

27 February 2005
Lent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus”

Text: John 9:1-41

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The thing about eyes . . . they're only as good as the things they see. What good are working eyes if all they see is what we *shouldn't* see? Maybe in that case it would be *better* to be blind! Isn't that what Jesus said, after all? ***“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.”*** (Mt 5:29) . . . Our eyes bring into our minds both good and bad, everyday. Powerful images. Parents (hopefully!) screen what their children get to watch on TV. Many people do not want to watch the evening news anymore. There are “gaper delays” on the highway because people can't help looking at gory accidents. Why is pornography the biggest and most lucrative business on the internet? . . . What are we using our eyes for? What are we seeing? What are we looking at? We with eyes that work. Is it the beauty of holiness or the ugliness of sin?

This third Sunday in Lent is called “oculi” – the Latin word for eyes, and the Holy Gospel we heard today was about Jesus healing a man born blind. But that reading is about much more than a healing miracle. In fact, the healing was done by verse 7 – the other 34 verses teach us something else about our eyes and our sight, and what we are seeing. And they are important words for us to hear.

The story begins with Jesus' disciples asking Him a question, after they encounter the blind man: ***“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”*** And we often think that way, don't we? Connecting specific sins to specific punishments, and thinking that God plays “tit for tat,” just as we do in our lives. So when something goes wrong – well, I guess I shouldn't have skipped church last Sunday! I guess I shouldn't have yelled at my spouse, or cheated on that test – God is getting me back. But while our actions and sins do have consequences, that's not how God works. If it was, then according to Psalm 130, none of us would be here! We sin far too often. . . . And so Jesus' answer to His disciples' question shows us something different – that He *sees* things quite differently than they do! For rather than looking at sin, as the disciples were doing, Jesus looks to God. Jesus sees this blindness as an **opportunity**, ***“that the works***

of God might be displayed in him.”

Who of us sees in this way? Looking at hardship, affliction, suffering, pain, loss, fear, handicap, struggle, confusion, and even death, as an *opportunity* for God. For His glory to be displayed. For Him to work His grace and mercy. For Him to be strong when we are weak. The problem is, with our eyes turned in on ourselves, we cannot see this. The problems seem too big, the troubles overwhelming, the obstacles insurmountable. We cannot even *imagine* there being opportunities for God in these things! . . . But Jesus’ eyes do not see as we see. The eyes of faith are not turned inward, but outward. ***“My eyes are ever on the Lord”*** we sang in the Introit, and with eyes on Him, we have hope and confidence.

That was the difference between Jesus and the disciples, and it was the difference in the rest of the story also, between the man born blind but now seeing, and Pharisees and others who opposed him. Those who opposed the man and Jesus could not stop looking at the sin, and the Law, and their Sabbath regulations, and the trouble Jesus was causing, and kept questioning and questioning, over and over. But the man who could now see was not curved in on himself or the things of this world, but His eyes were on the Lord, on Jesus, His healer and Saviour. His eyes were fixed on Jesus, and so he could see. He could see what the others could not see. His physical eyes were not the only sight given him that day, but also spiritual eyes; the eyes of faith. To see and confess the Son of God.

So what are we looking at with our eyes? Who are we looking at?

This all came home for me this past week, with my mother’s funeral on Tuesday. Just before the funeral service was about to start, we had that one last time to say our good-byes before the casket was closed. That was a hard time, because what were we looking at? At death, at the wages of sin, at separation. And so there were tears and sadness. . . . But then the service began. The casket was closed and our eyes were now directed not to sin and death, but to the cross, to our Saviour and His resurrection. Our ears heard the Word of God. The Holy Spirit did His work. Faith was lifted and strengthened. With eyes on the Lord, tears and sadness were replaced with joy and confidence.

But note carefully *why* that happened! It was not because of what *we* did. It was not because I am a pastor, or because I had such a strong faith. I was a son and sad like everyone else. No, it was for the very same reason as the man born blind: because ***“Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and . . . [He] found him.”*** Our eyes can only turn to Him because His eyes first turned to us. Because He came – and comes! – to seek us out. When Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden, it was God who came seeking them. And so it always is. . . . Oh, sometimes it may seem as if God does not see; that

His eyes are closed to our troubles and problems. But the Psalms tell us that **“God’s eyelids only test the children of men.”** (Ps 11) He sees, and He seeks. He sees, and He helps. He sees, and He comes. He comes in flesh and blood, born in a manger, to be with us, and to save us. To offer that flesh and blood as the sacrifice on the cross for our sin that caused us separation from God, that now **“nothing might separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”** (Rom 8:39) And His resurrection is the proof that this is now the truth. That we again have peace with God in the forgiveness of our sins, and that our troubles and trials in this life are not punishments from Him, but opportunities. To teach us His Word and faithfulness; to lead us to Him and His cross and forgiveness; to strengthen us when it seems as if His eyes are closed; and to work His grace and mercy in us as His children. That in the end we confess as did the man born blind, but now seeing: that Jesus is the Son of God. **“Lord, I believe!”**

The sin and trouble in this world sometimes blind us. We cannot see as we should, and we find ourselves looking at the wrong things. It happens even to the best and strongest of Christians. And so Jesus’ words at the end of the Gospel should be a comfort to us, for they tell us that He will always work in us what is needed, to keep us in Him and direct us to His cross. As hard as it may be for us. And so when Jesus said, **“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind”** it is because only those who are convicted of their own weakness can be strong in Him; only those convicted of their blindness may learn to see; only those convicted of their sin and humbled in repentance and faith will be forgiven. And this is why Jesus came: to forgive. And so He will give and take and use every opportunity to work in us what is most necessary. For as the blind man washed in the water at the Word and command of Christ and was given the gift of sight, so too we have been washed in the water of Baptism at the Word and command of Christ and have been given the gift of faith. And so we can see our Saviour, born for us, crucified for us, risen for us, ascended for us, and on this altar for us in His body and blood. Here for us, seeking us out, and drawing us to Himself. That we fix our eyes on Him and not on ourselves. That we fix our eyes on Him and not on our problems. That we fix our eyes on Him, for He has shown mercy to us.

So what are you looking at? The sin and death and trouble in this world? The struggles and suffering and pain? The unfairness and injustice? It can seem so overwhelming, can’t it? For those things are here, and they are real, and things *don’t* always work out as we want them to. Just ask the man who regained his sight – for that gift he was kicked out of the synagogue and made some very powerful enemies! But those things of this world cannot defeat us – not even death. And so, as we heard in the Gradual, from the book of Hebrews, **“Oh, come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat**

down at the right hand of the throne of God.” And seeing Him we see rightly. Seeing Him we are not blind. Seeing Him, we know that whatever happens to us in this life is but an opportunity for Him to work His grace and mercy and work good in our lives. Until the day we are led to Heaven, where – like my Mom and Sophie – we will see Him face to face. *(Sophie Dow was one of our shut-ins who died the morning of this sermon.)*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.