

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

March 19, 2023 – LENT 4, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Open My Eyes, That I May See*”

1 Samuel 16:1-13 (The Lord looks on the heart, not the appearance)  
Psalm 23 (God is our shepherd; with Him, we shall want for nothing)  
Ephesians 5:8-14 (We are live as those born of the Light [of Christ] )  
St. John 9:1-41 (Jesus heals the man born blind)

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The question put to Jesus by His disciples: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” reflects a long history of people of every culture believing that if something bad happens to a person, they must have deserved it. Think of the Book of Job, written 6,000 years before Christ. Almost the entire book consists of Job’s friends insisting he must have done wrong, for so many calamities to have befallen him. For millennia, as soon as hopes are dashed, we begin to question: “Why the pain and sorrow?” “Why me?” “Why has this suffering come to my loved one?”

One might be tempted to assume that such questions only arise for those who have little or no faith. But having faith only *adds to* our frustration at problems that were hard enough to start with. We who are believers wonder, “If God is Love, and He is with me, then why did He allow this to happen?” “Why has this loss or agony stricken me, or someone dearer to me than life itself?”

Non-Christian religions, such as Hinduism, make it easier. Hindus look at suffering and chalk it up to karma, or the just punishment of a transmigrated soul. Misery is no one’s fault, we are simply imprisoned by our circumstances, the victims of our own mistakes. If we are poor, diseased, or blind, look for the cause in our bad conduct in a previous life. Passive resignation is the only response. And this leads to indifference in the face of suffering and callousness toward those who suffer. Why should I help? These people brought it on themselves. My interfering kindness cannot save them from their ultimate destiny.

But religion like this forgets that life is not only about justice, it is also about grace. Such religion ignores the reality that not all suffering is punishment, nor every disability or grief is retribution. Our Lord went to His Cross not because of some failure in a past life that had to be set right. Rather, He willingly gave His life as a ransom for all (Mark 20:28). In fact, the Cross shows us how God is in the business of redeeming death, darkness, and despair, because *we know* Resurrection morning will come out of this nightmare.

Undoubtedly, the it’s-your-own-fault view of suffering which the Pharisees hold does have a precedent in the Book of Job, where Job’s so-called friends assume he is in agony because of some secret sins he has failed to confess.

However, Jesus will have none of this. “No one sinned,” He declares. And in this merciful pronouncement, He lifts the weight of guilt from the poor soul who is already overburdened without having to believe that he or his parents were the cause of his disability. “The man,” says Jesus, “was born blind in order that God’s works might be openly shown in him” (v. 3). That’s certainly a bold interpretation of the untoward things that happen to us in life! In this particular case, the blind man became living proof of the power of Christ to heal and deliver. It was through his blindness that he could be of incalculable service to the Master.

If tragedy or suffering comes to us, we are obliged to bear the pain. Yet, we can also accept the vision Jesus offers us, that through our loss or heartbreak, the works of God might be manifest. If we bear our pain with gracious humility and patience, others will want to know the source of our strength and peace, and possibly come to Christ, as did the man in today’s story. Moreover, our Christian faith tells us that through our suffering, we are being shaped and fashioned by the strong and loving hand of God into persons God can—and will—use.

Last Sunday’s epistle included Romans 5:2-5, in which Saint Paul assured the early Christians, who faced daily hardship and persecution: [We know that] “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

The Latin root of the word “compassion” means to “suffer with.” If we endure suffering with the assurance that our compassionate God suffers with us, and only wants to give us His best through the hardships we are undergoing, our faith will carry us through. For the God who loves us beyond measure wants our healing and wholeness, even if we have to go through tough times to receive it.

In the Gospels, Jesus heals several blind persons, all in different ways. There was the brave Bartimaeus, pushing his way through the crowd, heedless of their indignant protests, who was healed by a mere word, at once, without delay. Sometimes, we too, are blessed with instantaneous solutions to our difficulties, and there are those who come to faith in Christ with dramatic suddenness. In an instant they see, their spiritual eyes now opened to truth.

Another blind man was at Bethsaida. His sight was restored more gradually. On that occasion, Dr. Jesus preferred a more elaborate method. First, He asked, “Do you see anything?” The man replied, “I see men; but they look like trees, walking.” Then, Jesus gave him a further treatment, after which the man could “see everything clearly.” This shows us that at times, healing may be incomplete or take a long time, and that if we pray for someone (even ourselves!) who isn’t cured right away, keep on praying! Even Jesus had to pray more than once, for that man to see. It also shows us that sometimes God needs to take His time with us, and like a fine wine, we only become better with time.

However, the man in *today’s* Gospel had an even harder test and method of cure prescribed for him. To have his face daubed with dust and clay and spittle, and then to be sent in such a messy state, tapping his way through public streets to the pool of Siloam, likely feeling ridiculous and wondering what good could come of this ... Even so, the man obeyed Jesus. Resolutely, he carried on, doing exactly what Jesus had told him to do. And in the end, he came back seeing.

“God is the great physician of souls,” wrote Origen, one of the great 1<sup>st</sup> century Christian scholars and theologians. But the process of cure may require a messy course-correction in our behavior, or a U-turn in our lives, in order for us to become more obedient to what Jesus is asking of us.

After much back-and-forth with the Pharisees interrogating the man’s parents and the man himself, Jesus seeks him out, in order to hearten and help him. Hearing how the man was being hounded, Jesus drops everything to find him. But the one who has been healed shows his sturdy independence. In his refusal to be cowed or browbeaten by Jesus’ detractors, he demonstrates his loyalty to the one who restored his sight.

He could have, like us, sung, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind and now I see” (v. 25). Bluntly, he declares, “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (v. 33), and by the closing verse (v. 38), the man says to Jesus simply, “Lord, I believe.” *Here is faith!* Faith in the One who remains faithful, when all else fails.

So be assured that in whatever loneliness, or trouble, sickness or sorrow, anxiety or despair you may find yourself, you can be sure that Jesus has not forgotten you. He is thinking of you, making plans for you, and on His way to you with the very help you need. Together, you and Jesus can face anything and everything.

The newfound faith of the blind man healed makes clear that even a very elementary and unformed faith in Christ, even one little understood, is worthwhile to Our Savior. Jesus will be satisfied to lead us gently from the twilight in which He found us into the fuller light and greater wisdom of spiritual maturity. Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). But our understanding of Him deepens and broadens over the years, in our ongoing spiritual formation that happens through exposure to God’s Word, the Sacraments, and whatever outreach, service, and mission we undertake for Christ.

Jesus came into the world to cure both physical and spiritual blindness. Many rejected Him then, and continue to do so, today. But “to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” writes St. John the Evangelist (1:12).

As my closing prayer for each of us, I share the words of a wonderful 19<sup>th</sup>-century hymn:

“Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth Thou hast for me; place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free. Silently now I wait for Thee, ready, my God, Thy will to see.  
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!” *Amen.*