

Lesson 4

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: John 9:1–41

Jesus and His disciples were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, a remembrance of God's leading of Israel through their forty-year wilderness experience to their occupation of the Promised Land. Jesus had delayed His arrival and had entered Jerusalem without awakening general awareness of His presence—though John tells us “among the people there was much muttering about Him, but for fear of the religious leaders no one spoke openly about Him.” The week of festivities had reached its midpoint when Jesus went into the temple courts and began to teach. His teaching and its influence on the crowds led to a confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders that culminated in Jesus’ bold claim: “Before Abraham was, I am” (8:58). *Yahweh* means “I am.” They got the point. We’re told, “They picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple” (8:59). The incident in today’s Gospel followed—with its application to the religious leaders. This galvanized the religious establishment to plan their action against Jesus. His trial and execution were only half a year away.

The disciples’ question about the man blind from birth was typical of Jewish thinking. It’s typical of our thinking too. When something goes wrong, we look for some specific cause, for someone to blame.

57. What does Jesus’ answer say about this general attitude?

58. In God’s overarching plan for him, what lay behind the blind man’s disability?

Jesus’ commitment to the work for which He was sent as the light of the world is evident in His comments and His interaction with the blind man.

59. Why did Jesus apply mud to the man’s eyes and then require that he go to the Pool of Siloam to wash it off?

60. As the Pharisees investigated the miracle, what became their major concern? Why did the young man’s joyous testimony have so little impact on the Pharisees?

During the interrogation, the young man referred to Jesus as “a prophet” and was cast out by his questioners as a result. Later, Jesus found him and asked a question that took him a step further in his faith. Some Greek manuscripts have Jesus saying “Son of God” instead of “Son of Man.” The King James

Version offers that translation. If that is what Jesus said, his question was both direct and directive. But also the title “Son of Man” had definite messianic overtones (see Daniel 7:13–14).

61. Why did Jesus speak of Himself in the third person instead of by asking, “Do you believe in *Me*?” How is it that the young man was ready to say, “Who is He, sir, that I may believe in Him?”

Note that Jesus continued His formal, instructive approach with His “You have seen Him, and it is He who is speaking to you.” The Greek word for “worshiped” indicates the man did obeisance, bowing low to touch Jesus’ feet—an act that Jesus accepted from him.

62. Why are believing and worshiping always connected, also for us?

63. Jesus applied the incident to His ministry as the light of the world—including its lack of impact on the Pharisees. Why is there greater guilt for those who refuse to see the Good News of Jesus because they claim to “see clearly” without Him? Give an example of this spiritual blindness in today’s world.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42:14–21

Isaiah II, chapters 40–55, includes four Servant Songs in which the Messiah is presented as the ideal “Israel” who will carry out God’s saving will fully. This Old Testament Lesson follows the first of the Servant Songs.

The verse preceding this pericope describes Yahweh as a mighty warrior taking the field against His enemies, enacting His judgment against a faithless people. He says, “For a long time I have held My peace”—so much so that the people thought He was indifferent to their wrongdoing, easily appeased by their perfunctory ritual religion. But now the decisive time had come, like that of a ___. Verses 14–16 are notable for their string of fifteen verbs, all in first person singular, in which the Lord sets forth His position and tells what actions He will take. Note how His “I will lay waste . . . and dry up” contrasts sharply with the pictures of promise in Isaiah 35:1–7. This was some of the favorite graphic imagery of the prophets.

The last part of this lesson is the beginning of a two-part poem that pronounces judgment but also promises redemption.

64. Who is the deaf and blind servant who is called on to hear and see?

The pericope ends on a strong, positive note with “The LORD was pleased, for His righteousness’ sake, to magnify His law and make it glorious.” As the poem continues, however, this glory of the Law only emphasizes the plight of the people under the Lord’s judgment (see 42:22–25).

65. Who is identified as the one responsible for Jacob (Israel) being conquered and plundered?

66. What does today's lesson point to as the reason for the Lord's allowing this?

Sample a little of the part of the poem that promises redemption: 43:1–8.

67. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 5:8–14

The imagery of light and darkness is frequently employed in Holy Scripture. God is described as “living in unapproachable light.” The kingdom of Satan and all who oppose God’s will is called “the powers of this dark world.” In today’s Holy Gospel, we heard Jesus call Himself “the light of the world.”

68. How is it that those who once were darkness now *are* light? What is to be the result of a person’s being light in the Lord?

Paul described the fruit of the light as being found in all that is ___, ___, and ___. The Greek word that says “*discern* what is pleasing to the Lord” (emphasis added) means more than just “discern.” It has the weight of “test to prove genuine”—as in the testing of coins.

69. How may we “test” and “prove” what pleases the Lord?

The unfruitful works of darkness are the opposite of what is good, right, and true—things that are malicious, evil, and false.

70. In what sense are the secret sins of those in darkness “shameful even to speak of”?

71. How may those who prove in themselves what pleases the Lord expose the fruitless works of darkness for what they are? What is the desired result of exposing the fruitless works of darkness?

Scholars think Paul was quoting a familiar hymn, perhaps a baptismal hymn, in closing this section—showing the desired result of “light in the Lord” being brought to bear on the deeds of darkness and exposing them.

72. As children of light in the Lord by the grace of God, what practical steps may we take to work at living as children of light, thus testing and proving what pleases the Lord?

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Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 9:1–41

57. Jesus' answer says that misfortune and calamity are not God's direct judgment for some specific sin but are a result of our living in a world that is "out of sync" because of human sin in general (see Romans 8:18–23). This is not to say, however, that there are not built-in consequences that result from sinful behavior—such as sexually transmitted diseases. But a Christian should not think God is punishing him for something because he happens to get sick or has an accident. God allows suffering to be part of our lives, but it ultimately is so His renewing and strengthening work can be displayed in us.

