

## “Modern-Day Miracle”

John 9:1-12

*As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup>We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ <sup>6</sup>When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. <sup>8</sup>The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’*

*<sup>9</sup>Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ <sup>10</sup>But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ <sup>11</sup>He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ <sup>12</sup>They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

These verses are part of a larger story that takes up the entire chapter of John 9. This chapter tells the story traditionally known as “The Man Born Blind”. We only heard part of it this morning, but the entire story is rather long and very intricate. It tells, in detail, how the Pharisees didn’t believe in the facts of the healing. The Jewish leaders even went so far as to call the man’s parents as witnesses to prove that he was born blind and could now see. There was then a debate between all parties involved – the religious leaders, the man, the parents, even members of the community – about sin and its connection to disability, about true discipleship, about prayers to God...about miracles.

Each and every time I encounter this story in Scripture, I cannot help but think about a similar story. One which touches me quite closely – the story of my husband, David, who was born deaf. David was born in April of 1986. Thirty-two years ago, hearing tests were not commonplace for every baby born in the United States. So, David’s parents didn’t realize that he had hearing loss until he was around 9 months old. His mom noticed that the vacuum cleaner didn’t seem to bother him. They also noticed how he only seemed to respond to the deep timbre of his dad’s voice. When they finally convinced the doctor that they thought it was more than fluid build-up, David went through extensive testing and at 14 months old and was diagnosed with profound bi-lateral hearing loss. At 18 months old he was fitted for hearing aids and immediately started speech therapy 3-4 times a week which he continued until middle school. Without hearing aids and speech therapy, David would have never learned how to speak or converse with his voice or to have any hope of participating vocal conversation. From the very beginning, David’s parents made the choice to mainstream him and not to use sign-language to communicate as a family. David did well all through school, although his hearing loss was degenerative and seemed to get a little worse every year. Sure, there were times that were so frustrating that they led everyone in his family to tears and angry prayers to

God. There was also the one time a high school classmate was convinced that David could be healed through prayer and the laying of hands the use of holy oil. Needless to say, David tried it and wasn't healed.

By the time he went off to Clemson University, he had almost no hearing in his left ear and minimal hearing remained in his right ear. Even still, David thrived in college and in his classes, this time through the help of university-employed captionists who accompanied him to classes

and captioned lectures via a computer connected to his laptop. David and I became friends during our freshman year at Clemson and that spring we joined with a bunch of friends to attend a rock concert at Littlejohn Coliseum. It was at that concert that David lost his hearing completely. The sound reverberations of the concert combined with the amplification of his hearing aid severely damaged what hearing capacity he had left. David went through the last few weeks of freshman year without being able to hear a thing. He couldn't hear his roommate come in the door. He couldn't talk on the phone. He couldn't hear his professors teaching or giving instructions. He had to rely on captions and reading lips.

Because of all this, he made a drastic decision over spring break.

He and his parents visited the Medical University of South Carolina and made plans for David to receive a cochlear implant on his left ear during the upcoming summer. This was a big deal. A cochlear implant is very different from a hearing aid. Hearing aids amplify sounds so they may be detected by damaged ears. Cochlear implants bypass damaged portions of the ear and directly stimulate the auditory nerve. Signals generated by the implant are sent by way of the auditory nerve to the brain, which recognizes the signals as sound. Hearing through a cochlear implant is different from normal hearing and takes time to learn or relearn. Cochlear implantation is a major surgery that occurs very close to the brain, that takes away any natural hearing that remains or the hope that natural hearing might return. The recovery is also long and hard,

meaning that David's entire freshman year summer would be devoted to this implant, recovery, and learning to hear all over again.

David underwent cochlear implant surgery in June of 2005. He did great with the surgery and worked very hard in therapy and with his friends and family, learning to hear in a totally different way. But it wasn't easy. He couldn't wear his cochlear for the first several weeks after surgery, so he was again left in silence. He also dealt with vertigo related to the surgery, so couldn't drive. He had to go visit his audiologist often to get the settings on his device right for him and his environment. That summer I happened to be working in David's hometown, at his home church as an intern. I didn't really know many people in the Charleston-area, so David was my only friend. My first weekend there was in May and he invited me on the boat with his family.

