

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Zachary C. Nyein

John 9:1-11

March 22, 2020



Good morning, Church!

Today in the story of the man born blind, disciples and detractors alike are clamoring to Jesus – full of questions as they yearn to understand the world around them. Why was this man born blind? Who sinned, this man or his parents? Such questions are deeply human. I was recently reminded that if you line up the 66 books of the Bible in order, chronologically, Job, not Genesis, is the earliest. Whereas Genesis responds to the question of origin – where did we come from and how did we get here – Job suggests that the first questions asked by humans in scripture were not ones of origin but of meaning and order – why do the righteous suffer? In other words, why is life unfair? Existential questions that raise complex issues of God and justice.

These questions are both human, and holy, simply because you can't interrogate an entity you don't believe exists. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, our wrestling with faith can stimulate and strengthens our relationship with the God we strive to know and love and sometimes, blame. Indeed, it is often easier to believe in God during times of crisis and confusion than to simply believe God – our source and strength who bids us “not be afraid.”

Today Jesus does not provide the people with the answers they are looking for but he does confront their assumptions. Shaped by the prevailing mythologies of the day, his inquirers assumed that either the man born blind or his parents' sinned and that fault could therefore be assigned. On the contrary, Jesus says neither the man, nor his parents, sinned.

Thanks to the ways in which science has nuanced our understanding of the genetics and morality, the church now widely accepts that:

- A. Physical limitations are not punishment for sin and
- B. There is nothing wrong with being blind in the first place

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Still, harmful applications arise from this passage. Namely, the idea that the blind man's plight was caused to glorify God, that God's works might be revealed in him. This idea may provide comfort to the intellect, but as Stage-4 Cancer Patient and Duke Divinity Professor Kate Bowler suggests in her memoir "Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've loved," such logic is of little solace in the face of honest hardship and tragedy.

If we read further in this chapter, the townspeople are deeply unsettled by this blind man's receiving of sight from Jesus. So much that some don't even recognize him or believe he is who he says he is. "Is this... the... beggar?" Some say yes, some say know, others aren't sure. They're befuddled. They're shook. And I wonder why that is.

I suspect it had something to do with the way it exposed brokenness in their system around the care of the marginalized in their community. When Jesus restores the blind man's sight, he simultaneously reveals and heals a collective blindness that the community didn't even know they were suffering from, as Jesus gives them the ability to see him for the beloved child of God, worthy of dignity and love, that he always was. Someone worthy of more than a beggar's life all along.

My friends, as children of the light, we are called to see — to choose to see— even when the exposure causes us to squint and look away at first. Even when it's a bit painful to open our eyes.

Enlightened and faithful engagement with stories like this often calls us to embrace the adage that, texts don't mean anything but that people mean things with texts. And all texts require interpretation. Biblical Scholar Becky Wright reminds us that just as the characters today are wrestling with how to interpret and understand the world around them, so too has the text itself been filtered through the lens of human interpretation over the centuries.

Some of our parents who have been thrust into the world of homeschooling and find themselves returning to a nightmarish matrix of grammar worksheets and sentence diagramming may presently be all too keenly aware of the difference a comma can make, not to speak of the ever controversial Oxford comma. For example, there is an extreme difference between saying *Let's eat, Grandpa* and *Let's eat grandpa*.

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Calling attention to the fact that the original Biblical languages have no punctuation at all and that editors of English Bibles must decide where the periods and commas and semicolons should go, Wright has playfully mused on what it would look like to change the conventional punctuation in John. Typically rendered,

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

What if instead it read,

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind. [Insert Period] So that God’s works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.”

This interpretive choice demands we increase our capacity for uncertainty. The man was born blind. No further explanation. It also calls us to accept a heightened responsibility for our neighbors. So that God’s works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me. Whereas the conventional rendering forges a connection between the blind man and God, recusing the disciples from any responsibility for the blind man. This interpretive choice calls the entire community to a new level of accountability to God and neighbor.

Saint Augustine once admonished Christians to “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.” As followers of Jesus, called to act and pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. And we have interpretive choices to make everyday with information we have been given. Perhaps it could be said that data means nothing but that humans mean things with data.

