



Detail of *Two blind men cured*, Early Christian mosaic (6th century); Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

I can see clearly now

How we come into the world is not how we must remain.

An encounter with Jesus can be life-changing for the physically and spiritually blind.

ARE HUMAN BEINGS BORN CLUELESS, OR DO WE HAVE to work hard to get that way? It was once assumed that a person comes into this world as a *tabula rasa* (“blank slate”) upon which life, learning, and experience write. More recent science indicates that our brains are not as empty upon ignition as we thought, and a certain amount of genetic frontloading accounts for some of our preferences and abilities.

But once we hit the open air and encounter the world at large, our not-so-blank minds are instantly presented with

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certain “givens” to which we must adapt. For one thing, there are others; they have agendas, which may or may not be in our best interests. They will provide us with care and nurture or neglect and abuse or some combination thereof. They will provide role models for better and for worse. They will press upon us rules and lessons and values that will shape us. They will offer us challenges and the freedom to grow through them or hinder us by their own fears and obsessions.

An example of the duel between nature and nurture became clear in a recent conversation with a friend. He grew up under the constant surveillance of his mother, who was anxious that he would suffer bodily harm. It did not help matters that my friend was a naturally adventurous boy who loved climbing trees, taking risks, and going fast. The one phrase he heard every day of his childhood was, “Stop doing

that: You're going to fall down and break every bone in your body!" To this day my friend, now in his 60s, confesses to a bit of paranoia about bodily harm. Nature made him a risk taker, but nurture fashioned him into a most cautious adult.

The opposite was true in my upbringing. My parents had too many kids to keep a close eye on each one. We had great liberty to go where we liked and do what we liked; personal safety was never an issue. But the caution often repeated in our home was, "Don't touch that! You'll break it!" It made sense in a house full of children that the television, stereo, and appliances should be respected. But the result is that I am uneasy around technology, ever expecting the gas stove to blow up or the computer to crash when I touch them.

Does it matter that my friend is anxious about breaking bones or that I am neurotic about breaking things? Not a whole lot, as it turns out. We're all a little crazy in ways that only make sense to us. We may even congratulate ourselves on being less crazy than the friend who freaks out at the sight of black olives on her plate or the relative who has declared a war on germs.

But if these relatively unimportant life instructions leave such obvious footprints on our lives, how much more do the vital lessons impact us? Think of the life lessons incorporated by the child raised by parents with emotional, financial, or substance abuse problems versus those of a child raised in a stable, predictable environment. We learn about the world and our place in it from the moment we're conceived, and it's virtually guaranteed that some of those lessons will have to

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be unlearned if we are going to lead liberated lives. After all, my friend who's afraid of getting hurt went on to race motorcycles professionally, wrestling down his fear every day. And I spend the whole of every work-week with my Macintosh even though I don't trust the thing for a minute.

This should be a relief to parents everywhere who wonder if they've screwed up their kids completely. We are all flawed people raised by flawed people to live in a flawed world. This is what the church means by original sin. But just because we're in the soup doesn't mean we're going to drown in it. This is what the church means by grace and salvation. No matter what happens to us along the way to adulthood, sooner or later our lives are in our hands, and we are the only

people left to blame for who we become. Either we get it or we don't. Either we see the light or we remain in darkness.

THE STORY OF THE MAN BORN BLIND IN THE NINTH CHAPTER of John's gospel is everybody's story because we're all sightless and clueless in the beginning, wearing the blinders of ignorance and misinformation. The story begins with this business of original sin, as the disciples notice the blind man and ask Jesus the age-old question: Where does human misery come from? They are quite sure of the "catechism" answer: Suffering exists because the world is marred by sin. So their question is framed accordingly: Who sinned, this man blind from birth or his parents? It's hard to imagine that some sin of an unborn child could cause such unhappiness, so naturally the parents fall under suspicion. Did God punish their son as a roundabout way of getting even with them?

Instinctively we know this argument is all wrong. The error is not in the idea that suffering has its origin in sin. The problem is in thinking that God is the kind of God who goes around smiting babies to get at their parents. Jesus unhooks this particular man's suffering from any particular sin by inviting his disciples to look at the other end of the equation—not at the cause of suffering but at where it's headed. In the Christian story, pain always opens to glory, and suffering is lifted into redemption. Even death becomes the door to new life, so the real question to ask about this blindness is not, "Where did it come from?" but "Where will it lead?"

