

Title: Light of the World
Text: John 9:1-7
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron
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Growing up, the year was split into two halves – football season and cricket season. They were the only seasons that mattered to me. However, the life of the town I lived in was governed by the agricultural seasons. In early autumn we waited for inch or two of rain that signified the break in the season when soil could be ploughed and crops sown. Footy training was always around dusk. Our coach, a farmer, would come from his tractor to run us through our drills and then head straight back to the paddocks to continue seeding. Winter was all about getting enough rain and spring about not getting too much. And summer was harvest season.

Our country high school would close a week earlier than city schools for ‘harvest leave’ so that farmer’s kids could all stay home to help bring in the crops or cart the hay. Ever us town kids would find ourselves carting hay or working the sharing sheds. Our lives were inextricably linked to the rhythms of the nature and the land. The rhythm was constant and predictable from one year to the next.

It was the same in ancient Israel. Life was tied to the rhythms of the ploughing and planting, reaping and harvesting. Three major festivals were held to mark the change of seasons as well as God’s activity in their history. The final and perhaps greatest of all festivals was Succoth, or the Feast of Tabernacles. Tabernacles celebrated the harvest of grapes and olives and was held in September – October.

Tabernacles was also called the Festival of Booths as people would live in small, temporary huts for seven days to remind them of God’s provision for Israel in the wilderness. Over the week-long festivities people would rest from their work, rejoice and eat and drink. It was one, big, joy-filled party. Every day in the Jerusalem temple people would be lead in prayers for rain for the next season and would dance every night to flute music.

A feature of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jesus’ day was the lighting of four enormous candles in the temple courtyard. Every night four young men would climb ladders up to the top of these giant candles, fuel them with forty litres of oil each and light the wicks made out of priests underwear. Because of its high vantage point, these candles in the temple courtyard cast light far and wide. The Mishnah, ancient Jewish writings from that day, says this:

There was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light.
(Mishnah)

This was a festival of tabernacles, a festival of booths and a festival of lights.

At the time of Jesus the feast was strongly associated with the Jewish hope for a Messiah – a liberator. Centuries before the prophet Isaiah said of the Messiah to come:

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you might bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.
(Isaiah 49:6b)

Jesus and his disciples find themselves in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Festival of Light.

At this time pregnant with hope and anticipation for the long awaited Messiah, Jesus addresses the crowd in the temple courts:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.
(John 8:12)

The meaning of Jesus' word was obvious. Their effect was immediate. Jesus was claiming to be the long awaited Light – the Messiah. He was saying that he was the true light that surpasses any light in the temple. And the religious leaders saw this as outright blasphemy. A vigorous debate ensues. Jesus does not back down and this infuriates the Jewish leaders. It all comes to a head with Jesus making an even clearer claim to divinity:

“I tell you the truth”, Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.
(John 8:58-59)

Let's hear what happens next as Stuart reads for us:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.
(John 9:1-7)

In this story the religious leaders are effectively asking Jesus if the man born blind had suffered bad karma; surely either his sin or the sin of his parents must have caused his lack of sight?

Jesus responds with words that trouble us if we are honest:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”
(John 9:3)

Read at face value it seems that God made the man blind since birth so that Jesus could heal him years later. Not sure about you, but that makes God seem both cruel and manipulative. This is where translating the original Greek of the Scriptures into our English can lead to unintended consequences. Evangelical Bible scholars Gary Burge and Colin Kruse both argue persuasively for a different translation:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned”, said Jesus, “But so that the work of God might be displayed in his life, we must do the work of him who sent me while it is still day.”

The emphasis of God's action shifts from the man's blindness to Jesus' work:

God had not made the man blind in order to show his glory; rather God has sent Jesus to do his works of healings in order to show his glory.
(Gary M Burge)

Jesus heals the man with some spit and dirt. In healing a blind man Jesus not only performs a miracle, he awakens expectations that he may be the long-awaited Messiah. The Old Testament prophesied again and again that the Messiah would restore sight to the blind. The Light of the Messiah brings sight to the blind.

Out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.
(Isaiah 29:18b)

The light of Jesus has restored the man's physical as well as spiritual sight. Jesus, the Light of the World, the Messiah, has come to overcome darkness and restore the sight of the blind.

