My double vision

I like to think Jesus gives the blind man in Mark 8 vision of another kind: to see past the limits of human sight.

by Rachel Hoskins in the January 2024 issue

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The first time I saw double is beyond my recollection. “Her left eye is too strong,” a doctor told my parents when I was four years old. “It’s blinding her right. It has to be corrected.” He called my condition *strabismus*, something like a crossed eye. You’ve likely seen it: the eye turns out or in. Mine turned up and to the left. To correct it required surgery. Making a small incision in the conjunctiva of my bulb, the ophthalmologist reached the offending muscle and partially detached it. After

surgery, I wore a patch like a pirate and my vision blurred for days. When it cleared, instead of a world split in two, I saw one.

Vision is a highly complex sense. The mechanical and neurological components of the eyes and brain work together to produce sight in a delicate dance of light absorption and translation from rods and cones. When the eyes do not align, the brain may prefer data from one eye over the other. Usually, favor goes to the “clear eye,” the one without deviation, and my case was no exception. If left unchecked, my visual cortex would eventually ignore information from my other eye altogether, in a sense blinding it. Blinding it by ignoring its sight.

All this may be why my favorite healing act of Jesus involves the restoration of vision. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus travels to the village of Bethsaida, where villagers entreat him to heal their friend, who is blind. In other healing stories, Jesus speaks regeneration into being, but in this passage he physically intervenes, like an ancient medical doctor carefully operating on a little girl. First, he applies saliva. Then, he covers the man’s eyes with his hands. Then he asks, “Can you see anything?” (8:23).

“I can see people, but they look like trees, walking” (8:24), the man says, a strange response for sure. So, Jesus places his hands over the man’s eyes a second time. Many readers have been fascinated by this tale of healing in two acts. Some posit that Jesus engages in something like a first round of partial restoration that requires a second round of miraculous power. Others suggest that when Jesus first removes his hands, the man’s visual cortex lacks the ability to translate images harvested from light. Or as Immanuel Kant might put it, he has perception but no concepts to make sense of what he perceives; he is merely seeing abstractions.

Either interpretation may be right. But I like to think that Jesus is up to something else. Rather than partial healing or abstracted perception, I like to think Jesus gives the man vision of another kind: to see past the limits of human sight.

The second time I saw double, I was 12 years old. In church, staring at the pulpit, I saw our pastor split. He duplicated like film exposed twice, layered and skewed. This time, the fragmentation stunned me. It was ongoing, and I was cognizant. Rationalizing with my middle school understanding of biology, I reasoned: *Two eyes, two images, right?* Calmed, I experimented with this newfound ability. Shifting my gaze, tilting my head, I sought maximum division, the most double of double views.

But seeing clearly, integrating images into one, required a different kind of adjustment. Back in the ophthalmologist's office, the doctor said the severed muscle had grown back. My vision had regenerated.

At home after another surgery, again wearing a pirate's patch, I felt a deep pain throb through the adjusted socket. When I tried to see with my good eye, the pain permeated it too. They both ached in a hollow emptiness, as if the doctor had not just severed a muscle but had gouged them both out. It felt best to keep them both shut. I remember wondering if, along with the muscle, the doctor had severed my strength, like Samson and his hair.

My double vision had seemed like a gift, like accessing another sublime plane, where maybe people did move like trees walking. Yet, reasonable thinkers would disagree. For Kant and most of us after him, there is no other reality. There is the real as we perceive it—the phenomenal—and there is the "real reality" behind it, the noumenal. They are both essentially the same mundane place, but the noumenal, for the most part, is beyond our reach, because the world as we perceive it is interpreted through the self. It's as if we are wearing human-tinted glasses. Just as we cannot transcend the self to access "real reality," Kant argues in *Critique of Practical Reason*, so also we cannot access God. There are limits to human understanding.

But that does not mean we cannot conceive of an infinitude or limitlessness beyond us. We can. Confronted by cascading mountains, immeasurable stars, and even the immensity of mathematical equations, we may find ourselves overpowered by their vastness. This is what Kant calls the sublime. Our vision to conceive of infinity awes us. We humans are free to reason, and reason greatly. Additionally, that freedom gives us the ability to make moral choices. We can achieve mastery to some extent, allowing us to raise ourselves "altogether above the sensible world," writes Kant. But we are still hemmed in by the self. We see, but our vision is limited.

While Kant later expands his notion of human understanding, I believe he does not go far enough to account for self-interest. Driven by status and consumption, organizing for efficiency, and distracted by technology, pleasure, profit, and power, we often choose not what is moral or reasonable but rather what is right in front of us. Unable to grasp the repercussions of our actions and lifestyles on the planet and its people, we regard the world as an object for our purposes. When we see in this way, we reduce reality to its material pieces and parts. We merely harvest light with

rods and cones. As one eye becomes stronger, the other eye, so to speak—our spiritual vision—becomes weaker.

