WHAT’S YOUR STORY?
A SERMON ON JOHN 9:1-41

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

In John 8, we read about Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles, the most popular feast in all Israel. You will recall that at the feast, Jesus taught in the temple and he was confronted by Jewish teachers who wanted him to explain who he was. He escaped the legalistic trap of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus then makes the climactic statement, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” This statement was essentially a claim to divinity. John concludes by distinguishing between true children of the father and false children.

In John 9, Jesus tells a long and detailed story about one of those true children and how he came to be a disciple of Christ. We’ve seen that John’s gospel contains a number of personal one-on-one encounters with Jesus. Many of these encounters end with the person going off to tell others their story — think about the woman at the well or Philip. In those stories, however, the emphasis was on the response of the people they told. In today’s story, the emphasis is on what happens to the storyteller. As with any good story, this one begins with a prologue (9:1-5):

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 work of God might be displayed in his life.

As long as it is day, we must do the work 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."

Jesus and his disciples are walking along when they encounter a man born blind. Of course, they likely don’t know he’d been born blind just by looking at him, but John is writing this much later in life, giving us details that he picked up after this episode had occurred. The disciples ask a question that reflects a narrow theology of God’s justice. The assumption here is that if people suffer, then they must have done something bad to deserve it. In the case of a man born blind, it had to be something done in the womb or something done by the parents. But Jesus, as is his pattern all through the gospel, answers unexpectedly, and in the process, gives us the key to understanding the rest of the passage: "...This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." This statement does not mean that God inflicted blindness upon the man so
he could later heal him. Don’t get the idea from this verse that God goes around cursing people so that he can come later and show mercy, thus getting glory. God doesn’t work that way. Rather, God takes what has happened and turns it into good.

We see this is consistently the case in the Bible. In Genesis 50, Joseph had been sold into slavery, falsely accused by his master’s wife, thrown into prison, and left there to rot. From that position he rose to become Pharaoh’s right hand man. Later when he confronted his brothers who had sold him into slavery, he had the perspective to say in verse 20 “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” As it was with Joseph, so it is with this man born blind. God is powerful enough to take this present suffering that may last several years and use it as fodder to create greater blessing. It is only the perspective of many years that allows us to see the story of God working that out. That’s the interpretive key to this man’s life. I suggest to the lives of all believers: “This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

From this man’s story as presented here, we can derive several principles. First, everyone has their unique story of God working in their life. Second, at the present moment, we don’t know the complete story of what God is doing in our lives. Third, we will encounter opposition as we tell the story of what God is doing in our lives. Finally, we will grow spiritually as we tell the story of what God is doing in our lives.

First, see that everyone has a unique story. Look at verses 6-7.

Having said 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.

Relatively minor details — Jesus makes mud, spreads it on the man’s eyes, and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Scholars have debated for centuries what the significance of the saliva and the mud were. If Jesus could’ve completely healed this man with a word, why does he go through this elaborate process? The theories go back and forth, most centering on subtle statements that Jesus makes during this particular method. I suggest a much simpler solution — Jesus simply approaches each person in a slightly different way. Some he heals with a word, some with a touch, some have prayer beforehand, some do not. Some are healed from a distance, and some very close. Some in private, some in public. Some seek Jesus out, some are sought out by him. What we have here is another instance of a very unique and personal encounter with Jesus Christ.
However, there are examples of anointing people with spittle and mud in Jewish histories. One rabbinical source comments that the spit of a holy person, especially if taken during fasting, can cause healing and blessing on the recipient. So while this is a unique encounter, it was not completely alien. It was a subtle statement about the holy personage of Jesus, as well as a display of his power and mercy.

Just like this man, each of us who claims the name of Jesus Christ has a unique and personal story. It’s a story about how He got hold of you. That story is one of your greatest gifts. You may say “But I was raised in the church, I don’t have a dramatic testimony.” It doesn’t matter. “Nothing exciting has happened to me.” It doesn’t matter. Your story is the story of Jesus Christ working inside of you and that makes it important and exciting. You may say “But I don’t have much to offer.” or “I’m nobody special.” and I say Hogwash! Jesus thought you special enough to die for you and to dwell in you with the Holy Spirit. You cannot tell me that if the Creator of the universe values you so much that you have no significance or your story has no significance. Perhaps you’ve been told that you’re no good. Perhaps your employer thinks you don’t have potential. Perhaps your parents told you you’d never amount to much. Well hear me on this — your story is important. Christ approached this man in a unique way and he approaches you in a unique way, and only you can share with us what Jesus has done and is doing in you.

