

Sight and Insight

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“One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” – John 9:25

The hymn with which we will close this morning’s service, “Amazing Grace,” is one of the best known and best loved of Christian hymns. It was first published in 1779 in a hymnal known as *Olney Hymns*, a collection of 348 hymns assembled by John Newton and William Cowper.

At the time he wrote the words for “Amazing Grace,” John Newton was the curate – that is, the priest in charge – of the parish church of Olney, a small town about sixty miles northeast of London. But before Newton became a minister, he was a slave trader. His father, John Newton Sr., was a shipmaster in the Mediterranean service, and through a series of six voyages, equipped his son to take over the labors and skills of seamanship before he retired in 1742.

Because he knew how to sail, John Junior was drafted into the Royal Navy the next year, and in an attempt to escape the harsh conditions of navy life, he transferred to a slave ship, the *Pegasus*, which carried slaves from West Africa to the West Indies and North America.

During one of those trips, his shipmates on the *Pegasus* abandoned him in West Africa, where he became the servant of a slave trader named Amos Clowe. Clowe gave Newton to his wife, an African princess of the Sherboe people, who treated Newton as inhumanely as she treated her other slaves. Newton was rescued in 1748 by an English sea captain who has been asked by Newton’s father to find his son.

During his voyage back to England in 1748, his ship nearly sank in a storm off the coast of Ireland. Newton recounted years later that he prayed to God to be saved during that storm and in answer to his prayers, the cargo in the ship’s hold shifted, closing up a hole through which seawater had been pouring into the ship. In gratitude for that deliverance, Newton vowed to become a Christian, a conversion process that lasted for several years.

Although his conscience troubled him, John Newton continued to work in the slave trade even after he converted to evangelical Christianity. He was an active slave trader for nine years and continued to profit from slave trading for many years after that. In fact, John Newton would not renounce his slave trading past as incompatible with a Christian lifestyle until he had been retired from slave trading for 34 years. When he finally broke his silence in 1788, he published a pamphlet that was sent to every member of the British parliament arguing for the abolition of slavery. In that pamphlet he wrote, “It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”

John Newton knew from first-hand experience the horrific conditions of slavery, both because of his own enslavement in West Africa and also because of his work on slave ships between Africa and the New World. He saw the many deaths at sea of the slaves crammed into filthy and disease-ridden holds. He saw the suicides of slaves who managed to break free of their shackles to hurl themselves into the sea rather than face the living hell of slavery on the sugar cane plantations in Jamaica, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Mississippi. He saw the scars from the beatings inflicted by slave traders and slave owners to force their human property into submission.

John Newton saw all of this and a great deal more savagery as well, and yet it took over thirty

years for his sight to become the insight necessary for him to be able to write the famous words, “was blind, but now I see.”

What was it that John Newton saw? Was it simply the evils of slavery, or was it, rather, his own spiritual blindness, his unwillingness to see the many opportunities he had to speak out against slavery and chose not to?

People had been condemning slavery since biblical times – the Israelites’ freedom from Egyptian slavery is celebrated to this day in the festival of Passover – but for most of recorded human history, those were the voices of the fringe. Most people, in most places, in most historical periods have accepted what we regard as a grave evil simply as a matter of fact. Slavery was how the work that animals could not perform got done, and how an agrarian society could function – how the cash crops could be planted and harvested, how the livestock could be tended, how the cotton could be picked, baled, and shipped – without slave labor was simply inconceivable to most people prior to the era when machines mechanized that labor.

It was the rare, minority voice that spoke against that system that so many others took for granted, and it was insight, rather than sight, that empowered them to speak. And almost without exception, the people whose insight allowed them to see evil where others saw business as usual did not take credit for that vision; they attributed it, rather, as Newton attributed his new sight, to God’s grace: “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.”

Our scripture readings this morning are all about the grace of God that gives us the insight, if we will trust in the power of God’s Holy Spirit, to see not only the hurt and brokenness of the world, but also – and much more important – to see how that hurt may be healed and that brokenness restored.

In our first reading, the prophet Samuel secretly anoints David to be Israel’s second king. The anointing is secret because it is treasonous and punishable by death. Israel already had a king, Saul, also anointed by Samuel, but because Saul had refused to obey the rules of holy war when he defeated the Amalekites, his kingdom was going to be taken from him by God. If you read Saul’s story in the first book of Samuel, you’ll see that his disobedience was one of the many signs of what appears to be madness engulfing Israel’s first king – we would call it paranoia or a persecution complex today – and as the kingdom of Israel sinks deeper and deeper into infighting and chaos, Samuel is commanded by God to go to an obscure village called Bethlehem and find from among the sons of a villager named Jesse Israel’s next king.

To you and me, this episode appears simply to be part of the succession narrative – how early Israel got from one king to the next – but to the people who wrote and preserved the Bible, this was a sacred story of salvation. God’s chosen people – called through Abraham from idol worship in Mesopotamia, delivered at great price from Egyptian slavery through Moses, led by charismatic, spirit-filled judges like Samuel for their first two or three hundred years in the promised land – God’s people were on the brink of extinction because of a lack of unifying vision.

