

3rd Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 42:14-21
Sermon #1225
March 12, 2023
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¹⁴ I have been silent for a long time. I have kept still. I have restrained myself. But now, like a woman giving birth, I will scream. I will gasp and pant. ¹⁵ I will dry up mountains and hills. I will make all their grass wither. I will turn rivers into islands. I will dry up pools. ¹⁶ I will lead the blind on a way they do not know. Along paths they do not know I will direct them. Ahead of them I will turn darkness into light and rough places into level ground. These are the things I will accomplish for them. I will not abandon them.

¹⁷ They will be turned back and completely disgraced— those who trust in an idol, those who say to molten images, “You are our gods.” ¹⁸ You deaf ones, listen! You blind ones, watch carefully so that you can see! ¹⁹ Who is as blind as my servant? Who is as deaf as my messenger whom I sent? Who is as blind as my associate, as blind as the servant of the LORD? ²⁰ You, Israel, see many things, but you do not observe. Israel opens his ears, but he does not hear. ²¹ Because of his own righteousness, the LORD was pleased to make his law great and glorious.

Dear Friends and Fellow Redeemed,

In the 1920s, there lived a man named Morris Frank. By the time he reached twenty years of age, his life had already taken him through some unusual challenges. As a child, he had to serve as a guide for his mother who had lost each of her eyes in two separate freak accidents and depended on her son to help her get around safely. But that was only the beginning of Morris’ struggles with blindness. At the young age of six, he too went blind in one of his eyes following a horseback riding accident. Ten years later, at the age of 16, he lost his other eye in a freak boxing accident. His only recourse was to hire a young boy to guide him from place to place as he had done for his mother, but in his own words his young guides “got bored easily” and sometimes left him to fend for himself – and you can probably imagine how that went! Blindness is hard, probably harder than anyone who hasn’t experienced it can imagine, and without help it can be dangerous!

In today’s scripture readings, God uses blindness as a way to illustrate the spiritual challenge that come into the lives of God’s people because of sin, and the problem of sin is even worse. Morris Frank at least knew that he was blind because he had been at one time able to see, and therefore knew what the difference looked like, but spiritually speaking, we are born blinded by sin. We

don't know what it's like to not be encumbered by sin because it's always been a part of us! That means that by nature we don't even realize we are blind at all! By nature, we don't even see the danger we are in, but just head merrily on our way down the path that leads to an eternity in hell, thinking that as long as we try our best it'll all turn out OK. The blindness of sin is so devastating and so dark that by nature you are so blind that you don't even realize that you are blind at all!

Because blindness comes so naturally, it shouldn't really be all that surprising when we realize that even as children of God, this spiritual blindness remains so deeply ingrained that it continues to be a struggle even as a child of God, and even as a person who should know better! In today's gospel, you heard about how that tragically unfolded in the lives of the Pharisees – religious leaders of Jesus' day who were so blinded by sin they couldn't even recognize who Jesus was! And the Pharisees were far from the only people in the history of the church who faced this struggle. As we will read about in a few minutes, God's people in the time of the prophet Isaiah – the prophet who wrote the words of today's first lesson – also struggled with spiritual blindness, and sadly, you and I can see the same struggle with blindness in our lives. It might come if you find yourself committing a sin that has become so familiar that you don't even realize it's wrong anymore – it's become that entrenched in your life. It might come if you find yourself thinking: all those descriptions of God's judgment and his anger over sin – that's not meant for me – it's meant for the bad people out there! I've got this covered! I do the right thing most of the time – that'll be good enough!

Whatever form it might take, today Isaiah warns us that the spiritual reality is far more serious than that – spiritual blindness will always remain a danger for children of God! God speaks to his people through the words of Isaiah: **¹⁴ I have been silent for a long time. I have kept still. I have restrained myself. But now, like a woman giving birth, I will scream. I will gasp and pant.** Like the birth of a child that will not be put off, something big is about to happen, and when you read on it doesn't sound good! **¹⁵ I will dry up mountains and hills. I will make all their grass wither. I will turn rivers into islands. I will dry up pools.** Destructive language Isaiah uses to describe God's righteous judgment in handing out the punishment sinfulness deserves – a punishment that God has withheld for a time, but that must be paid eventually! We might be blind to the danger, but the reality is God does not simply excuse sin and pretend it didn't happen – the punishment

must be paid, because God is holy and displays perfect justice! But the good news is, God doesn't leave his people wandering in blindness toward eventual destruction.

GOD INTERVENES

in human history, and when he does he acts with both

1. Patience, and
2. Persistence

so that instead of judgment his people can look forward to salvation!

You might think of God's intervention by turning back to Morris Frank – his story doesn't end with him stumbling through life with the curse of blindness. On November 5, 1927 the Saturday Evening Post published an article titled *The Seeing Eye*, and someone shared it with Morris Frank. It had been written by an American dog trainer named Dorothy Harrison Eustis. She lived in Europe, and had seen some success in teaching dogs to lead blind World War I veterans. Morris Frank joined her program, and within a year he had been paired with one of the first seeing eye dogs ever – a relationship that worked so well that the dog safely led him across Broadway in New York City – during rush hour! Until he got his seeing eye dog, I'm sure the very thought of trying to cross Broadway during rush hour seemed impossible and terrifying – that's just not the kind of thing blind people could do! But with the help of this outside intervention in training the dog to be his guide Morris Frank was no longer bound by his blindness – he had been given freedom, and everything in his life changed because of it.

