

# The Art of Holy Departure: When Staying Isn't the Answer

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[ 0 : 00 ] So a few years ago, I came across this online movement that for me felt like pleasant, but also dissonant.

At the time, I was deeply inside of the world of church planting. I was pastoring Resurrection City, which is a church that eventually merged with a table church. I was very much trying to get that off the ground.

And the movement that so struck me was simply called Hashtag Leave Loud. It was started by a black historian named J. Mar Tisby, a man who had been committed to racial reconciliation within white evangelical spaces.

And committed until he started to sense that he was engaging in what felt like a feudal effort. He started to notice black Christians quietly leaving these spaces due to reluctance, to the reluctance he found in those kinds of spaces to deal with systemic white supremacy and all of the fruit that comes with that.

And then Tisby decided to change the name of his organization and to begin this movement called Hashtag Leave Loud for black Christians.

[ 1 : 25 ] He was calling them to let their lived experience in white evangelical spaces drive their actions. And I was struck by the movement.

For me, you know, I was raised to be very much a fastidious good girl. And so I was sort of appalled by a person, a Christian, calling other Christians to leave church.

But I also kind of loved it, you know, like I was in that moment doing this thing because I hadn't found churches where I felt like I could be fully myself. So I also like sort of found it delicious.

Like I liked it. Hashtag Leave Loud was this like doubling down on a subversive practice that black folks have known for a long time.

The act of holy departure. Think Seely in the color purple. If you have not seen the color purple, come to my house this week.

[ 2 : 25 ] We're going to watch it immediately. All right. So think Seely in the color purple, lunging at mister as she leaves him and saying, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble.

Until you do right by me, everything you even dream about will fail. Or then think about the black churches and the whole denominations that we celebrate during Black History Month, which began out of a call to leave, to engage in holy leaving.

In her phenomenal book, I Bring the Voices of My People, Dr. Shaniqua Walker-Barns, she reflects on Seely's actions in The Color Purple when she writes that leaving is an act in itself.

It is an act of salvation and transformation that subverts the authority and the dominance of the powers. Seely's leaving is a holy act, a reclamation of her agency as one created in the image of God.

And I know who's in this room. And I know that leaving is never easy. I know it's something that far too many of us have had to do.

[ 3 : 51 ] And yet it is sometimes the next right step. This morning, as so many of us are contemplating various kinds of leaving in this political moment, I want to remind you that leaving can be holy.

Whether that's from an institution that has remained too silent when it comes to injustice, a company that cuts spending on something that you know to be essential for the flourishing of your neighbor, or a job where you can no longer do your work ethically.

Leaving can be holy. But the other side of leaving is much uglier.

The other side of leaving is expulsion. It's being cast out without your consent. Along with necessary leaving, many of us in this room know the sharp edge of unjust expulsion.

About 15 years ago, I was, I call it, invited to leave. It was not with my consent. But I was invited to leave a church that I was attending because I was queer.

[ 5 : 12 ] And I can still remember exactly how it felt when I walked out of that stone building. I walked out of this meeting the pastor had called me into.

And I remember being bewildered, absolutely bewildered, with very little sense of guidance on what was going to come next.

I know, I know that I'm not the only one who carries those memories. And again, right now, for many of us in this room, for many of us maybe watching online, we in this moment have new experiences of removal.

In the last two weeks, I've been talking to so many people, and I want you all to know this as a praying community, who have been furloughed or placed on administrative leave or fired, or who are still going to work but under the threat of being fired.

There is so much bewilderment in our community, in this church, and in our neighborhoods, and so much need for guidance.

[ 6 : 24 ] So much need to show up for each other and to show up to the question of how to move forward when the leaving is not of our own choosing.

Now, you might have guessed that I don't have a lot of meat answers this morning. The realities we are facing are large.

But I do want to take us to this multilayered passage of Scripture that is about both the call to leave and the experience of being forced to leave that might speak, I hope, a word in the midst of the messiness of the situations we're in right now.

So we're going to continue the sermon series we've been in on John, and we're going to go to John 9. I'm going to read parts of it. It will be on the screen, but this is one you might want to pull out on your phone just so you can scan the parts that I kind of summarize.

It is John chapter 9. We're going to start at the very beginning in verse 1. As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.

[ 7 : 42 ] His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

So this passage starts a kind of dramatic retelling of a story of healing, a controversy that follows a healing, and then basically Jesus' theological interpretation of the healing.

The writer of John organizes this book, the entire book of John, by retelling these miracles, what he calls signs. And every time when we read this book, we encounter a sign.

We know that John is trying to tell us something fundamental to the identity of Jesus, to the mission as well of Jesus. So the sign here begins with Jesus and his disciples seeing this man.