We went boating several times together before David had his surgery. After his surgery, I would go to visit him in the evenings and we would watch a movie (with captions) or go out to eat (I would drive), or practice conversing. Because we spent so much time together, my voice became one of the ones that David knew and understood the best. And it continues to be that way today. If you haven't already guessed, we fell in love that summer. It was completely unexpected and completely magical. When we went back to Clemson that fall, David began to experience things in life he had never experienced before due solely to the cochlear implant –

the sound of the bells from the Tillman Hall Bell Tower, the crunch of fall leaves, the high-pitched chirps of the birds all over campus, having extended and productive conversations over the phone. It was a modern-day miracle.

The story I just shared with you about David was quite intricate. There were a lot of details and characters. Thanks for sticking with me as I told it. It, like our scripture for today, told the story of a young man who didn't have the benefit of one of his senses. It, like our scripture for today, told the story of the community and family surrounding a person born with a disability. It, like our scripture for today, told the story of God's mighty power in the life of an individual. No, David's deafness wasn't completely taken away, he wasn't restored to perfect, completely natural hearing. There are days when the cochlear doesn't work perfectly. There are still days when it is incredibly frustrating to be deaf. There are days when the dog eats the new hearing aid sitting out on the bedside table or the neighbor kid squirts water on the implant at the baby pool, requiring it to dry out for days.

But God did heal David in a way and God continues to work in his life, like God does in the lives of all believers, to make him whole. I've often said that if everything in my life and in the world went to pot, to hell in a handbasket and I was left with hardly any faith in God at all...that this story, David's story, our story, would keep me believing.

David's story isn't the same as the story of the man born blind. Jesus didn't come to David in the flesh and heal him with saliva and mud. David is still profoundly deaf. But God worked a modern-day miracle through doctors and surgeons and audiologists and inventors and manufacturers and moms and dads. And for that I am thankful and because of that I share this story with others. But I must acknowledge from this pulpit, that there are people who pray for miracles, of the modern day and biblical variety, and do not receive them. And for that, there is no explanation. No comfort. No answer.

PAUSE

But, there is good news in this passage for all of us and it is this - **that God is intricately involved in our lives.** That God knows every letter of our story. That God cares and that we matter. That the sin and the broken places and imperfections of our lives do not define us and that God does not punish us by way of disease or disability. If this story of the man born blind tells us anything, it is that. That God cares and God knows and that we matter. Our daily lives, our daily challenges, our daily joys and trials matter to God and have a place in God's story and God's heart.

***So that God's mighty works might be displayed in him.*** This has to be the most profound verse in this entire long and intricate story from John 9. And it is the verse that has the most reverberation for our lives today. Our scripture says, "*He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him*", but we can fill in that blank with anything and follow it up with "*so God's mighty works might be revealed in him*", *in her, in you, in me.* As God's people, this is our purpose in life. To live into our circumstances, to keep our eyes open for God's power and activity around us, and to let ourselves be vessels of God's might. As my friend, Emma, said when reflecting on this passage, "How is God spitting in dirt and wiping my eyes in this world, in my life?" If we open ourselves up to that, who knows what can happen...

In February of 2017, David's college roommate and our dear friend, Kevin, and his wife gave birth to a beautiful baby girl named Lily. Lily, like nearly all babies born in the United States today, had a hearing test at just a few days old. She didn't pass it.

Kevin immediately contacted David with the news. He was scared and didn't know what would happen, but he expressed trust that Lily would be okay because his good buddy and college roommate David was born with hearing loss and he was okay. Lily is now a thriving 18-month-old with a cochlear implant – another modern-day miracle. God sure does work and move through us all in mysterious ways!

In the last few verses of John 9 there is a second encounter between the man who can now see and Jesus. Jesus asked the man if he believed. The man responded, "Lord, I believe." And then he worshipped Jesus.

May it be so for all of us as we live into our circumstances and wipe our eyes in this wide, wide world of God's. Amen.

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