

*Blindsided*

John 9:1-41

Whitefish UMC

Fourth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2011

- † Blindsided—a good word that describes what happened to cynical and jaded Hollywood critics when two films overtly about faith brought commercial success. First it was that surprise sleeper starring everybody’s sweetheart, Sandra Bullock, called “Blindside.” Then, just months later, “The Book of Eli” surpassed critics’ expectations again.
- † Both films deal with blindness—the physical and spiritual kinds. Kind of like the scripture for today—but we’ll get to that in a moment. I have a confession to make: I put “The Book of Eli” into my Netflix queue reluctantly. Some of the rebellious teens that have come to youth group posted on their Facebook pages that they had seen the movie and found it intriguing and compelling.
- † Not being one for science fiction or end-of-days type films, I dismissed it, but for some reason, I decided I’d better watch it. In case you missed it, here’s the sermon equivalent of a theatrical trailer:
- † It’s 30 years after “the war,” and a man walks across the wasteland that was once America. Empty cities, broken highways, seared earth- all around him. There is no civilization and no law. Everyone left is either predator or prey. Water is so scarce that people bathe with leftover wet wipes from KFC. Food is so inadequate that many resort to cannibalism. Eli makes his way westward across the charred, barren landscape. He has an impressive amount

of fighting equipment strapped to his torso and an iPod. A warrior, not by choice, but necessity, Eli will kill anyone who threatens him.

- † It is not his own life he is guarding- but rather his hope for the future- a hope he has carried, wrapped and hidden in his pack for thirty years. The prize possession Eli so zealously guards is a heavy, leather bound tome that he calls “the book,” it’s the Bible and it is the last known copy in existence.
- † This book is coveted by a sleaze named Carnegie who has assembled a gaggle of thugs and runs a makeshift town in the middle of nowhere. Like Eli, Carnegie remembers the days before the war, and he also remembers his Bible. He tells his henchmen- “It’s not a book. It’s a weapon. People will do whatever I tell them if the word comes from that book.” He thinks that he can subjugate the world if he can only get his hands on a Bible.
- † Eli, driven by his commitment and guided by his belief in something greater than himself, does what he must to survive and continue. He keeps moving to the west where he believes he will deliver the Bible to restore a ravaged humanity. His strength comes from his belief in the power of the Book he carries. And the Book holds the power of God’s desire to restore humanity to reflect God’s sight--good and whole.
- † Eli, played by Denzel Washington, is named for the Old Testament priest Eli, who himself became physically blinded. Humanity’s warring madness has blinded those who survived the “flash” of nuclear war. For the people, blindness from birth was not begat from sin, but this physical blindness certainly was brought about for many by the violence of war
- † The Book of Eli has its flaws, to be sure, but it raises provocative questions about who is really able to see and who is not. “I walk by faith, but not by sight,” says Eli, echoing the Book that he has internalized by constant

reading and repeating. Ironically, those characters who are physically blind see more clearly than those who have ocular vision.

- † Blindsided: it's a good word to describe what happens when we think we have things all figured out. It's certainly what John tells us happened to the Pharisees in the scripture that Alita read. Jesus heals a man blind from birth who the community believes must have sinned to be punished in such a way. He uses what every parent knows is a good tool for wiping away what is undesirable on a child's face—spit. In this case, it's holy spit.
- † Notice that it takes only one verse for Jesus to heal the man, to give him sight. It takes 39 verses for everybody to argue about it. And we can relate. Our certainties relegate us to missing the real point. God desires our healing and restoration and gives us the ability to be agents of that healing. We waste a lot of time arguing about who deserves healing and who doesn't, who or what is responsible for it, and whether we have enough—faith, resources, initiative, perseverance—to get it done.
- † And then we're blindsided in our assumptions, and if we are willing to let God help us see with eyes healed by God's insight—with the waters of our baptism and the mud of our unexpected challenges in life—we find ourselves changing our minds and our vision.
- † This week Jennifer asked me to write an introduction to our new church directory. Before I did, I looked back at the last one we published—complete with photographs. It came out in 2005, coinciding with our church's centennial. It's fun to look back and see how much has changed—little ones have grown up, gawky middle-schoolers have gone off to college, and so many new faces have been added.
- † I remember that year as one full of challenges: we had just started our child care center, and it was off to a very slow and wobbly start. We were having

trouble seeing our place in the community, even though we wanted to see it. We thought we were too small, too financially stretched, and we felt anxious.

- † What's changed since then? We let Jesus use the mud of hard work and the spit of our baptisms to open our eyes to our ability to welcome those who aren't particularly welcome in other churches, to offer a community garden—not just for our own members-- so that we might grow the health of our community along with vegetables. We expanded Rainbow's End so that it is the model for good and affordable children's programs with a waiting list as long as your arm. We organized to take our youth to Lame Deer to open their eyes to the reality of poverty equivalent to the developing countries right here in Montana.
- † And that's just a part of the new vision God cast for us. How can God help us to see into what lies ahead for us? Will we look to the future with fear or with gratitude for the promise of still waters and green pastures and a table overflowing for all of us? If our hearts are open, so will God open our eyes to the joys of the future in compassion and love.
- † Three centuries ago in the village of Olney, England, a new parish priest came to town. The townsfolk flocked to see him, fascinated with his vibrant, personal style of preaching and his checkered past as a slave trader.
- † In those days, learned clergy frequently wrote original verses for congregational singing (don't look at me!!), and the priest at Olney wrote in a testimonial, plainspoken style, often referring to his own sordid story and remarkable conversion. Each week, he or an associate would present some new verses.
- † One of those compositions was titled "Faith's Review and Expectation." It was a plain and plaintive little poem, humble and heartfelt, and for its

earliest audiences, it didn't stand out and was soon forgotten. But the song survived the priest, whose name was John Henry Newton.

- † “Amazing Grace” crossed the Atlantic and became perhaps the most beloved hymn in the English speaking world, not least among African American communities. For imagery and language, Newton drew from the parable of the prodigal son: “I once was lost but now am found” (Luke 15:24) and on today’s text as well.
- † In the story of the man born blind and his fateful encounter with Jesus, Newton found a parallel for his own experience. “Was blind but now I see:” From the spiritual blindness that allowed him to see African slaves as less than human, Newton was blindsided by God’s amazing grace.
- † He became instrumental in the abolition movement, along with William Wilberforce. (If you haven’t seen the wonderful movie “Amazing Grace,” be sure to do so.)
- † How will God blindside us? Will it take a personal tragedy to shake us from our certainties about who is wise and insightful? I pray that it won’t. Can we train our sight on the example of Jesus so that we may be led for the restoration of humanity and all creation?
- † Heaven knows our warring world needs to be blindsided by God’s alternative vision for it. Will you be a part of it? Will you follow Jesus even when you risk the scorn of others?
- † We’re half-way through Lent, and Jesus is turning toward Jerusalem and the cross. For we remember....

Source:

Mathew Byer Boulton, “Living by the Word,” Christian Century, March 22, 2011