[ 8 : 50 ] The disciples want Jesus to tell them about sin. What is its cause? Did his parents cause it? Did he cause it? And they're circling this ancient question that is common in the Hebrew tradition about whether a person must bear the sins of their parents.

And Jesus is clear that neither of the options of the disciples put on the table is accurate. The man is not blind because of his parents' sin or his own.

Now, what happens when we read this passage is that we assume a third option based on what Jesus says next. He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

But the problem is that the third option effectively says that God has caused the man's blindness so that Jesus can basically come in and save the day.

The translation of the passage makes clear that the man's blindness is not the thought of his parents or him. But the translation can also lead us to see that God causes this problem.

[ 10 : 05 ] And it can cause us to see people with disabilities in deeply problematic ways by seeing them as waiting to be healed in every situation. And trying to make sense of the passage, translators have inserted the phrase, He was born blind.

This is not actually there in this way in the original Greek. One scholar of John, Alicia Myers, argues that a better translation would be this.

And check this out. It's super interesting. Neither this one nor his parents. But so that the works of God might be revealed to him, it is necessary for us to work the works of the one who sent me while it is daytime.

This is actually not the story of a disabled man waiting to be healed and thus some kind of judgment on all disability.

Instead, it's a story of a disabled man being healed because that is the way that God can in the moment reveal himself to that particular man.

[ 11 : 10 ] Or as another scholar, Yellow Day, puts it, the need that evokes this miracle is not the man's blindness, but the need for God's works to be made manifest.

And that manifestation is for the sake of the community as well as for the sake of that individual person. All four of the Gospels in the New Testament have stories of people who are blind seeing.

But it's important that we don't read those stories through an ableist lens because when we do, we actually miss something much deeper that Jesus is constantly communicating about, the revelation of himself.

So here, John is reminding us that Jesus subverted traditional notions of sin and identifies himself as the one who gives true understanding regardless of whether a person can see or not.

Okay, so I'm going to summarize a little bit here as we go forward in the story. So here's what happens next. Jesus makes some mud. He puts it on the man's eyes and he tells him to go wash in this pool called Siloam, which means scent.

[ 12 : 32 ] You're going to see that again. Jesus completely leaves the scene. You don't see him again until the very end. And the man returns able to see. The neighbors see the man return and they argue about whether this is actually the same person who used to be blind.

And this is kind of a situation that we've all been in, right? Something happens in your neighborhood. Something happens on your block. And slowly people start to gather outside and go, what happened?

Did you see what happened? This is what happened. Then another person walks up and is like, yeah, this is what happened. They're like, that's not what happened. Like, it's this like communal, like, standing on the street corner and trying to figure out this situation and debating the details of it.

And during this situation, the man himself is like, hey, let me tell you what actually did happen. And they finally see him. Just something we can talk about. It's a whole other sermon there. Takes them a long time to actually see him.

And then, maybe out of fear of, like, wanting the authorities to, like, authorize the healing or, I don't know, maybe just wanting, like, a sense of, like, is this okay?

[ 13 : 42 ] The people then take the man to the religious leaders. And the Pharisees get upset because they're like, this is work. Jesus, this person was doing work on the Sabbath. That's not okay.

He was making mud. So then, they also stand around arguing. So you can imagine another group of people. Maybe they have on some robes, some vestments.

You know, they're a little more respectable. And they're standing around. And they're also trying to figure out what happened. Who is this person? Let me understand. Could this man possibly be from God?

And then they decide. This is like, you have to see this almost as a play. Like, then they decide they're going to call in on the stage. The parents. The parents of the man. Like, what happened?

Can you sort out the details of this situation? So I'm going to take us now to verse 18 and read the rest of the story.

[ 14 : 39 ] So the Jews did not believe that he had been born blind and had received his sight. And so they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked him, Is this your son who you say was born blind?

How then does he now see? His parents answered, We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But we do not know how it is that he now sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes.

Ask him. He is of age. He will speak for himself. His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews. For the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

Therefore, his parents said, He is of age. Ask him. So for the second time, they called the man who had been blind and they said, Give glory to God or tell the truth.

We know this man is a sinner. He answered, I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know that though I was blind, now I see.

[ 15 : 46 ] I said to him, What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? He answered, I told you already and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?

Do you want to become his disciples? Then they reviled him, saying, You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.

We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from. The man answered, Here is an astonishing thing. You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.

We know that God does not listen to sinners, but does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.

If this were not from God, he could do nothing. They answered him, You were born entirely in sins and you are trying to teach us. And they drove him out.