The results of the healing are dramatic and immediate. The Pharisees are enraged, not that the man was healed, but that Jesus healed him on the Sabbath – the day of rest. An epic debate eventuates between Jesus and the religious leaders that culminates with Jesus pointing out that although they can see with their eyes their hearts are blind to spiritual truth.

They see and yet they do not perceive. The Son of God, the Messiah is in their midst, yet they are blind to the fact. They suffer the Spiritual Blindness.

Jesus said: 'I am the light of the word. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness – never walk blind – but will have the light of life.'

Five hundred years before Jesus the Greek Philosopher Plato developed a very famous allegory called The Cave. Rather than try to explain it to you, watch this:

Play 'The Cave' video

'To the prisoners, the world outside the cave does not exist. But this does not make the world outside of the cave any less real.'

To the religious leaders that Jesus battled with, the world outside their tightly controlled and narrowly defined belief structures did not, could not exist. They could see with their eyes, but not with their heart. They were spiritually blind.

It is possible for us to go through life believing that we can see all there is to life and know all there is and in reality be blind to the deeper and eternal truths that matter. It is possible for us to live in our own dark caves where we only see distorted shadows of the truth than the truth itself. It is possible for us to see with our eyes but be profoundly blind spiritually.

We can be Blind to the God of Wonders

The story is told of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson on a camping trip. They pitch their tent under the stars and go to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, Holmes wakes Watson. "Watson, look up at the stars and tell me what you deduce." Watson says, "I see millions of stars, and if even a few of those have planets, it's quite likely there are some planets like Earth, and if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life." Holmes replies, "Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent!"

We can miss for the woods for the trees. We can see the shadows, but be blind to deeper truth.

We can be blind to the wonder of our world that points to the deep truth of the Creator that lies behind it.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.
(Romans 1:20)

If we have eyes to see, overwhelming evidence for a God of Wonders is all around us. From the smallest hairs on a caterpillar to the biggest of black holes; from the roar of the ocean to the beauty of cloud formations we see God's fingerprints in all that he has made.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
(Psalm 19:1)

Even in the face of such incontrovertible evidence for the hand of a Creator it is possible to be blind.

We can be Blind to our own Sin

In Lord of the Rings, Gollum is a hobbit whose mind and body has been twisted by his pursuit of the mysterious Ring. He lives inside Misty Mountains deep inside a cave. He becomes so used to the darkness he can barely stand the sunlight on the surface.

The Apostle Paul speaks of the darkness of a world without God:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened...they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.
(Romans 1:21, 25a)

Even though the evidence for a God of Wonders was all around them, they did not acknowledge him and settled for lies and half-truths. This is our story as well.

This is the truth, God is holy; we are not – God is perfect; we are not – God is without sin; we are not.

It is easy of us to live in the delusion that we are better than we think.

There is a psychological condition called Illusory Superiority. Illusory Superiority is a bias that causes people to overestimate their positive qualities and abilities and to underestimate their negative qualities, relative to others.

An example of Illusory Superiority is the Australian Idol auditions. There are some contestants who truly believe they can sing when the evidence is incontrovertible; they can't.

A survey was conducted of American teenagers about their driving skills. 93% of those surveyed though they had above average driving ability. Do any of you know someone who thinks they are a far better driver than they are in reality? (Now is not the time to be looking at your husband or wife)

There is more. Surveys have shown that people with low IQ's consistently overestimate their intelligence. As a matter of interest, men tend to overestimate how smart they are.

Our world is suffering an epidemic of Illusory Spiritual Superiority. We overestimate our goodness and underestimate our sinfulness.

'On balance I'm pretty good. I'm not an axe murderer, I'm kind to children and I give money to disaster relief.'

It's easy for us to believe that the lie that we don't need God, that freedom is the ability to live as we please. But true freedom is not found in autonomy, but living life as God ordered it to be lived. In exercising our freedom to choose we can easily become enslaved by our bad choices and their consequences – what the bible calls sin. We become blind in the darkness of our own sin.

They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.
(1 John 2:11)

An 18th century German poet put it this way:

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None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.
(Johann Wolfgang von Goeth)

All around us are people blinded spiritually by sin and they don't even know it.

