchange we find out more about what’s really going on here, don’t we? The darkness of it all is being exposed.

All the controversy and the questions... isn’t about discovering what God is up to.

It is actually about the inability of religious leaders to admit that they might just be wrong. It is about their own stubborn blindness.

The parents don’t want to play this game.

And so they throw their son under the bus! Did you catch that?

They said, “Umm... ask him. He can speak for himself.” Which is to say, “You’re all alone on this one, sonny.”

Again, more darkness is being exposed here.

The darkness in the religious system is spreading to the family system.

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**Then scene 4.**

They call the healed man back and the argument heats up. This is probably my favorite part of this story because here the healed man... who has never seen Jesus, and who doesn't really know what to say about Jesus... starts giving the religious leaders some lip. He gets a little sassy.

"Why do you keep asking me questions? Oh, you must want to be his disciple too!" He's toying with them.

But even in this antagonistic argument, the healed man comes to recognize something more. He puts more pieces together and names what has to be true.

"I don't know whether the man who healed me has sinned or not," he says, "but he has to be from God, doesn't he? Only someone from God could heal the blind."

It's another movement:  
from "I don't know,"  
to "He's a prophet,"  
to "He must be from God."

And they blow a gasket.  
It's the last straw. With that they kick him out.

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Now here's what's really fascinating about this progression.

The Light is opening the eyes of the one that longs to see.  
And it exposing the darkness at work  
among those that do not want to see.  
What they really want, their desires, are being revealed.

So the man sees more and more,  
the darkness becomes more and more revealed.  
And what we see is how easily that darkness **infects** our religious systems and **uses** our religious beliefs.

And if that doesn't humble you, it should. So let me repeat it just to make sure you got that. Darkness... so easily infects our religious systems... and so easily **uses** our religious beliefs.

You see, this story is revealing a pattern, a pattern that is not just true of the Jewish leaders in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine.

And it's not just true of radical Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Middle East.  
And it's not just true of corrupt Popes in the Middle Ages.  
This story is revealing a pattern that is true for us all.

Darkness is so good at using our religious beliefs... and infecting our religious systems:  
**Muslim, Hindu, Atheist... and Christians alike.**  
**Pew warmers, Sunday school teachers, and pastors alike.**

It can happen to us all.  
The darkness is so good at using our religious beliefs...

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That's not to say we should not hold any religious beliefs. Don't hear me wrong. In fact, that's just a knee-jerk reaction that is akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water.

What it does mean, is that we need to learn to hold our religious beliefs with a kind of courageous humility.

In fact, that might be one of the most common characteristics of the saints...

one of the most common characteristic of those that have had a true God-encounter... and who live from that God-encounter.

Kate Hanch, by the way, is writing about this in her dissertation on Julian of Norwich and Sojourner Truth. She could tell you more about it than I can, I'm sure.

But the pattern is clear. Those that truly know God, those that live from an on-going awareness of God, have this fascinating paradox instilled in them.

It's there, time and time again in history.

There is in them a *profound, courageous, humility* in the way they hold their beliefs about God.

And when that is missing in our Christian lives, when there are no beliefs at all, or no humility in our beliefs... then there's a good chance that the darkness will work its way in... just under the surface.

There's a good chance that we are exactly who Jesus is talking about at the end of this story.

"Because we think we can see, we remain in our sin."

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Which reminds me, there is still the end of the story to get to. There is one more scene in John's mini-play here. The healed man has been kicked out of the synagogue, but his journey isn't over.

When asked about Jesus, he's gone from saying: "I don't know,"  
to saying, "He must be a prophet,"  
to concluding, "Surely he must come from God."

But that's not the end of the journey. There's one more scene... and in this scene, for the first time, *his eyes stare into the brightness of the Sun*.

He actually sees Jesus and all he can say now is, "I believe."

As I was reading this story this week, I kept thinking about what a strange thing it was to say. Because when we hear someone say, "I believe," we expect them to explain what they mean, right? ***What is it you believe?***

But he doesn't make any more statements about Jesus. He doesn't tell us what he believes... and it dawned on me that is because he doesn't have any words.

When he says, "I believe," he's simply describing a movement of his soul, not an idea in his head. ***"I believe and he worshiped him,"*** John writes.

In fact, it's as if this whole story is taking us through belief statements, which are an essential part of the journey... and then past them... to something more.

Each step along the way this blind-now-healed-man is trying to figure out what to think and say about Jesus. And in each movement there is a larger statement made, something more attributed to Jesus.

But nothing he says, nothing his mind conceives of... really captures the whole truth. His ideas, his conclusions, are never quite enough. They keep shifting and expanding until finally... he comes face to face with the Light itself.

And in that moment his ideas are no longer enough.

So he moves into the place that the tradition has called: *Un-knowing...*  
or sometimes "The Cloud of Unknowing."

The place beyond words and definitions... where there is just pure holy presence.

And in that place, the only response large enough... the only response that makes any sense at all... is not a response of his mind at all, but a response of his soul. "And he worships him," John writes.

Which is to say, there is suddenly an overwhelming, profound reverence and awe before the light and the life that he is encountering in Jesus.

Think about that for a moment:

Nothing left to argue.

Nothing left to figure out.

Nothing to know.

There is only reverence, and awe, and worship.

This is where the soul goes to when it encounters the presence of God...

That's where the soul goes to when it encounters a reality beyond our ability to define and make logical sense.

And this is *where this whole series we've called "beyond beliefs" has been leading us to.* This is where the eagle of the Gospel of John wants to carry us:

To move from trying to understand Christ through logic,  
to encountering Christ through love and presence.

To a place beyond theological answers and systems,  
where finally we allow ourselves simply to worship,  
to bow our hearts and our lives  
before the One who is more than we can comprehend.

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The only question left now is: will you do that?

Will you allow yourself to be carried there?

If you will, close your eyes.

Take a deep breath,

and in the coming silence, be present to the Holy One... who is here now in our midst.

Lose yourself in God's love

and allow your soul to worship.

[Silence. Read Quote]

*To adore: That means to lose oneself in the unfathomable, to plunge into the inexhaustible... to offer oneself to the fire and the transparency, and to give of one's deepest to that whose depth has no end.*

-- Teilhard de Chardin, The Oxford Book of Prayer

Amen.

*Entering the darkness that surpasses understanding,  
we shall find ourselves brought, not just to brevity of speech,  
but to perfect silence and unknowing.*

*Emptied of all knowledge, man is joined in the highest part of himself,  
not with any created thing, nor with himself, nor with another,  
but with the One who is altogether unknowable;  
and, in knowing nothing,  
he knows in a manner that surpasses understanding.*

- St. Dionysius the Areopagite