- [ 16 : 47 ] Jesus heard that they had driven him out. And when he found him, he said, Do you believe the Son of Man? Do you believe in the Son of Man?
- He answered, And who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him. Jesus said to him, You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.
- He said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him. Jesus said, I came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.
- Some of the Pharisees were with him, and they heard him, and they said, Surely, surely we are not blind, are we? Jesus said to him, If you were blind, you would not have sin.
- But now that you say, We see, your sin remains. So the end of the story, and the second half of the story, the part that I just read, contains several things I want us to consider and that I think that we can relate to.
- [ 17 : 58 ] So first of all, we get the scene. We get the scene with the parents who are so afraid of the religious leaders in the community that they act dismissively or maybe even betray their son who's thought to be sinful.
- We also get this man himself becoming so frustrated with the religious leaders, asking him over and over to retell the story, trying to coerce him into saying that Jesus is a sinner.
- He gets so frustrated that he like claps back at them. Did y'all get that? He is like, Look, look, it's time. He boldly and sarcastically points out the inconsistencies in the leader's perspective toward Jesus.
- He starts to speak with a lot of confidence. I love this guy. And from a kind of homegrown, like common sense, he's just like, Look, you know that this is how this works.
- He starts to declare if this man were not from God, he could do nothing. This man, formerly a street beggar, he becomes the teachers to the religious authorities.
- [ 19 : 07 ] And in the end, they do to him exactly what the parents fear. They do cast him out. Now, I'm in a second going to end with a couple takeaways.
- Three, because I'm a pastor. I'm sorry, I got to do it. But I want to say first that I hope that as we've been moving through the series and looking at this text today, that you can see some of the nuance and the artistry of this passage.
- I hope that it rekindles or kindles something in you about the richness of engaging the Bible, of reading it and wrestling with it. Next week, Pastor Anthony is going to wrap up our series on John.
- And then the following week, we're going to start a sermon series for Lent on sacred self-care. But for my part, I want, you know, for me, I think this series would be a success if some of you, just some, not all, just some, went and actually read through the Gospel of John.
- Can I get a clap? Get a clap. Because we didn't touch on all the text, right? It's such a rich book. This is a book where John is like so clear about who Jesus is, that Jesus is God.
- [ 20 : 24 ] But it also does this cool thing where it redefines sin in a manner that is actually really refreshing. Because for John, sin is not about how a person relates, you know, or sort of like behavior.
- For John, it's not about behavior. It's not about what you did this morning or last night or the night before. For John, sin is about how you respond to the revelation of Jesus. And that's it.
- It's like really, really a lean understanding. And I can talk on and on about how John kind of redefines things like salvation. And, but go read it. Go read it. Just do that for me. All right.

Okay. Okay. So that's my soapbox. And get to my pastoral three points. All right. So one. First, this story reminds us that Jesus is the giver of sight and the revealer of truth.

Pretty basic. This is who he is. The one who brings clarity. The one who brings the ability to discern. Those who are so sure of their insight as religious leaders.

[ 21 : 27 ] They shouldn't be so sure. To get cautionary word from me and Brother Pastor over there. Mm-hmm. But those of you who right now feel like your vision of the future is compromised.

Feel like you maybe can't even see your hand in front of your face because your vision is so cloudy. You are the ones who are right for the revelation of God's presence.

You're the ones who are right for God's truth. And then second, the story reminds us, just as it reminded its first hearers, what it is to live in the in-between.

If you go back and you read chapter 9 all the way through, you'll notice something interesting. And that's that Jesus is absent for most of the story. This is one of the longest passages in any of the Gospels where, like, Jesus is not present.

He heals a man. Then he comes back at the end and invites the man to believe. And then he interprets the healing, what it means. But that's it. That's all Jesus actually does in the passage. And that keen sense of absence is probably what the first hearers of this story would have related to, what they would have felt most.

[ 22 : 47 ] The story, the story in the form that you have it, that we have it, doesn't come into, kind of start to circulate until about 50 years after Jesus' death. The Jewish temple has been destroyed.

It had been destroyed maybe a decade earlier. And there was this tension between Jewish Christians and the leadership of the emerging Jewish synagogues. The folks encountering the story were actually being pushed out of the religious spaces in which they felt most at home.

And make no mistake, that carried very, very real economic and social consequences for them in the Roman Empire. So when this story takes place, the power of the synagogue to expel is at its center.

And it's mirroring this major concern that Jewish Christians had in John's day. Think about this. For those of you who like musicals, I think I've come out as somebody who newly enjoys musicals.

Hamilton, see, I knew, I already know. I already know, okay. So Lin, Lin-Manuel Miranda, he says that Hamilton is a story about America then, told by America now.

[ 24 : 04 ] And that's what's happening in John. In the face of crisis at a time when Jesus seemed absent, this story led its hearers to ask what it would mean to witness to Jesus in this moment, in their moments of leaving, in their moments of expulsion.

