

His eyes were opened.

*And look what happened!*

He got cast out — excommunicated — cut off — rejected.

And he asked for nothing!

All that happened was that Jesus saw him and put mud on his blind eyes.

Mud, made from dust, —

from the dust out of which God had created human beings.

Was this, then, an act of *re-creation*?

And then obeying Jesus' command

this man plunged into that pool of Siloam — which means *Sent*.

*Sent*, of course, is *who Jesus is*.

He is the One Sent from God.

He is the One Sent into the world

not to condemn the world

but Sent so that the world might be saved.<sup>2</sup>

So that pool *Sent*, — — was it an actual pool?

Or was it the very life of the Sent One — Jesus?

The man heeded Jesus' voice — Jesus whom he could not see, —

and he plunged in.

And, behold! His eyes were opened.

The Light of the World gave him light — vision —

a way to see by means of the light and life of Jesus.

Yet, after much controversy rather than any joy, —

twenty-six long verses later — a long journey in this narrative —

this man is cast out by the very ones

who were *most sure about God and God's way* in the world.

That is what happened when this man's eyes were opened.

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*Disfellowshipped.*

You will not find that word in the dictionary.

But that is what those who were sure

they knew all about God and God's way in the world called it.

And that is what happened to a church in Memphis about twenty years ago.

That church's eyes had been opened, —

opened to see things in the light of Jesus in whom Paul says, —

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, . . . slave or free, . . .

male and female, . . .”<sup>3</sup>

It was a whole new way of seeing.

And that congregation used those new, opened eyes

as they searched for a new pastor.

They expanded their search to include anyone, male or female, —

who might be called and suited

to share God's good news among them.

They called Nancy.

<sup>1</sup> Great appreciation is given to the Rev. Nancy Sehested who graciously shared her story, the core of this sermon

<sup>2</sup> John 3:17

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:28

Nancy's dad and granddad had been Southern Baptist preachers.  
She had never imagined being one.  
But *she had been plunged into the Sent One* — into the life of Jesus.  
And her eyes had been opened — —  
opened to the reality  
that she was one called to live out Jesus' Great Commission —  
to make disciples of all people, to baptize them, to teach them.<sup>4</sup>  
Nancy had never seen a woman preacher.  
She had seen women missionaries who preached terrific sermons.  
But they were not ordained ministers.  
And in the Baptist church, —  
those sermons delivered by those women weren't called sermons.  
They were called *devotions*.  
Nevertheless, Nancy lived with her eyes opened.  
She walked in the light of the calling she experienced from Jesus.  
And that calling led her to seminary.

Now this congregation that called Nancy as its pastor  
was a congregation of about 300 members.  
It lived in the shadow of a 22,000 member Baptist congregation  
whose pastor, Adrian Rogers, happened to be  
the current president of the Southern Baptist Convention.  
And Mr. Rogers was not thrilled, to say the least, —  
that a woman had been called to be a Baptist pastor in his neighborhood!  
So, at his instigation, —  
at the next meeting of the Shelby County Baptist Association, —  
after opening worship in which the crowd of hundreds  
sang with gusto, "*We are one in the Spirit, —*  
*we are One in the Lord . . . .*" —  
as the business session began, —  
a pastor brought a motion. —  
*"to disfellowship from the association*  
the church that had called Nancy —  
along with Nancy herself, —  
because allowing a woman to be  
an ordained minister of the gospel  
*violated the Word of God.*  
And fellow Baptists could not stay in fellowship  
with any church that violated the Word of God."

The debate ensued.  
Two minutes time was allowed for each speaker  
who gathered before microphones placed in the aisles.  
Nancy came to a mike to speak.  
And just as she did, someone bolted to another mike and shouted, —  
*"Mr. Moderator! I move the previous question."*  
The Moderator immediately called the question  
and the body voted to end debate.  
Nancy blurted out into her mike, —  
*"Mr. Moderator, since I am the center of this controversy, —*

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:19-20

*I ask to be allowed to speak.”*  
 “*Too late! Too late! Too late!*” came the shouts from the crowd, —  
 until Mr. Rogers rose and said, —  
 “*Mr. Moderator, —*  
*Christian courtesy calls us to allow this little lady to speak.”*  
 So faced with that utterance by the president of the Southern Baptist Convention  
 who had orchestrated this motion, —  
 the Moderator and the body relented.  
 And Nancy, who had been wondering  
 what would happen to her and her modest congregation in all of this, —  
 with only her Bible in hand and not knowing what she would say, —  
 was *emboldened to walk straight up to the pulpit.*  
 As she approached, the Moderator stepped aside.  
 And she began, —  
 “You have asked by what authority I speak.  
 That is a great question. It was asked of Jesus over and over again.  
 I tell you, —  
 I am not here by the authority of the church that reared me;  
 I am not here by the authority of the church that baptized me;  
 I am not here by the authority of the seminary that educated me.  
 I am here *by the authority of Jesus Christ*  
 ‘who did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped  
 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . .’<sup>5</sup>  
 What I tell you is that *I found a towel with my name on it.*  
 That is why I am here.  
 For “the wind of the Spirit blows where it wills  
 and we hear the sound of it, —  
 but we do not know where it comes from or where it will go.”<sup>6</sup>  
 Like Peter and John said when they were dragged before the church council  
 and ordered not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, I say, —  
 ‘whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you  
 rather than to God, you must judge, —  
 for I cannot keep from speaking about what I have seen and heard.’<sup>7</sup>  
 Indeed, Jesus, before his hometown congregation  
 talked about how persons  
 his congregation were sure were not included  
 in God’s community  
 were ones God welcomed.  
 And because he did so, that congregation was filled with such hate  
 that they tried to hurl Jesus off a cliff.  
 There to that congregation Jesus said, —  
 ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me  
 to bring good news to the poor . . .  
 to proclaim release to the captives, . . .  
 recovery of sight to the blind,  
 to let the oppressed go free,  
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:6-7

<sup>6</sup> John 3:8

<sup>7</sup> Acts 4:19-20

<sup>8</sup> Luke 4:18-19

Then, shutting her Bible and looking straight into the eyes  
of those putting her and her congregation on trial, —  
Nancy concluded, saying, —  
“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”  
And she went back to her seat.

