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Message: Seeing in times of pandemic and apocalypse – John 9**
Sunday, March 22, 2020
by Doug Klassen, Executive Minister

We were driving down the dusty, rutted roads of Orodara, Burkina Faso. We passed kids kicking a ball through the streets, some guys fixing cars, others welding, right along the side of the road. Soon we were on the main road heading north toward the border of Mali.

As we were driving, Josue said to me, "Let's stop and say hello to some of the missionaries who work up here in the village of Tin. They do Bible translation."

About 15 kilometres along, we were approaching this little village. You could see clay/brick buildings on the left side of the road.

Suddenly Nicodeme, the driver, turned the vehicle to the right and we drove down a driveway that was carved out of the bush.

Branches were scraping the side of the vehicle, and some vines were like fingers running over the roof of our 4x4.

Soon we pulled into this clearing and out of the house came the first white person I had seen in days. He introduced himself and told us that we had arrived at the perfect time – it was time for morning tea.

We sat under his gazebo and talked about his call to ministry, his move with his wife from Manitoba to Burkina Faso, building his house, and the painstaking work of translating the Bible into the Siamu language – a language that was not a written language, until he set himself to the task.

As we were visiting, another man came up through the vines and branches and came to the gazebo to join us. He introduced himself as Pastor Solo. He became a Christian through the Bible's translation into Siamu, and he was on his way back to his village.

Later another elderly man, came up the driveway. He had a walking stick, and at times he would put his hand out in front of him to either brace or protect himself, I couldn't tell which.

When he got close and greeted us, I could see that he had cataracts in his eyes...his irises were so cloudy, they were almost white. He was a Muslim man from an all-Muslim village across the street.

We visited a while longer, drank more tea, ate some oranges, and then Josue said it was time for us to go.

Just when we were standing up to leave, the Muslim man put his hand out to stop us. He pointed at me, but spoke in Siamu. The missionary turned to me and said, "This man would like you to pray for healing for his eyes. He is almost completely blind."

In John 9, Jesus and his disciples were walking a dirt road. On the shoulder of the road there may have been people working, but there was a blind beggar, minding his own business, likely just trying to collect enough coins to be able to eat that day. Many knew him and would help him out.

The disciples decide to use the man as a case study in their discussion. It was common belief in Judaism at the time that God's favour and God's punishment worked by "cause and effect."

If you did good things, you would be blessed, if you did bad things, you, or maybe even your descendants would be punished. "Look at this blind man, Jesus. Whose sin caused his blindness?"

Jesus replied, "You are missing the point" and he made some mud, puts it on his eyes, heals him, and then Jesus and his disciples leave.

A short while later, this former blind man is walking around town looking good... maybe a little too good. Finally someone asked him what happened.

Suddenly the scene changes. The neighbours haul the man before the religious leaders. This healing happened on the Sabbath by someone unauthorized.

"Are you sure you can see?", they asked him. "Were you really blind? Who healed you? Can you imagine?"

Next the parents. "Is this your son?" "Yes." "Was he born blind?" "Yes, he was born blind, but now he can see. We don't know what happened. He is an adult, go ask him." "Thanks a lot, Mom and Dad."

They couldn't take the risk of upsetting the religious authorities. Expulsion from the synagogue was a huge social disgrace and they were not willing to risk it. They abandoned him.

The scene changes again. The man is now grilled a second time now, but even more intensely. Jesus must be a sinner, they said.

The poor man shoots back, "Well, here is a fine thing! This man has the power to open my eyes, and you have never heard of him! Something like this has never happened before. If he wasn't from God, he couldn't do anything." Outrage! They yelled at him and threw him out of the synagogue. Healed now, but excommunicated, an outcast, also forsaken by his parents, and now all alone.

What do you think was going through his mind? He didn't ask for this healing. He was just sitting minding his own business. It all started with the disciples using him as a case study.

And the blind man is thinking, "This is the grace of God?"

After it was all over, Jesus heard what had happened to him, so he comes to see him. And it is interesting how he begins the conversation. He says to him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Interesting question. In other words, "do you believe in what the book of Daniel says about God's son (God's Messiah) coming to redeem the world?"

The blind man is so confused by now he says, "Who is he?" "You have seen him," Jesus said. "I am he." The man replied. "Lord, I believe."

And then comes what I think is the most curious and intriguing line in the whole story...verse 39...Jesus says, "I came into the world so that those who CAN'T see WOULD see, and those that CAN see WOULD become blind." The story ends with the Pharisees becoming blind, and the blind man now able to see.

Under that gazebo in the village of Tin, the Muslim elder reached out his hand to me and said, "Pray for the healing of my eyes." I hesitated, this was not a case study.