And the story asked the same thing of us. The story asked them to watch a man be told to go bathe in a pool called Scent.

And then follow his progression from physical sight to spiritual sight to theological sight. From watching the man calling Jesus by his name, just Jesus, to then calling him a prophet, to then recognizing that he is the son of God.

What will it look like for us to witness to Jesus as set ones? Whether that sending is of our own choice or not.

To witness faithfully to the God who loves justice, who loves diverse community, communities that put the, you know, she, her on there, I'm just saying, you know. To communities that are committed to truth telling.

[ 25 : 22 ] What will it take for us not to become bitter, but to seek God as the light of the world? The one who gives true understanding.

Finally, this absolutely brilliant story in John 9 reminds us that our experience, our experience, our experience matters to God.

And that is the place from which God desires to speak to us and through us. I absolutely love, love, love, love that the man at the center of this story recognizes the presence of God solely through his experience.

He doesn't assert religious qualifications or religious doctrine. He can't read Hebrew or, you know, okay, he's speaking brief. But you know what I'm saying. He's like, he's a regular person.

He simply recounts his experience and he interprets it. So whether in this moment you're contemplating your own form of leaving, you're dealing with being cast out or you're just feeling bewildered, I'm pretty convinced that we are not going to theology our way out of this moment.

[ 26 : 44 ] I'm pretty sure that we're going to not write doctrine our way forward. It's only in our reflection on our actual experience of God in our lives, individually and communally, that we will receive insight to move forward, insight into the wisdom that God longs for us to have.

Now, I stand up here as one of your pastors and I, like all of us, I'm watching the chips fall in this political moment.

And I've been trying to, I don't know if anybody else feels like that, but probably, I've been trying to overcome just a sense of general helplessness. Like, what do we do?

And I, particularly as I listen to your stories. Yeah. And as each day passes, I feel this sense only more and more that we must be rooted and that I need to do one of the only things I know how to do, one of the few things I think that every pastor is called to do, which is to encourage you to practice prayer, to learn to listen to God for yourselves, to listen and to know God's presence in your experience.

I can invite you to be like the man in this story, who, despite the retaliation of those in power, was able to recognize Jesus.

[ 28 : 29 ] The point of the story, after all, is that being able to recognize Jesus is the real healing. It's a real way forward.

So, I'm going to try something. We're going to end this sermon in a non-traditional way. I'm going to lead you in a historic Christian practice called the prayer of examine.

It'll take just five minutes or so. And it's a prayer and a practice that is designed to help you as you consistently practice it.

It's designed to help you learn to recognize God's presence in your life. Pretty convinced that the way forward for us doesn't, great theology, more beautiful, all of that's really important, more beautiful gospel.

And knowing God and hearing God for ourselves in this moment in the depth of the difficulty, I think, is going to be key. So, if you are willing, you don't have to do this.

[ 29 : 30 ] Feel free to get coffee, go to the bathroom, whatever. It'll take about five minutes. If you are willing, no. Just essentially take a few deep breaths, get into a comfortable position.

And then I'm just kind of sit over here because you don't need to be looking at me for this. So just kind of center down into your body. Release the need to make anything happen.

and let whatever this moment is where you be, let everyone is a pile of judgment. Take a few more deep breaths.

So as we are silent together, reflect on, simply reflect on just the last 24 hours of your life.

Review those hours in your mind. What did you do? What meals did you eat? What people were you around? What places did you go? What experiences did you have?

[ 31 : 00 ] Are there moments that brought you joy that you would like to relive? What happened in those moments that made them life-giving?

What happened in those moments that made them Simply sit with those moments and allow them to give you life again.

Take another few seconds to recognize your experience of God in those moments. How God was present.

Now, if you could go back and change any moment in the last 24 hours, what would it be? What made that moment so difficult?

Just take a second to sit with that moment in light of God's love and allow yourself to fill whatever emotion comes up. And offer that moment to God for healing.

[ 33 : 10 ] Recognizing that God has never left you and will never leave you. Amen. Amen.

Amen. God of our ancestors.

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God of Miriam and Moses. God of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Schrueth and Bayard Rustin.

God of Paulie Murray and Marsha P. Johnson. We thank you that you are with us. And that you long for us in our experiences.

Lord, so many in our community are bewildered. So many in our community need your guidance in very particular ways.

[ 34 : 37 ] I ask God that you would bring us the first healing of being able to recognize your presence in our everyday lives.

Being able to recognize your goodness and your love for us that you have not left, but that you long for our good. God, give us the courage to be sent ones who prophetically clap back.

Speaking truth to power and living out truth before power. God of heaven and earth, we need you now.

So come. In our experiences, may we recognize that you have already come. May we commune with you, Jesus.