There was no sound.

It was as if the air had been sucked out of the room.  
The Moderator rose and put the question, calling for a standing vote.  
And three quarters of the assembly stood  
voting to disfellowship the congregation and Nancy.  
*They were sure they knew God and God's will.*  
Yes, there was some crying. But there was also much clapping.

That is what happened when that congregation's and Nancy's eyes  
had been opened.  
*They were cast out.*

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Frankly, this story from John's Gospel is *about more* than this one man born blind.

It is *about the church*, —  
the little Johannine church for whom John wrote this gospel.  
That church existed sometime after 70 C.E., —  
after Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed by Rome.  
And it was then and only then that the leaders of the synagogue, —  
of which the little church had always considered itself to be a part, —  
*passed a rule* declaring that anyone who dared to confess  
that Jesus was Messiah, that Jesus was one Sent from God, —  
would *be cast out* — excommunicated.

Keeping all the law of Moses — of which Sabbath-keeping was a prime test —  
was the measure of who was in and who was out.

And the leaders of the synagogue, *they knew*.

They knew all about God, and all about how God wanted the law to be kept.  
No one who didn't keep the Sabbath  
like they were sure God meant the Sabbath to be kept  
had to be cast out.

And since Jesus had not kept the Sabbath  
the way they were sure it was to be kept, —  
*he could not be from God.*

So therefore, no one confessing him could be faithful to God.

Thus, the little Johannine church had been cast out.

Being cast out meant they were *ostracized*.

It likely meant they had *lost jobs*, perhaps even *homes*.

That congregation was suffering.

And they must have wondered if they had been abandoned by Jesus.

“*Do not be surprised*,” John is telling this little church.

“Do not be surprised that you have been cast out.

That is just what happens when Jesus opens your eyes  
and you *walk in his light* and you *respond to his voice*.”

And that is a word that John is still sharing with us, — us, the church in this day, —  
who have been *re-created* as Christ's body in this world, —  
us, who have plunged into the Sent One, —  
us, who are seeking to live in the light of Jesus' calling.

“Do not be surprised.

You will be confronted by those who are *sure they know* —  
know all about God, know all about God's way and will, —  
and thus are sure you, in being faithful to your calling, —  
just as Nancy was faithful to hers, —  
*cannot be acceptable.*”

“Do not be surprised.

That is what happens when your eyes are opened.”

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But I wonder if there is another word for us here, —  
for us who are religious, for us who are *pretty sure we know about God*.  
Those Pharisees, —  
because they were so sure they knew all about God and God's way, —  
they *missed the Light of the World*.

They missed what God was doing in the world.

Right now in our own Presbyterian Church

many are getting caught up in the tendency to claim  
that we, in this church, *know all about God*.

There is a tendency to claim that we know what is *essential*, —  
essential to say or to do to be acceptable among the faithful of God.

Every person ordained to office in our church is asked to affirm  
the *essential tenets* of faith and practice.

Yet up to this point, we as a church have been modest, —  
and have not attempted to name those essentials

like the Pharisees named Sabbath-keeping as an essential, —  
like that Shelby County Baptist Association named  
males-only-as-clergy as an essential, —

like, in the past, we named  
no-divorced-persons-being-allowed-to-hold-office as an essential.

But now there is *pressure* for our church to name those essentials.

And many of us, out of a surety that *we indeed know how it is with God*  
*want* to name those essentials.

We want to do this in order to make sure others who do not abide  
by the way we are sure God means for us to live and believe  
are cast out as church leaders, if not cast out of the church itself.

“*Watch out!*” I think John is telling us.

“Watch out, you who are sure you know — know all about God, —  
all about God's way and will.

By being so sure about what you know  
you may well be blind, —  
blind to the Light that has come into the world.”

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The man born blind found out what happens when his eyes were opened.  
The little Johannine church found out as well.  
Nancy and her congregation found out.

And as our eyes are opened and we live in the light of Jesus  
and respond to his voice alone, —  
we will find out.  
We, too, will be cast out, —  
cast out by those who know all about God.

But the story does not end there.  
After the man born blind had been cast out, —  
*Jesus searches for him and finds him.*  
Jesus finds this man and *invites him to fullness of life* —  
life trusting in the Son of Man.  
He invites him, as one scholar puts it, —  
“to *deepened insight, deepened faith . . . .*  
[And the man — and the Johannine church] by this  
were assured that even expulsion from the synagogue  
would mean, not catastrophe, but a *deepened encounter*  
with the One who had given them sight.”<sup>9</sup>

Nancy put it this way: —  
“We were disfellowshipped.  
But after the vote, after it was all over, —  
I had an unbelievable sense of being visited by the Holy Spirit.  
It was the most powerful experience of the Divine  
I have ever had.  
And that congregation — — we went on.  
For eight years as pastor and people together we thrived.  
We were not abandoned.  
You don’t know that will be the case in the middle of the trial.  
But when it is over, — reflecting on it, —  
that is what you discover is true.”

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When our eyes are opened  
that is how it is — and will be — for us.

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Pete Peery  
First Presbyterian Church — Asheville  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
2 March 2008

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<sup>9</sup> Gench, Frances Taylor *Encounters with Jesus*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007, p. 77