Not only does everyone have a unique story, but note that at the present moment, we don’t know the complete story of what God is doing in our lives. Look how the man tells his story the first time in verses 8-11.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was.
Others said, "No, he only looks like him."
But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

The only thing he knows about his healer is that he is this man they call Jesus — he doesn’t even know where Jesus is. At this point in the story, he knows something extraordinary has happened to him, but he’s not aware of the results of that event. Even when we get to the end of this story, we don’t know the whole story. How does the man’s faith work out in his life? What does he do? Who does he impact? His story was destined to go on.

Many of you know that Dr. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, is dying of an incurable lung disease. I was at a Promise Keeper’s rally in Orlando Florida about a year and a half ago when he came onstage and made the public announcement. Imagine an arena full of men stunned and grieving over the words that Dr. Bright himself said, that he was close to the end of his
time here on this earth. In this past year and a half, Dr. Bright has not written off his story — he continues the story through speaking and writing engagements and media interviews. As he was announcing his condition to the secular media, he was asked if he had any regrets. Dr Bright said he was in a win-win situation — if he lived, he’d be able to go on doing ministry. If he died, he’d be glorifying God face to face. Listen to that — a win-win situation. Live or die, he is able to go on glorifying God. Those are the words of someone who understands that his story is not complete. Those are the words of someone who understands that until the last moment of earthly life, God is working out a wonderful story in your life that only reaches its climax when we enter into glory. When I look out at many of you in this congregation, I know you know this. So many of you who are retired who are active in ministry. We have many elderly who are unable to be with us on Sunday, and yet they understand it because they are diligent in prayer for this congregation. Where you are right now, you don’t know the complete story, but God is doing something wonderful, and on the other side of eternity, we’ll look back and say “Ahah, that’s what He was up to.”

Not only is your story unique, not only do you not see the entirety of your story, but also when you tell your story, you’ll encounter opposition. Look at verses 13-34.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."
But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?"
So they were divided.

Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened."
The man replied, "He is a prophet."

The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already
the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

First, notice the mounting opposition. The first time he is simply questioned by the Pharisees. Then his parents are subjected to a grilling. Finally he's brought before the Pharisees in a more confrontational meeting where he is ultimately insulted and thrown out. The basic principle is that the more we understand the nature of our relationship with Jesus Christ and the more we try to articulate that relationship through our words and deeds, the more opposition we will encounter.

What is the greatest time of tension within any family? It is when the children go into their teenage years. Why? Children, when they become teenagers, start to seek out their own identity separate from their parents. They explore and try new things. They listen to their peer group and pick up cues from them. Deep down, there is a sense that they are coming into their own in this world and they want to explore the possibilities. Parents, on the other hand, feel the
responsibility for teaching their children and helping them avoid the mistakes that they made. The teenagers are changing so rapidly and the parents have to adapt very quickly to accomplish their role in a changing environment. It's a recipe for conflict. Wherever there is significant change in a person’s life, there will be conflict with some people around them. This is true as people mature spiritually as well. With spiritual growth comes a change in attitudes, a change in behaviors, and a change in the stories you tell. As you tell the exciting story of what Jesus is doing in your life, some people will not take it well.

Your story is unique, your understanding is not complete, you will encounter opposition, but the final word is this — the more you tell your story, the deeper you will grow in your relationship with Christ. Look at his story in verse 11: “the man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes...” But later when being questioned by the Pharisees, he tells his story and then is asked his opinion of Jesus. In verse 17 he says, “He is a prophet”. In his second interview with the Pharisees, he tells his story again and in verses 31-33 he gives this stunning reply “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” Finally look at the end of this chapter in this man’s story — in verses 35-38. Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah to the man and he says, “Lord, I believe” and he worshiped him. When you tell your story, you are forced to organize and analyze what Jesus has done in your life. As you organize and analyze, you gain new insight, which then gets worked into your story in a new way. It has always been said, if you would learn more, then teach somebody else what you do know. Paradoxically, if you want to go deeper with your relationship to Christ, then tell your story, even if your story is far from over.

Your story is your unique and worth listening to. Your story is not complete and is always developing. You may encounter opposition when you tell your story, but don’t worry. God is drawing you ever closer to Him each time you tell it.

Michael Card, one of my favorite songwriters, has a terrific song called “The Poem of Your Life” He wrote it as an extended meditation on Ephesians 2:10 — “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The first verse goes like this:

Life is a song that we sing with our days,  
a poem with meaning more than words can say,  
a painting with colors no rainbow can tell,  
a lyric that rhymes either heaven or hell.  
We are living letters that doubt desecrates,  
we’re the notes of the song of the chorus of faith,
God shapes every second of our little lives,
and minds every minute as the universe waits by.

What is your story? Your whole life is God’s handiwork. What’s your story?
As you look back, do you see God’s hand shaping your life? Go and share it as often as possible. Amen.