

## March 26, 2017: Lent 4: Mud



Kids know mud is good. Whether squished between the toes, splashed up from a big puddle, or patted into inedible mud pies, mud is like the best possible combination between playdough and paint!

Today, it's not only kids who are playing in the mud... anyone can buy mud packs, facials or mud baths for the treatment of various skin ailments and rheumatic diseases. Mud from the Dead Sea is well known for its curative and therapeutic properties; detoxifying, increasing circulation, treating skin conditions, and relieving aches and pains. This mud is particularly high in minerals so it nourishes the skin, as it softens and moisturizes.

In our scripture today, Jesus makes some mud of his own, spitting into the dirt and swirling it around, using it to restore the sight of a man born blind. Now, before you get totally skeeved out by Jesus using spit and dust to make a medicinal mud paste, know that as late as the 17th Century, popular folk medicine treatments for diseases of the eye did involve saliva. But while both mud and saliva are known for their healing and restorative properties, complete restoration of sight with the use of these natural remedies is unheard of!

But, there's more going on here in this story than simple physical healing. All through today's gospel reading, there's a spiritual parallel of dark to light, blind to sight, doubt to belief. In verses 5&6 we hear Jesus say to his disciples, "While it's daytime, we must do the works 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." Contrasting the spiritual darkness that accompanies not knowing the love and grace of God, Jesus is the light that enables us to see God; who opens our spiritual eyes to faith in a loving, healing God. This kind of spiritual sight is what we sing about when we belt the beloved hymn, Amazing Grace:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that sav'd a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

John Newton wrote about the incredible transformation he experienced after coming to know God's presence in his life. Abused as a child, Newton rejected religion and made a living as the captain of a slave ship. The awesome fury of a storm, however, brought Newton to Christ, and he renounced every aspect of his former life, eventually becoming ordained as a minister. It was in the light of this new understanding that he wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace." Even as his physical vision faded with age, Newton fervently preached a message of insight.

Uniquely in this miracle, Jesus never asks the man to prove his faith before the healing. Jesus sees him, smears mud on his face, and orders him to wash in the pool. You can track the spiritual development of the man born blind throughout the story... while his physical sight is restored when he washes off the mud, his spiritual sight takes time to grow. At first, for the blind man, Jesus is just a man who smears mud on his eyes, and then as time passes and he reflects on what has happened, he calls Jesus a prophet,

which gets him kicked out of the community of faith by the Pharisees... and then when Jesus finds him again, he asks "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him." Jesus said, "You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you." The man said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped Jesus." From Man, to Prophet, to Lord --- The restoration of his physical sight leads to the development of his spiritual sight... to truly seeing who Jesus was, and through him getting a glimpse at the amazing grace of God.

The physical healing and restoration of sight for the blind man illustrated with such clarity the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees. They refused to see the healing grace of God working so clearly right in front of their eyes. Jesus, the light of the world, is standing right in front of them, and they are so set in their ways, structured by their laws and rules and regulations, that they can't see God's work, God's love, God's grace in flesh. Now THAT is spiritual blindness!

Augustine, the early Christian theologian and philosopher, was once approached by a pagan who showed him his idol and said, "Here is my god. Where is yours?" Augustine replied, "I cannot show you my God – not because there is no God to show you, but because you have no eyes to see."

For the man born blind, it was Jesus' touch through the mud that gave him eyes to see; that brought physical healing and spiritual transformation. I wonder where we are on the progression from blindness to spiritual sight? I wonder what it takes for us to see God – to see the healing and transformative work of God that's happening right in front of us? Some of us may have experienced harm that caused us to shut out the belief in a loving God. Others, are so busy thinking and processing, trying to wrap our minds so completely around every aspect of life, that there is no room left for the wonder and awe and mystery of faith. Some are so tired of witnessing hatred and evil and fear that we've grown cold, closed our eyes to the possibilities of hope and healing and reconciliation that God's love can offer.

There are many ways to be blind or become blind. Some of them are physical, others are intellectual, emotional, or spiritual. The good news is there are also many ways to see, even amid our blindness. This morning, I invite you into a time of reflection... a time to ask some hard questions of faith and listen to what God is speaking into your life. And so I ask: Where are you blind? What is keeping you from seeing? How can your heart, mind, spirit, or body be opened to receiving the gift of healing and restoration that will help you see God?

In our scripture, Jesus uses the simple elements of dirt and saliva, mixing them into a transformative gift of healing grace. Jesus repeatedly chooses to convey God's power in ordinary things. Things we often take for granted, or overlook, or dismiss — like water and dirt, bread and wine, wind and breath. But it is through the ordinary that God's extraordinary work is done... that God's grace is conveyed.

As we journey through the Landscape of Lent, today we are invited to receive a means of grace, a healing touch of hope. With these questions rolling around in your heart and mind, (Where are you blind? and How can you receive the gift of healing or spiritual sight?) I invite you to come and receive a small amount of mud from the Dead Sea to

work in your hand...to work in your heart. I invite you a time of prayer at the rail and then a time to wash... and find renewal of heart, mind and spirit. Let us look this morning for what God can do in our lives as we move into this ritual of healing and hope.