There is a strange comfort in living with our spiritual blindness, of ignoring our sin. Like Gollum, it is in some ways easier for us to live in our caves where the sun cannot shine. The Light that has come into the world illuminates the darkness – the darkness cannot put it out – including the darkness of our own hearts.

If there is a terror about darkness because we cannot see, there is also a terror about light because we can see. There is a terror about light because much of what we see in the light about ourselves and our world we would rather not see, would rather not have been seen.
(Frederick Buechner)

Only the Light of God can overcome the darkness that is in every human heart.

We can Blind to God's Amazing Grace

The truth of the gospel is this; we are far more sinful than we thought. Evil is a dividing line that separates every human heart. This is the bad news.

But there is a deeper truth that is good news; if we are more sinful than we thought we are even more loved than we imagined possible.

At the beginning of his gospel, John testifies to Jesus:

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.
(John 1:9, 12)

In Jesus, the Light of God kicks the darkness of our world until it bleeds daylight.

No longer do we need to live life blinded by sin.

No longer do we need to live imprisoned in the caves of our failure, shame and regret.

By believing in Jesus and placing our faith in him we are liberated from the chains that bind us and are free to walk in the light of his love.

Tragically, it is possible for us to hear this truth, but not receive it. Our eyes can be blind to the grace of God that is always near to us. This was the story of the Pharisees. For three years the Messiah they longed for, prayed for, cried out for walked amongst them – teaching and healing and loving. And yet they did not recognise Grace even when it was under their nose. How incredibly frustrating that must have been for Jesus!

Here is the really disconcerting thing for me. The Pharisees were good people, people who took God seriously, who read their bibles, went to church, prayed and fasted – and yet these good, religious people were blind to grace.

Churches are full of good, religious people. I wonder if it is possible, just possible, that we too can be blind to the grace of God that is always reaching for us and which is necessary for life?

In spring 1996 eight climbers died in one day as they attempted to climb to the summit of Mount Everest when a deadly storm closed in. One of those climbers, Jon Krakauer, wrote a book of the tragedy called Into Thin Air.

One of the climbers who died was Andy Harris, who was an expedition leader. Harris had stayed at the peak past the safe deadline to return, and on his descent, he became in dire need of oxygen. He radioed his predicament to the base camp, telling them. He was frustrated that he had come upon a cache of small oxygen canisters left by other climbers, all empty.

Tragically, those who had passed by the canisters on their own return from the summit knew they were not empty, but full. They pleaded and pleaded with Harris over the radio to make use of them, to try them, it was to no avail. His brain was so starved of oxygen that his mind was completely muddled, so much that he was convinced the canisters were empty.

The problem was that the lack of what he needed so disoriented his mind that even though he was surrounded by a restoring supply he continued to complain of its absence. The very thing right by his hand was absent in his brain and ravaged his capacity to recognize what he was clutching in his grasp. He was blind to what could save him.

Imagine how frustrating it must have been for Andy's friends at base camp. They knew that what he needed for survival was in his hands if only they could convince him.

I am privileged beyond measure to be one of your pastors. I pinch myself that I get to do this. Along with all the joys I experience as a pastor, there are also some frustrations. The biggest frustration is this; seeing people who are so close to receiving and experiencing the grace of God, and yet who do not. Seriously, sometimes I wish I could shake some of you and say; 'Don't you know what you have in your hand? Drink in God's love! Breathe in God's grace! Allow the light of his love to pierce your darkness!'

And so I end with a life-defining question is this; are your eyes open to Grace, or are they blind to it?

Centuries ago, Saint Augustine said this:

It is of no advantage to be near the light if the eyes are closed.
(Saint Augustine)

We are sitting in church. Two or three are gathered here in the name of Jesus. Jesus is present and with us by his Spirit. God's light is near. Are our eyes open to see it? Or are we content to sit in our spiritual blindness.

Like the Pharisees we can pray, we can sing, we can read the bible, we can come to church each week and still not have our eyes opened wide to grace.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like.
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see!

Grace is everywhere. God is always reaching out to rescue and save his people. In Jesus Christ light has come into our world that rescues us from the darkness of our own sin. Paul says this is Colossians:

(God) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
(Colossians 1:13-14)

Here is truth: we are more sinful than we thought, but more loved that we imagined possible.