58. We don't know what caused the man to be born blind, but in God's will it served to lead him to strong faith in Christ. Jesus' interaction with him produced the opportune moment for him to be led into the Kingdom. There is an urgency in such opportune moments, as Jesus' "while it is day" indicates. The "night" that is coming is the end of the opportune moment for our Kingdom work and its impact on others.

59. Jesus' applying the mud gave the man a sensory aid. It focused his attention. Requiring him to go and wash attached a test to his faith. He had to act in faith to enjoy the blessing he desired.

60. The legalistic Pharisees ignored the miracle itself and picked at Jesus' "working" on the Sabbath by making mud and healing. The Pharisees were hardened in their rejection of any and all evidence that pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. Still today, those who are determined to reject God and the Lord Jesus become impervious to the impact of the Gospel.

61. The young man already believed in Jesus as a prophet from God and his healer. Jesus' speaking of Himself in the third person was an instructional technique, designed to expand the man's understanding of all that his interaction with Jesus had opened up to him—centering in his seeing Jesus as the promised Messiah. It is entirely understandable that the young man was ready to tell Jesus, who had healed him, "Just point Him out to me, sir." The man had been blind but surely had been instructed in the faith. He knew the Jewish hopes that were wrapped up in their anticipation of the Messiah and, being blind, he had probably keyed in personally on the great promises in Isaiah 35:5.

62. Once the young man saw Jesus not only as his healer but also as the Messiah, it was natural for him to bow before Him in worship. We can't really believe Jesus is the Son of God and our Savior without worshiping and praising Him in the fellowship of His people and exalting Him through lives of Christian service. Confessing (Matthew 10:32–33), listening (Luke 11:27–28), giving Jesus praise (Acts 2:46–47), encouraging and admonishing (Colossians 3:15–17), communing (1 Corinthians 11:23–26), and serving (James 2:26) are indispensable concomitants of believing Jesus is Savior and Lord.

63. Those who claim a spiritual concern and sensitivity but reject the Good News of Jesus become more responsible to God for having heard His good Word and consciously choosing their own way over God's way (see Luke 12:47–48). The New Age Movement, with its humanistic blend of psychology and religion, seeks truth from within humanity and from the natural forces of the universe. Thus its proponents exalt themselves "as gods" and worship the creature instead of the Creator. Those who become "wise" in this kind of self-styled wisdom are generally quite willfully blind to the message of God's love in Jesus, for that requires humility and repentance.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42:14–21

Fill-in Answer: The decisive time had come like that of a woman in childbirth.

To get a feel for the emphatic movement in verses 14–16, have your group identify the fifteen "I" verbs, starting with "I have held My peace" and ending with "I will turn . . . the rough places into level ground." Call attention to the gentleness as He speaks of the blind but also to the decisive judgment in verse 17 as He judges those who trust in idols.

64. The deaf and blind servant who needs to hear and see but refuses to is Israel herself. That's why judgment was coming.

The Law of the Lord was great from its very beginnings—as the Moral Law was thundered to Israel from Mount Sinai, and as the ceremonial law was given to Moses on the mountain as the Lord's way of mediating His grace to His people in their sin. The problem for Israel, as verses 22–25 make clear, is that they did not really listen to and value the instruction of the Lord.

65. It was the Babylonians who conquered and plundered Judah. But it was the Lord, in His judgment against His faithless people, who "gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers" (42:24).

66. The reason for the Lord's judgment at the hand of the Babylonians was that His people, who had turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to the Word of the Lord, might be led to hear and see.

Do take the time to have your group hear the promises of redemption in the first part of chapter 43. These two sections show the continuing tension in Old Testament prophecy between the word of judgment and the word of reassurance.

67. Israel was willfully blind and deaf, and so were the Pharisees in the Gospel. The promise to the blind in this lesson found fulfillment in the healing of the man born blind and his being led to see Jesus as the Messiah.

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 5:8–14

68. The Good News is not that we are to *become* children of God by following and imitating Jesus. We are to do that, of course. But the Good News that saves us is that we who once were darkness in our sinful natures now *are* light through faith in Jesus. Salvation is not contingent on discipleship, but salvation invariably produces discipleship (see 1 John 3:1–3). The result of being light in the Lord is living as children of light and finding out what pleases the Lord, because we want nothing more than to please our Savior.

Fill-in Answers: The fruit of the light is found in all that is good, right, and true.

69. We may test and prove what pleases the Lord first by being instructed in the way of the Lord through the Word and then by experiencing in our daily living the great benefits of walking in His way—enjoying blessings of positive values and protected from the negatives of a godless lifestyle (see Romans 1:26–32; 12:1–2; 14:17–18; Acts 2:44–47; Proverbs 16:7–8).

70. It is shameful even to speak of the secret sins of those in darkness, especially when they are mentioned with approval as part of freedom of speech or expression or when they are spoken of to entertain and titillate the immoral desires of the sinful nature.

71. The fruitless works of darkness are exposed for what they are when Christians provide their societies with positive examples of the benefits of the fruit of the light. The desired result of exposing the works of darkness for what they are by displaying the fruit of light is that people turn from darkness to become light in the Lord.

72. We may work at living as Christians and testing what pleases the Lord by applying the values of the Word to our lifestyle and actively involving ourselves in efforts that promote these values and combat

society's pervasive evils, such as abortion, drug abuse, Internet pornography, sexual looseness, spouse and child abuse, and race and gender prejudice.