I looked at the missionary, I looked at Nicodeme and Josue and then I looked at the man who looked at me like he was staring into my soul.

In my journal I wrote down that I prayed, "Lord Jesus, when you walked on the earth, you healed the sick, you cast out evil spirits, you shared the words of eternal life, and you put your hands on blinded eyes. Sitting with us is a man who has asked for healing for his eyes.

We believe in miracles, we believe that you want healing for every person. So, work your will in this man's life, we pray. Most of all though, give him the awareness of your presence in this world.

Give him the eyes to see your love and your care for him. Reveal yourself to him in a way that fills him with hope and encouragement, give him vision to see you at work in his life and in this world. In Your Name, AMEN."

When I returned from Burkina, I thought about that man often, and prayed for him often. I wondered if his cataracts suddenly or eventually disappeared.

Some months later, I shared this story with a friend who wanted to hear about my trip. He was dying of cancer. The friend was so moved by the story that he said to me, "Doug, find out what it would take for this man to be flown to France for the surgery. I will pay for it."

I was overwhelmed. Maybe this is God's healing coming to him now. The next day I wrote the missionary and told him of the offer. I checked my e-mail the day after, and the day after that...a week later.

Finally, after about 3-4 weeks I wrote him again. He answered a couple of days later. He said, "Doug, this is an exceedingly generous offer, but it is complicated.

This man has never been beyond the large city that is a two-hour drive from here. He doesn't have a passport; he may not have the identification needed to get one. He likely doesn't know which day is his birthday.

Having him take a trip like this at his age would be extremely stressful. Further to that, he is not the only ailing person in his village. This offer could start a firestorm of desperate pleas for help that could upset the entire social order.

He is a respected and revered elder right now. If we would follow through with this, he could end up being ostracized because he was given something that others were not able to have. I really feel that we don't want the last years of his life to be as an outcast."

No, no, I thought - the man in John 9 became an outcast...and that was all good. Or was it?

The story of the man born blind was often told to catechumens in the early church as they were preparing for baptism. "If you receive sight, you may lose everything. If you say, 'Lord, I believe', your world might be turned upside down, because while you can now see, you may also be oppressed by the blindness of others."

What do we make of this? How do we understand this text in the midst of the pandemic that we are living in? COVID-19 is an apocalypse – an apocalypse in the truest sense of that word. It is an unveiling, or a revealing, of things unseen but deeply known.

What has been unveiled for us is the level of fear that exists in our culture; the hoarding, the greed, the concerns about self-defence, the blaming of certain people groups – they sinned, or at least their parents did.

No, Jesus said, "Let the works of God be revealed."

To say, "Lord, I believe", is to say yes to an alternative story that is being told in our world at the moment.

I have been thrilled to read about how many of our churches are reorganizing their pastoral-care efforts. The phone calls that are being made....

Pastors, deacons, young adults...asking seniors for their shopping lists.

Small groups checking in with each other asking about work and layoffs and if everyone is sleeping okay.

And what I know now is that through you, Jesus is showing up to those who are alone, isolated and even outcast.

In his groundbreaking book, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force*, author Rodney Stark asks,

"How was it done? How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western Civilization?"

He concluded that one important factor was the way the early Christians responded to two terrible epidemics. To cities filled with homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments.

To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities faced with epidemics, Christianity offered care for the sick and dying.

I thank God for the health care professionals who are working tirelessly in this pandemic. It is best that we heed their advice and keep our distance from those who are sick and dying – they are handling it so well.

However, there are many who remain healthy, all around us, whose lives have been turned upside down because of this. And they need care as well.

The missiologist David Fitch invites us to be like Jesus and come to those, like the formerly blind man, whose lives are uncertain.

When Fitch meets new people, he asks them,

"Are you lonely?

Are you angry?

Are you lost?"

How do you think the formerly blind man would have answered those questions?

Jesus shows up when there seems to be nowhere to turn. Jesus comes among us when the innocent are blamed, when fears abound and innocent people are dying.

Jesus comes among us when everything that used to make sense no longer does.

Do you believe in the Son of Man? Do you believe in the one who was sent to redeem the world? Who is he? "I am he", says Jesus. And maybe I can add today, that "you are he." You are the ones, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that are the conduit of God's healing and hope for the world.

You are the ones, through your words and actions in this time that are living the good news of Jesus Christ to people who are lonely, angry or lost. Let us continue to live out of the courage and witness of our forbearers.

God's strength, wisdom and grace to you all in this time. Because of your living witness, may it lead to a chorus of the forgotten saying, "Lord, I believe." AMEN.

***Please note that this transcript was posted before the sermon was recorded and therefore may be slightly different from the video. If you have questions, e-mail Katie Doke Sawatzky, the communications officer, at kdsawatzky@mennonitechurch.ca.*