As healing stories go, this one does not follow the formula established by Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In the typical healing story suffering is presented, faith is expressed, and Jesus effects a healing. There are two basic lessons to take away from that narrative: that Jesus has the power to save and that the faith of the needy person participates in the saving event. The expression of faith and the activity of healing regularly stand in as the punchline of the scene at the end of the chapter. But in John's story of the man born blind, the action barely gets started with the healing. The miracle is reported almost dismissively offstage in a mere sentence: "He went and washed and came back able to see." The man can see and it's only verse 7! Whatever this story is about, we have to look further than the healing itself.

WE CATCH A THREAD OF UNDERSTANDING IN THE NEXT scene, as the neighbors argue about whether this man, whom they've known all their lives, is really their neighbor or someone who just looks like him. Who shows signs of blindness now? Seeing may be believing, but these folks are looking right at a miracle and refuse to believe it. They prefer to doubt their eyes rather than change their minds and hearts. The gospel writer seems to be saying to the first-century church

and to us: When it comes to putting your faith in Jesus, don't look to your neighbors for a validation of your experience. If they haven't had the encounter themselves, they won't get it.

The following scene involves religious authorities. They too have trouble accepting a miracle at face value. They see only the failure to obey the law of the Sabbath. If Jesus works on Saturdays, then even a good work must come from the devil. It's interesting to see how adherence to laws and principles can neatly blind us to the truth. The gospel writer is saying: Don't expect an imprimatur from the legalists for your encounter with Jesus. Their allegiance is to the system they teach and enforce, not to the reality unfolding before their eyes.

Now the action focuses on the parents of the restored man. Will they support his new sight? Well, at least they admit he *is* their son, unlike the neighbors who pretend he's someone else. But in the end they refuse to stick their necks out for this child of theirs who has run afoul of the authorities in his untimely wholeness. If they have to choose between their child and the system, they'll take the system. The gospel writer tells his audience plainly: Even your family may not join you in your embrace of the light of Christ. They have

bowed to other powers for so long, love and loyalty may not compel them to receive your wholeness.

THE MAN ONCE BLIND IS DRAGGED BEFORE THE AUTHORITIES again. Since they can't stop the miracle, they propose to short-circuit its potentially damaging effect to their credibility. They want him to praise God and denounce Jesus. This exasperates the man with sight. Obviously Jesus heals through the power of God; how can he exalt one and reject the other? Even a blind man, so to speak, can see the connection. He tries to spell it out to the teachers, but they are enraged that this sinner dares to preach truth to them, and he is tossed out.

The last scene finds the man who sees back with Jesus. Neighbors, leaders, and family may fail and desert him, but the one who restored his sight is still faithful. The man perceives that he was once blind like the rest of them—clueless, misinformed, misinterpreting the directions of sin and grace. He thought sin was inside of him and grace belonged to someone else. Now he sees that sin does not define him, and grace is possible in every hour, even for him. All of us may be born blind, but that's no excuse to remain in the dark. **USC**

The man born blind:
John 9:1-41



Why is Easter a “floating” holiday?

Two reasons account for why Easter's date changes every year, what our tradition calls a “moveable feast.” The first reason has to do with the timing of the Jewish feast of Passover; the second has

to do with the decision the church made in the year 325 to always celebrate Easter on Sunday.

All four gospels situate the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Christ in the context of Passover, the spring festival that celebrates God liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt. In all of the gospels Jesus rises from the dead on the Sunday after Passover. The Jewish calendar is determined by the phases of the moon, whereas the calendar most of the world uses today is based on the rotation of the earth around the sun. Passover begins on the night of the first full moon after the spring equinox. This puts it on a different day each year, roughly between March 22 and April 25 on our solar calendar.

Calculating backwards to the time of Christ with our current solar calendar, most scholars agree that Jesus died on Friday, April 7 and hence rose from the dead on Sunday,

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April 9. So why not keep Easter every year on April 9, just as we keep Christmas every year on December 25?

It has always been most significant to the church that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, Sunday. Just as God rested on the Sabbath (Saturday) after creating the world, Jesus “slept” in death on the great Sabbath (our Holy Saturday) after completing his work of re-creating the world: dying on the cross. He rose from the dead on the very day that God had begun creating everything by first creating light.

In the first two centuries of the church, Christians in Syria and Asia

Minor did keep Easter on the same date each year (the Jewish calendar date of the 14th day of the month of Nisan), regardless of what day of the week it fell on. Rome, however, always kept Easter on the Sunday after the 14th day of Nisan.

In the year 325, the Council of Nicaea decided that it was more important to keep Easter on the Sunday after Passover than on the historical anniversary date, preserving the essential importance of both Passover and Sunday to our understanding and celebration of Christ's Resurrection from the dead. **USC**

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Q&A ON CHURCH TEACHING

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