

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

JOHN 9:1-41

Fourth Sunday of Lent | March 22, 2020
Community CRC, Kitchener ON

Sisters and brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the story given to us in our passage for today is truly remarkable. This story of a miraculous healing, of a man who was born blind, who is given the gift of sight for the first time in his life by the power of our Lord, is a beautiful story in and of itself. But what happens next makes this one of the most hilarious stories in all the gospels. Because this story, dripping with irony, quickly shifts from a miracle story to a “whodunnit” mystery thriller.

The disciples see a man, begging at the side of the road, who has been blind from birth. And they ask Jesus what they think is a profound theological question: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Our Lord’s response is to reframe their whole understanding of suffering and its relationship to sin. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” Jesus says, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” In this answer, Jesus totally reframes the whole story, and sets us up for everything that follows.

You see, this man, blind from birth, would have lived a life of suffering. Unlike today, when we have social services and healthcare and eye doctors and just a better societal understanding of ability and disability (still not perfect, but better than it used to be)—in Jesus’ day, a man blind from birth would have had no opportunities in his life. He would never have been able to find work, other than begging at the side of the road. He would never have had prospects for a career or for a family. He would have been a perpetual burden on his parents and extended family, who would be responsible to care for him his entire life. He was a man living a life of suffering.

And the disciples, like many people in Jesus’ day, believed that suffering was usually a result of sin. People have always tried to find meaning in suffering, and the easiest explanation, especially to people who haven’t experienced tremendous suffering in their lives, is to blame suffering on the person who suffers. Last week, in the story of the woman at the well, we saw how easy and natural it is for us to assign blame, to judge a person as sinful, despite our Lord’s command: “Do not judge, lest you be judged.”

Jesus' response is to heal the man. Jesus mixes his own spit with the dust of the earth, and in a beautiful act that reflects God's creation of Adam out of the dust of the earth, Jesus breathes new life into this man's eyes, speaking light into his darkness, bringing order to his chaos, breathing new life into his living death.

And then we get a fascinating exploration of what it means to truly "see." Jesus shows the disciples how they failed to see the man who was suffering, and only saw his sin. And the Pharisees fall into the same mistake. Faced with a miraculous sign of God's power to bring sight to the blind, the Pharisees say, "Let's get to the bottom of this." They treat the whole affair as a mystery to be unravelled, basically as a crime to be solved, rather than as the miracle that it is. Against the healed man, against his parents, against Jesus himself, the Pharisees lay blame, crying "Sinner! Sinner!"

And the whole story becomes a powerful and fascinating exploration of how dangerous it is to claim insight when we have none. How we should be slow to judge, and quick to listen.

It is frighteningly easy for us to rush to judgment, to rush to blame, when we are confronted with suffering. It's amazing to watch in our current situation, as people rush to lay the blame for this global pandemic. The conspiracy theories are astounding and multitudinous. People from the darkest corners of the internet to the highest levels of government promote destructive and misleading theories assigning blame to different people or groups of people. Government officials call it the "China virus," even going so far as to spread theories that this is the result of a bioweapon developed by China or North Korea, leading to discrimination and hatred against our Asian sisters and brothers. Conservative religious leaders have called this God's judgment against the LGBT community, deepening the homophobic inclinations of so many faith communities. Millennials and Gen-Zs are calling this virus the "boomer buster" or "boomer replacer," theorizing that COVID-19 is the earth's revenge on the elderly for not taking the threat of global warming seriously. Some blame young people for continuing to go to work or school or vacation, failing to properly follow social-distancing protocols. Others blame government leaders and heads-of-state for supposedly covering up this virus, or for spreading misinformation, furthering its spread.

How quickly we rush to judgment! How easily we pretend to have insight when we have none! How quickly we try to assign blame, to judge people for what we perceive as their sins! How quickly we fall into the trap of the Pharisees, trying to get to the bottom of it, as though it is a crime to be solved. In times of suffering, I fear, it is far easier for us to hate our imagined enemies than to love our actual neighbour!