Some thinkers have pushed back on Kant's thinking. Friedrich Schleiermacher, often called the founder of modern Protestant theology, is one such figure. While he reframes theology to align with Enlightenment thought, he does not agree with Kant that our ability to understand reality is rooted in, or limited to, the reasoning self. Instead, Schleiermacher forwards a surprising claim: rather than being able to conceive of infinite reality using your rational abilities, that reality comprehends *you*. Thinking that we can grasp what is immeasurably greater than us is like Prometheus taking fire from the gods, he writes in *On Religion*. Each person is only one small member of an immense universe. And none of us, no matter how independent, reasonable, or moral, is sufficient on our own or entirely free. We depend on our planet and on other people, and they depend on us. But as creatures, we are absolutely dependent for our existence on God.

The realization of our absolute dependence is an immediate perception, and it overwhelms us. What I find most fascinating is that Schleiermacher believes this experience of being overwhelmed is intuitive—as in, prerational. In other words, when you experience it, you will not revel in your powers of reason. You will wonder where they have gone. You will find yourself speechless. You may even forget yourself—and God willing, you will, because there are no frameworks or conceptual categories, Kantian or otherwise, for understanding what you have just encountered.

Like the man from Bethsaida who meets Jesus for the first time and sees people like trees walking, you will not be able to make sense of it. But it will make sense of you and your place in this world, and that feeling will free you and raise you altogether above a self-limiting view. You "will see miracles everywhere," Schleiermacher writes, not just in cascading mountains and starry skies, but in every humble and overlooked speck of sand, drop of water, and blade of grass.

With this move, Schleiermacher unseats our egotism, replacing the self at the center with the Divine imprinting all things. This vision of the world aligns well with an incarnational view. The revelation of God descends and opens both of our eyes, in a manner of speaking—mundane and transcendent, material and spiritual. And it infuses reality with the same.

Seeing in this way abounds with ethical implications for our planet and ourselves. Instead of valuing a forest as, say, a place for outdoor adventure, a crop of two-by-fours, or a future business park, we value it for what it is: a home to flora and fauna, a grace-filled sacrament. No longer reduced to its material pieces and parts, the universe is revealed as a sanctum that is, in the language of Genesis, “very good” (1:31). Cascading mountains, immeasurable stars, and even the infinitude of mathematical equations point not to the glories of our own reasoning capacities or to our mastery and domination of the world but rather to the glory of God, as does every humble and overlooked speck of sand, drop of water, and blade of grass.

Yet, there is another danger here. Focusing on the spiritual becomes problematic if we ignore the material. Living in perpetual divine heights ignores the other eye. It too limits our view. We need both spiritual and material vision, not one ignored for the other, or a split and doubled view. We need integration.

And even if it were possible to live on such a transcendent spiritual plane, who could do so continuously? Who could unendingly see with the eyes of God, as it were, and not become unmoored? Without Kant’s human-shaded glasses, reality would shift from the spectrum of human understanding to something like ultraviolet light. Nothing would make sense. Among the banalities of eating, sleeping, playing, working, and even caring for others, who could function as a material creature while the immaterial heavens tore open around them? It would disorient us, I think, like having vision with no vision.

If this is the gift Jesus gives the man from Bethsaida on his first round of healing that day, it is one he soon corrects. He does not leave the man to such an ongoing fate, no matter how profound and revelatory the view. Instead, Jesus places his hands over the man’s eyes a second time, and when he removes them, the man’s sight is restored. “He saw everything clearly,” says Mark (8:25).

The Greek word τηλαυγῶς, translated “clearly,” can also be thought of as “seeing plainly.” Instead of splitting the world in two, I like to think Jesus integrates the man’s vision, giving him the plain sight to live as a creaturely, sense-experiencing being. The gospel writer tells us that after restoring his sight, Jesus sends him home. While Mark does not tell us more, I like to imagine the man spends his days marveling at each prismatic drop of water, veined leaf, and starry sky as though infused with infinity and set on fire. But I wonder if sometimes he still dreams of people like trees walking and ponders a gift that once was his.

If that is the case, then I can relate to this man from Bethsaida who has his plain sight restored. That day in church when my vision split, not only did the pastor double but the entire sanctuary fractured. Pews, curtains, crosses, choir, baptismal, and altar reproduced. Light fragmented in a million sparks of refracted lumens as movement headed into the aisles. People grew long limbs, sprouted and ruptured, swept along by graceful and jagged currents. And I joined too. Down I went toward those staggering figures, those points of light. The room filled. My heart and retinas swung open, as the ceiling released and that which I knew not and yet knew as plainly as I knew myself descended. And for a moment I saw clearly a world valued as good, as very good. For a moment I saw past the limits of human sight.