

Seeing the Light
John 9:1-41
Rev. Emily Peck-McClain
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We begin this soap opera of a biblical account of Jesus' healing with an age-old question: "Why do bad things happen?" Right away, when the disciples and Jesus come across a man blind from birth, they ask, "Who sinned?" If it's our own sinning that causes bad things to happen to us, we know where to assign blame and might even feel like we have some control over stopping these bad things from happening. On the other hand, we're left blaming ourselves. If it's our parents' sinning, well then, our therapists will be kept in business for the rest of our lives. Here, too, we know whose fault it is, but we have no control over stopping it because it's not our own sinning.

When it comes to suffering, we are always asking, "why?" Why me? Why my family? Why is this person I love and respect hurting? Why do bad things happen to good people? The Pharisees thought it was divine will that determined a person's destiny and that God's will was exercised based on that person's relationship to God. Rabbinical teaching in the first century held tightly to the belief that can found in the Old Testament that a parent's sins bore heavily on their descendents. For instance, from Numbers 14, "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation." Sadducees thought it was a person's responsibility – did someone act with wisdom or foolishness? If foolish, a person would suffer and wise person would not.

Jesus, however, answers this question in a way inconsistent with all these hypotheses. He says, “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.”

Understanding Jesus’ answer here really isn’t that easy. He’s saying a few things here:

- 1) This man who is blind since birth did not sin. It’s not his fault. It’s also not his parents’ fault.
- 2) He was blind so that God’s works can be revealed in him.
- 3) We, meaning Jesus and his disciples, are the ones who have to do those works to reveal God. And we’d better do it soon.
- 4) Jesus is the light of the world.

If we stop after that second point, it sounds like God made this man blind. The other of those points help us clarify the kind of being that God is. God is not a pompous ruler trying to puff himself up by proving that he can make someone blind and then make them see. That just doesn’t sound like the God we learn about through Scripture and experience in our lives. God does not cause bad things to happen to good people just to prove how powerful God is or something. I don’t know about you, but I find that very comforting! However, it doesn’t help us answer our big question of “Why?” We only know that God doesn’t do it, that it’s not the result of the man’s or his parents’ sins. The twist that we get on the Sadducees and Pharisees answer to that question is that the

responsibility for this man's blindness (and sightedness) rests on us. The answer is corporate responsibility, and not in a Wall Street statement about stock trading sense.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, we read, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God" (8:28a). This might be another way of looking at this. All of the sudden, this man's suffering becomes the responsibility of those who are in relationship with God. Jesus says, "We're the ones who have to work the works of God, we're the ones who have to reveal God in this situation." Furthermore, these works have to be done now, not later. This is important in the story, because the scene is taking place on the Sabbath. Making clay, mixing dirt and saliva together to make mud for the blind man's eyes, is not allowed on the Sabbath. But Jesus does not want to wait until night, when work can't happen because of darkness. And, I imagine, it needs to happen when the blind man will have something to look at when his eyes are opened. It would seem some cruel trick to me to heal a man's blindness at night so that when he looks for the first time, he only sees darkness. It's not like Manhattan streetlights are lining the streets of first century Palestine! We must work the works of God to reveal God in the middle of this suffering and we cannot wait until later to act. In this way, all things will work for good, even the blindness of a man.

It is not hard to see situations of suffering around us. Perhaps the big problems of global warming, systemic racism, war, terrorism, and nuclear arms come to mind. Certainly these are situations of great suffering and situations we are called to be active in. But there are also situations of suffering on a smaller and more intimate scale. Think of your neighbor who is a single parent and sometimes could use an hour of babysitting assistance. Think of your friend who is undergoing treatment for cancer and might need

some extra help around the house. Think of your homeless neighbor who might relish a cup of coffee during these cold days. Think of your relative who has just had a hard time lately and needs support. Healing the blindness of a man is certainly a way to help; however we might find ourselves sorely lacking in Jesus-miracle-working-power if we spit into some dirt from Riverside Park and attempt to put it on the eyes of a blind person to make them see again. But wouldn't things change dramatically if we just saw that other people's difficulties are our responsibility to reveal God through our involvement? Our neighbor who is a single parent won't automatically have all the support he or she needs all the time. Our friend won't be cured of cancer. Our homeless neighbor won't be in an apartment or have all his or her problems end. Our relative won't have all the difficulties removed from life. But we will have shown God through working the kinds of works God would have us do. And a burden will be lifted from people who are suffering so that some good can come of it.

Nearly every week we give voice to the difficulties we are going through as a community in the form of our prayer concerns. Every week the prayer list in the bulletin is updated so that when we go home from Sunday worship we know who and what to keep in our hearts throughout the week. We know who needs prayer, a card, a lunch out, or just a sympathetic ear. Every week we know whose suffering we need to take responsibility for and show God through. It's part of the strength of this congregation, being open about where healing is needed and asking for help when we're able. It's a lot harder when we don't know where the suffering is or how to help. But you'll notice that this blind man didn't ask for help from Jesus. We don't have to wait for an invitation to work God's works, just an opportunity. If we have the strength, courage, and faith to take

those opportunities, I firmly believe that we can show the Light of the World through our actions, instead of just going about our daily lives and not helping the light break through.

The response to this healing by Jesus is almost as interesting as this strange healing. By the way, in case you were curious, because I certainly was, saliva having healing power was a widespread belief in the ancient world. Of course there's the reaction of unbelief, "This can't be the same guy who was blind, he was blind for his whole life!" So they take it to the religious authorities who determine that because the healing was done on the Sabbath, he's not a man of God. The next question is, logically, how can someone who's not a man of God do something so wonderful? Then some more unbelief, they get the man's parents to come in and claim their son. Is this your son? Was he blind from birth? How did he get sight? The parents are wary of answering because, as the Scripture says, "anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." So, being the good parents that they are, they tell the members of the synagogue to ask their son. They let themselves off the hook with that one! They end up turning the "man who had formerly been blind" out of the synagogue because they don't understand.

When Jesus hears about this, he finds the man and reveals himself to be the Son of Man. He then prophesies, "Those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind," and "if you were blind, you would not have sin." Jesus is pretty famous for turning things upside down. We hear that the first will be last and the last will be first (Luke 13:30, Mark 10:31, Matthew 20:16, Matthew 19:30); that whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it (Matthew 16:25). Not

only is Jesus stating once again that whatever gives you rank or status in the world will not carry over to rank in the kingdom of God, he is also emphasizing responsibility. If you cannot see, if you are blind to the world around you, you cannot be held responsible for it. But once your eyes are open, you have responsibility. I don't think Jesus is suggesting that we should turn a "blind eye" (so to speak) to the suffering around us or that we should keep ourselves in ignorance. Rather, Jesus is telling us that we cannot ignore what we can see. Once we see suffering, it is at the same time a call to act in a way to alleviate the suffering. Once we know of a person's pain or difficulty, we are in the same moment, called to get involved and to help.

Through this lengthy and strange soap opera (blindness healed, the synagogue thinking there must be a body double, a man turned out of his religious community, religious leaders being told they're blind, God revealed), Jesus' message is rather simple. Open your eyes and look around. When you see suffering, get involved and help. That's the only way you have no guilt and it's the only way that you rise up to your call from God to reveal Godself in this world. Connect to each other, you're not out here alone, you are in a human family that is suffering. Be someone who shows God so that the light of the world can shine.