When God intervenes in a world filled with spiritual blindness, his goal is to impart a similar freedom from blindness that flows into every part of life, and to bring that about God acts with extraordinary patience. Had God acted in judgment and punished sin right as it happened, none of us would be here today, because the wages of sin is death and we'd have been dead long ago. But, God was patient and waited until his plan to send a Savior was completed, and that changed everything! ¹⁴ **I have been silent for a long time. I have kept still. I have restrained myself.** Why? Not just judgment – God was about to make an amazing change: ¹⁶ **I will lead the blind on a way they do not know. Along paths they do not know I will direct them. Ahead of them I will turn darkness into light and**

rough places into level ground. These are the things I will accomplish for them. I will not abandon them. God leads us on the unfamiliar path of undeserved love – Jesus laying down his life to suffer punishment for sins he never committed – all of those sins that had been stored up through all those generation while God waited patiently, and all the sins that would be committed in the future! Jesus died for all of them! And now, we can see the spiritual reality clearly! In Jesus, we can see that we don't have to be afraid of God's well-deserved judgment, because Jesus already suffered that for us. In Jesus, we can see that we don't have to be afraid of sins we commit unknowingly, because Jesus forgave those too! In Jesus we can see that we don't have to be afraid of anything – no matter how chaotic things might seem to be – because Jesus promises that no matter what the twists and turns, life ends at the gates of heaven where that sinful spiritual blindness will finally be gone forever! In Jesus, we see that when God intervenes, he is patient, he withholds his judgment and sends the Savior we need!

The best part of God's cure for spiritual blindness is that this whole thing depends on entirely God. It's not like he is patiently waiting for sinful people to change and be ready to participate in his plans – the fact that we continue to struggle with our spiritual blindness throughout life has no impact on what God has chosen to do to save us. Perhaps nowhere does that become clearer than on the pages of Old Testament history, where God tells us the story of his people, wandering in the fog of that familiar spiritual blindness for generation after generation. Isaiah addressed God's chosen people with these words: ¹⁸**You deaf ones, listen! You blind ones, watch carefully so that you can see!** ¹⁹**Who is as blind as my servant? Who is as deaf as my messenger whom I sent? Who is as blind as my associate, as blind as the servant of the LORD?** ²⁰**You, Israel, see many things, but you do not observe. Israel opens his ears, but he does not hear.** Israel's struggle with blindness was so pervasive that they in no way deserved to be called servants of God, and when you and I are honest with ourselves we have to admit that there are plenty of times when such words could well be addressed to us too!

But God doesn't let that stop him from carrying out his plans to save his people. Isaiah concluded this section: ²¹**Because of his own righteousness, the LORD was pleased to make his law** (not just rules, but here God's whole will revealed through his prophets – both commands and promises) **great and glorious.** And God was persistent in doing that – despite the spiritual struggles of sinful people

he made sure his plan was fulfilled – showing his will to be great and glorious! Generations after Isaiah, it was through this same nation of sinful, spiritually blind people that God brought Jesus in the world! And Jesus was persistent too in carrying out his part of the plan – he accomplished his mission as Savior despite the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders of his day, and despite the spiritual blindness of even his own followers at times! When God intervenes, he is persistent, and nothing can stop his perfect and righteous will from being done!

That's still true today. Some of you might have been wondering why I chose Morris Frank as an illustration for today out of all the blind people who have lived and used seeing eye dogs, and the reason is found in how his story concludes. Even with the seeing eye dog, Morris Frank was still blind, and that was hard. But now he had a way to deal with his blindness, and he wanted to dedicate his life to sharing that. He went on to found a school called The Seeing Eye. Not a school for teaching math and reading, but a school for training dogs and people to work together so that more and more people could benefit in the same way Morris Frank did! Despite his own ongoing blindness, Morris Frank sought to share the good news he knew.

In a similar way, you and I know the good news about God's cure for spiritual blindness, and God invites us to dedicate our lives to sharing that. In fact, that's part of God's plan! Because just like in years past, God intervenes in the world today by working through the lives and witness of sinful people like you and me, despite our shortcomings! That's why he has gathered us together into a congregation – leading us to pool our resources that so that God might work through us to call other people out of that spiritual blindness and into his glorious light. And intervening in the world isn't just something that God does formally through congregations and religious organizations. God also intervenes in the world through you personally by giving you opportunities to display the relationship you have with him! Often that's more common than we might realize. God intervenes in the world when his people display a quiet trust in God's power and will even when the world around seems to be consumed with frenzy and panic. God intervenes when his people take the time to comfort and pray for people who are consumed with fear. God intervenes when his people take the time to help those in need, even if they don't seem to deserve it! God intervenes through you and me, despite our flaws and shortcomings! He demonstrates both

patience and persistence as he carries out his will – making sure that his people don't just wander in spiritual blindness, but arrive safely in the glorious light of his kingdom! Amen.