“In those days,” Judges 17:6 says, “there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” It was Israel’s wild, wild west period, when people took the law into their own hands and went their own way with what they believed to be God’s blessing and the spiritual inheritance of their ancestors. The twelve tribes of Israel were literally falling apart, and seeing their decline, they demand that the judge Samuel anoint for them a king like their neighbors had. Samuel warned the people that hereditary kingship was a bad idea: “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots;¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers.¹⁵ He will

take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle*and donkeys, and put them to his work.¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.'

You and I have forgotten, in our age of titular monarchs as benign and grandmotherly as the Queen of England, that kings were despots and dictators, and by demanding a king to replace the ad hoc system of judges, the Israelites were surrendering their freedom for the sake of security. That security, Samuel warned them, would come at a great price, as every generation which has made that Faustian bargain has learned, to its sorrow and regret.

And so, with Samuel's help, Israel found for itself a king, Saul; and now, in this morning's reading, Israel finds itself with a king going mad and its own future as a people in limbo. And so Samuel literally saves the day for Israel by anointing another king, Israel's greatest king, David, secretly.

And David was not the obvious choice. He was not Jesse's oldest son, the one who, in that ancient patriarchal society, had first dibs on everything. He was good-looking – and those looks would prove problematic for him his entire life – but as our text says, "the Lord looks on the heart."

Now, if this were a Bible study and not a sermon, I'd have you all open your Bibles to the various passages in David's story where his heart is going to prove as problematic as his looks, which makes this statement a kind of foreshadowing. But for our purposes this morning, suffice it to say that the point the author of 1 Samuel is trying to make is that God operates through God's people not on sight but rather on insight. It is discernment – that combination of heart and head – rather than custom or even consensus that allows us to penetrate beneath the obvious to the real.

And that's what our second story, from the Gospel of John, is about. In fact, one could say that that's what the entire Gospel of John is about – discerning the real from the obvious. John is telling us in this story of a blind man seeing that we use sight for the obvious and insight for the real.

It was, for example, obvious to most good Jews of Jesus's day that misfortunes such as blindness were the result of sin. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind." That's the question that Jesus' disciples ask to get the ball of this story rolling. It's not phrased as a hypothetical – "Rabbi, did someone sin that this man was born blind?" – but rather as a given that someone did sin and the only question is who. The disciples are voicing the received theological wisdom of the day that understood misfortune as punishment for sin. And that received wisdom had a long and distinguished pedigree.

"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God," Moses tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy 30, "you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you."

"But if your heart turns away," Moses continues, "I declare to you today that you shall perish."

That was good Deuteronomistic theology: if you obey you get blessed, if you disobey you get whacked. And the way God whacked you was by afflicting you with sickness or other misfortunes if you were an individual or by delivering you into the hands of your enemies if you were a country.

And that pattern was what most people saw in their own lives and in their history as a nation. And that theology is alive and well to this very day. There is a widespread movement in Christian theology today that says that God wills your prosperity, and all you have to do to secure that prosperity is have faith, think positively, and support certain religious movements. We know it as the prosperity gospel, and some of its best known proponents are Oral Roberts, Joel Osteen, and Creflo Dollar.

People sometimes ask me today, "What did I do to deserve this?" and the answer's always the same: nothing. It's the answer Jesus would have given the blind man had he, rather than the disciples, asked the question. Jesus unhooks the linkage between misfortune and wrongdoing, saying that misfortune is not punishment for sin; it's an occasion for grace. And that's what we see when Jesus

heals the man – God’s grace at work in the world.

And that’s why the blind man, when he’s interrogated by the religious know-it-all’s, dodges right past all their nit-picking and trap-laying and says simply, as John Newton would put it centuries later, “was blind, but now I see.”

John’s gospel is filled with irony, and the irony in this story is that it is a blind man who sees who Jesus really is. It is a blind man who gets it. It is a man who has spent his entire life without the vision that you and I take for granted who has insight. It is a man restored to wholeness through God’s grace who sees with his heart as well as with his mind. That’s insight. That’s getting it. That’s grasping what is really real. That’s seeing as God sees – what Paul Tillich called the dimension of depth – and not simply the glittering appearances that generate tweets and hashtags.

“A moment’s insight,” Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “is sometimes worth a life’s experience.” Or, as you’ve heard me say somewhat more prosaically, some people have seventy years worth of experience and some people have one year of experience repeated seventy times. What such people lack is not sight but insight.

Is insight what you lack? Do you have the sight that can read the price of everything and the value of nothing? Are you the sort of person that T. S. Eliot described who has the experience and misses the meaning? Does the Bible remain a closed book to you, or have you disciplined yourself, as the Holy Spirit told St. Augustine, to take it up and read?

The Christian faith, my dear friends, is for people not with sight but with insight. At face value, Christianity is simply for people who want to be nice, and the world has lots of nice people in it. For people, however, who want to change the world, you need more than sight – you need insight. You need that grace that allows you to pause, to reflect, to filter, to wait patiently, to weigh, to consider possibilities, to think imaginatively, to love, and to trust. You need the peace that passes understanding. You need insight.

And if Jesus can give that to a man blind from birth, is there any reason Jesus can’t give it to you?