

Stay Focused

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Scripture

John 9

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 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." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "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 now he 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 to him, "Give glory to God! We know that 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." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also 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, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he 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 man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "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 worshiped him.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Sermon

The lectionary reading for this Third Sunday in Lent is the entire chapter. It's impossible to preach faithfully on this text in one sermon. Instead of preaching many sermons on this text, I hope reading the story in digestible sections this morning, interspersed with a hymn, might allow us to enter the narrative flow, get carried along, engage the characters, and resonate with the emotions and feelings of the text. There's a lot going on here.

The text also raises some serious theological questions. If we're honest, this story might not sit well with us. From the start, we hear, "As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (Jn. 9:3). Immediately, the disciples make an enormous theological mistake, a mistake that colors how we have come to understand this story and the beliefs we hold today. This mistake requires our serious attention because it's this mistake and all the associated questions and problems that flow from it that presents us from seeing what needs seeing and doing what needs doing.

The disciples' mistake is that they connect suffering or disability with sin or wrongdoing. It's this *link* between suffering or disability with sin or wrongdoing that needs to be severed. And Jesus is quick to do the severing. In no uncertain terms, immediately and forcefully, Jesus corrects them: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (Jn. 9:3). In other words, we should not assume a connection between sin and suffering. "Their question is a bad question—useless at best and harmful at worst." [1]

Too many people have been told that their suffering or that of someone close to them is their fault. Too many people blame themselves for the suffering in their lives or the lives of someone close. I have known—and I'm sure you do too—many people who believe that what they or their loved ones are experiencing is due to something they did or failed to do long ago. They are paying the price for some sin or wrong. Whether it's a disability or disorder, an illness, condition, or addiction, we search for a reason. We search for someone or something to blame, thinking that would make sense of the suffering. "It must be my fault," we tell ourselves. Or we say, God is punishing me; I'm paying the price for something my parents or grandparents did. Maybe you believe that not because of anything anyone ever said to you, but because you just told that to yourself. Perhaps it's a holdover from an archaic way of thinking. The gods punish us when we don't behave; therefore, we must keep them happy by not sinning. Others, we think, are hurt because of our sins. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." I remember hearing this as a boy. My hometown in New Jersey had treelined streets whose growing roots lifted and cracked the sidewalks in many places. It was almost impossible not to step on a crack.

As a child, being a literalist, I was anxious about possibly breaking my mother’s back. What a terrifying prospect for a young child.

In her beautiful commentary on John’s Gospel, Jaime Clark-Soles offers invaluable insight into this story. Clark-Soles, professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, gets right to the point and says: “...we need to stop repeating stupid stuff about sin and suffering.” [2] Sometimes what we suffer has nothing to do with us. Sometimes it does. Not all suffering has the same source, quality, quantity, degree, or “solution.” Sometimes the suffering is due to stigmatization and bad theology that shames and blames. [3]

But it’s easy to keep blame and shame theology alive within us when we have this verse in the Bible, the second half of John 9:3: “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” It sounds like his blindness was caused and allowed by God. The problem with Bible translations is that they are translations, and we’re at the mercy of the translators. But even the revered translation of most Bible scholars, the New Revised Standard Version, the most scholarly translation available, sometimes gets something wrong. I’m grateful to Clark-Soles for pointing this out. The phrase “he was born blind” in John 9:3 is not actually in the Greek text. Jesus answers the disciples’ question this way, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. In order 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.” [4] Jesus moves away from an obsession with determining whose fault the man’s impairment was – the man, the parents, or God. It’s simply a fact: the man was born blind. That’s it. Stuff happens. The disciples, however, want to turn the blind man into an academic exercise, turn his condition into a theological quandary, a puzzle to solve at the man’s expense.

Trying to answer the question of who was to blame for his blindness *blinds* the disciples from seeing what matters most: the work of God embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus doesn’t want us to worry about the past but be about the work set before us here and now. Stay focused. The disciples are distracted. Sometimes theological questions can distract us from the work at hand. The Pharisees don’t want to be about the work of God. Even the man’s parents fail him, they won’t vouch for his healing and thus are not open to the works of God right in front of their eyes. What matters most is God’s work to heal, however literal or symbolic we wish to understand this. The focus is upon God’s *work*. Jesus said, “We must work the works of the One who sent me while it is day.” The focus on work and works is a theme that runs through John’s Gospel. Later, Jesus will say to his disciples, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (Jn. 14:12).

The work of God is light. The work of God brings light, and allows us to see, to see the work, *God’s work* that is set before us, work for us to do. Earlier, in chapter 8, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12), and then in chapter 9, Jesus gives light and gives sight to the man born blind. Note how Jesus sends the man to the pool of Siloam to wash the mud from his eyes. For many years, scholars believe that John got this wrong because they could find no evidence of such a pool. They thought he made it up. In 2004, however, the pool was discovered. It’s no mistake that John tells us the man gains his sight only after he goes to the pool, whose name means “sent.” We can take this healing both literally and symbolically, either way, the point is we gain our sight when our eyes are washed in the pool named “sent.” It’s the sending that matters. Jesus was sent by God, Jesus sent his disciples, the blind man was sent, and in being sent, everything came into focus. He began to see the works of God before his eyes which led to the praise and worship of God (Jn. 9:38). The same is true for us.

So let us stop saying stupid stuff about suffering and sin. Let us stay focused. We, the church, are a people sent to do the works of God, the healing works of God. That’s what matters most.



Sources

[1] I’m grateful for the scholarship of Jaime Clark-Soles. Throughout the sermon, I rely heavily on her exegesis of John 9 in *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 47.

[2] Clark-Soles, 48.

[3] Ibid.

[4] This is Clark-Soles translation of John 9:3-4.