In the wake of COVID-19, the collective wisdom of our public health officials has discerned that the most compassionate response in light of the information available to us is to place a proverbial period in our lives and in our life together. To stop. Slow down. Wash our hands. Take a break. Breathe deep. Practice a pause – for the sake of the most vulnerable in our community. Compassionate interpretation; Purposeful punctuation.

This will require some kind of sacrifice for all of us and some more than others. While many employees in healthcare and essential services must continue working at risk of their own wellbeing, others are now involuntarily without pay or unemployed. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable members of our community – especially the homeless, are more at risk than ever. Here at All Saints’ we will be working in the coming weeks to discern how the Holy Spirit is calling us to offer support to those suffering the most under these extraordinary conditions.

I’ve long been fascinated by a practice developed by shepherds known as grafting. As with most mammals, a certain percentage of baby lambs become orphaned each winter and spring due to natural causes. Similarly, a certain number of mothers sadly lose their baby lambs. Thus, shepherds long ago learned to coax the living mothers to accept an orphan lamb by essentially covering the orphan lambs in blood from the living mothers and their deceased offspring.

While, Jesus’ use of mud to heal the blind man may suddenly seem sterile by contrast, this notion of grafting offers a beautiful image of God’s posture towards us in the Gospel of John, which portrays Jesus as both the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, AND the Lamb of God who becomes a sheep himself, to show us that way of selflessness and sacrifice that has the power to love the world back to life. In this dynamic metaphor, Jesus clothes all humanity with dignity and honor, such that when God looks at us, God sees Christ in every one of us – together met, together bound – kindred siblings dependent upon one another and our Good Shepherd.

By contrast Pastor James Howell observes that we human sheep tend to nibble ourselves into lostness – as we chase after our selfish and fleeting wants and desires. For those of us accustomed to more or less doing and eating and getting what we want when we want it, maybe Jesus is extending to us during this season of sacrifice and discipline an invitation to live evermore fully into the psalmists refrain: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. To find our satisfaction and fulfillment in God – even when toilet paper and produce may be scarce on grocery store shelves.

There is no expiration date on Scripture’s wisdom for or us. And our rich tradition never fails to offer timely words of faith and encouragement. One of my strongest teenage memories was walking into an overflowing church the Sunday after 9/11, when, like today, our beloved Psalm 23 was the pre-appointed selection for the day. Our small town congregation gathered in great number to hear a word of comfort and hope from our very own Martha Sterne, friend of All Saints’ and my priest at the time in Maryville, Tennessee.

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I give thanks for her model of calm and steadfast spiritual leadership in that moment, which left a meaningful impression. It is a reminder to me that though the territory we find ourselves in may be uncharted, we do not go unaccompanied. God is with us, and we are surrounded by the saints past and present who inspire us by their courage and faith in whatever face of the valley of the shadow of death we may face.

Today is Laetare Sunday, also known as Rose Sunday, Refreshment Sunday and in some countries Mothering Sunday – a day of light and joy in the midst of our Lenten Wilderness – a reminder that Easter is coming. And so I want to leave you with words from another one of the great saints and Mothers of our faith, The Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris – African American and the first woman consecrated a bishop in the Worldwide Anglican Communion. She died a week ago after a truly illustrious life in ministry. Thankfully she published her memoir in 2018, and it was titled after the old Gospel song, “Hallelujah Anyhow.”

*When your troubles come your way
Hold your hands up high and say
Hallelujah anyhow!*

My friends, as we practice compassionate interpretation and purposeful punctuation for the good of our community, may we as people of faith and hope remember that the Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want. We will continue to refrain from saying alleluia in our service for the remainder of Lent, as is our custom, but I want to challenge you for however long this crisis lasts, to find a hallelujah anyhow every day – some glimmer of hope some spark of gratitude. Something that reminds you that God is with you. That the Lord is our shepherd, and we shall not want. May this reality be on our lips and in our lives the days come, and let the people say Amen.

Amen.