Over this past week, I've found myself drawn to another story in scripture, where people think they have insight when they are actually blind to the truth of things. Two years ago, in 2017, we had the privilege, in the evening service, of preaching through the Old Testament book of Job. If you're looking for something to do while you're stuck at home, you might want to go back and explore that series. From January to April 2017, in the evening services, we preached through the book of Job, exploring themes of suffering and judgment and sin and misery. And it was an incredible experience. And one of the things that I remember best about that series, as we explored this profound and jarring piece of scripture, is the speeches of Job's friends, Eliaphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

We often skip over the speeches of Job's friends, and rush to the conclusion, that their advice was not appropriate for the context. But the amazing thing about the book of Job is that the advice of these three friends is reflected in other parts of scripture, especially in other parts of wisdom literature—in the Psalms and the Proverbs. The ancient Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides explains that Job's three friends represent three different Jewish theories of suffering. And we can see that reflected in their speeches. The three friends tell Job that when God's people suffer, their suffering is not meaningless or arbitrary. There is a purpose to it. God has a plan.

- God might send suffering on his people because of unconfessed sin, inviting his people to a time of self-reflection, so we might confess our sin and come to repentance.
- God might send suffering on his people to test us, put us through the crucible, so to speak, so that we might be refined and strengthened in our faith and character.
- And God might send suffering on his people to remind us that our hope, the source of our faith, is found not in worldly possessions that can so easily be taken away, but in the unshakable foundation of God's faithfulness—to strip away our pride and self-assurance, and teach us godly humility.

These are all true things that Job's friends say, and they are important for us to remember when we experience times of suffering—to take time to confess our sins to God and seek his forgiveness, to be strengthened in our faith, to humble ourselves before our God and relinquish worldly pursuits.

But ultimately, God makes clear to Job and his friends that they are all blind to the truth of things. That their whole conversation has been nothing more than an exercise in futility. We cannot understand the mind of God, and God does not ask us to try and understand his mind. It is beyond our ability. Above our pay grade. Beyond our capacity to see.

We can speak generally of the purpose of suffering, but in specific situations of suffering, when it comes to God's will, and God's purpose, we are all equally in the dark. We do not know, and cannot know, why God allows particular suffering in this world. We do not understand why this specific evil is allowed to run its course. But we do know this: That the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. "I am the light of the world," Jesus tells his disciples in our passage for today. By his light, we see light. And only he can reveal the purpose of his will.

Jesus tells his disciples that this man was born blind so that God's glory may be revealed. The darkness is dark so that we may see clearly the brilliance of the light.

So maybe, as God's people, we should avoid playing the blame game in this time of suffering, in this time of darkness, and instead find ways to show people the light that shines in the darkness, the light of the mercy of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Maybe instead of trying to solve the mystery of who is responsible, we ought to rejoice and celebrate the ways that God is shining his light in the darkness of this hour. Because the light of Jesus Christ invites us to see our neighbours, to see one another, defined not by our suffering or our sin, but defined by the almighty, covenant God whose image we bear.

Over the past two weeks, I've heard some of the most incredible stories of grace and peace, of light in the darkness. I've heard of people reconnecting with their families around the kitchen table. I've heard stories of people reaching out to their elderly neighbours. I've heard stories of people running errands for those who are under quarantine. I've heard stories of doctors and nurses coming out of retirement to ease the burden on the healthcare system. I've heard stories of people rekindling old friendships and healing broken

relationships. I don't know if I've ever seen so much edifying and encouraging Christian content on social media in my life!

People of God, we do not have all the answers. And it's important that we not pretend to have insight into things that we do not know. We should not pretend to understand how infectious diseases spread more than health experts. We should not pretend that it's perfectly fine for us go into work when officials are telling us to stay home. We do not know how long this darkness will last, or what the cost will be. We do not know how God will use this suffering for good. But we do know that we can trust in him, because the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot, will not, ever overcome it. Let us live in the light, as he is in the light, and cast aside the deeds of darkness. For as the Apostle says, "Once you were in darkness, but now *you are light* in the Lord. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth—and find out what pleases the Lord."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Dear Lord, please help us to see clearly what you have in store for us, so we may bring your light to the world. Guide us as we go through our week. Help us to walk in Jesus' footsteps. Amen.