

March 22, 2020 – John 9:1-7, 14-17, 24-41

So for the past couple weeks, I haven't really preached about this current COVID-19 pandemic. I wasn't doing that intentionally. It's been on my mind just as much as it's been on yours, I'm sure. But there was a very simple reason for it: the readings just didn't lend themselves to bringing it up.

I like to follow the lectionary readings. I like reading through the passion narrative. I find the structure and variety to be comforting. And there just wasn't really a great opening in passages like the Samaritan woman at the well or Peter's denial of Jesus.

Well, there is today. It's an exceptionally good opening in fact: the healing of a man who was blind from birth. Because, after all, right now we could all use a little healing. There are roughly 300,000 people around the globe who would gladly put spit and mud on their eyes if it meant that they could be healed from this highly infectious disease.

And I've seen a lot of responses from Christians to this pandemic. Because we're all just trying to make sense of it. We're trying to make sense of it in a scientific sense, of course. Gathering data and recommendations and governments mandates and putting them into practice for ourself and our families. But, even more so, we're trying to make sense of this in a spiritual sense. In a theological sense.

What does a global pandemic that has killed thousands say about our relationship with God? What does it say about his relationship with us? What is God doing? And what should we be doing in response?

These are natural questions to ask. We want the world to be orderly and rational. We believe in an orderly, rational God, after all. Who took chaos and made creation from it. Who took the formless void and made light and life out of it. So this has got to make sense, right?

And we go through all sorts of theological hoops to force it to make sense. Some look at this as a test of faith. That we must simply believe that God will protect us from the coronavirus and he will. Others look at this as a call to prayer. Pulling Bible verses out of context to argue that God will end the plague when enough people turn to him in prayer. And still more see this as a punishment for sin. As God's wrath upon a godless world.

And it's that last group that I really want to look at closer. Because this is the same group that Jesus' disciples fell into at the beginning of our Gospel lesson today.

*"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* It's a rather blunt question. Certainly not at all politically correct in our current culture. Probably not one that would immediately pop into our minds when we come across a blind person. But, honestly, it's not that much different than the questions we've all been pondering recently.

*"Jesus, make sense of this."* That's what they're asking. *"Jesus, show us the order in this chaos. He's blind. That seems like a punishment for sin. But he was born blind. He wasn't blinded after he did something sinful. So does that mean his parents were sinful? It doesn't make any sense, Jesus. Explain this to us. Help us understand what God is doing here. Help us understand how we should respond."*

To this, Jesus gives a somewhat enigmatic response: *"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."* Essentially, Jesus says, "This man was born blind so that I can heal him, and so that you all can see it happen."

Which, on the one hand, is a pretty straightforward answer. But it doesn't make much sense. Did God really strike this man blind for his entire life thus far just to be an object lesson for Jesus? That seems kinda cruel.

But I really don't think that's what Jesus is saying here. Not just because it doesn't make sense, but also because there's a lot more to this story than just the act of healing. There's also the response of those who find out about it.

Which is one of my favorite stories in scripture. Because it's, honestly, kind of hilarious. Over and over again, people come to this man who was healed and ask, "How did he heal you?" And over and over again, the man simply says, "He put mud on my eyes and I washed and now I see." Which, of course, is not at all what they're asking.

They're asking *how* did he heal you. Where did he get this power to heal? But the man doesn't know. In fact, the man doesn't even know who Jesus is. He was still blind when Jesus put the mud on his eyes, and after he came back from washing it off, Jesus was apparently gone. Jesus actually has to reintroduce himself to the man at the end of this passage as the one who had healed him.

The man doesn't know Jesus' name. He doesn't know where Jesus gets his power. He takes a shot in the dark that he's probably a prophet, which is a good guess. But ultimately, all he knows for sure is that he was blind, Jesus put mud on his eyes, and now he sees.

Which blows their minds. This is unlike anything any of them have ever seen. And they simply can't wrap their heads around this idea of someone undoing blindness.

Because, for them, things like blindness had become normal. People are simply born blind. It happens. They try to understand why. They blame on things like the punishment of God against children or their parents. But ultimately, this is expected. This is how the world works. This is normal.

Sin is normal. The effects of sin are normal. And they're permanent. People are born blind. Or deaf. Or paralyzed. People get cancer. Or heart disease. Or coronavirus. This just happens. And your only option is to live with it and try to decipher God's message in it all.

And then Jesus shows up. And he says, "No. Sin isn't normal. The effects of sin aren't normal. They aren't supposed to be here. The world was not made like this. It was made so much better."

"And none of this is permanent. Because I can make it go away. I can make the blind see. And the deaf hear. And the paralyzed walk. I can take away cancer and heart disease and coronavirus. I can give you the world you were meant to have. I will give you the world you were meant to have. Because that is the work of God. That is the work of God's Son."

It's an amazing message of hope in the midst of despair. It's a light in the darkness. But it's also a message that the Pharisees couldn't accept.

Why? Well, because it left them out of the equation. It left no room for all their fervent acts of faith and their prayers and their self-righteousness.

Jesus has done something they have never, ever seen before. And they keep asking the man, "Who healed you and how did he heal you?" And finally the man says, "*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?*"

I don't know if this was asked honestly or sarcastically, but I think it's a great answer either way. Because that's how you respond to a miracle like the one Jesus just did. You become his disciple. That's what this man has done. "Do you *also* want to become his disciples?" He just did something amazing. He is from God. If he weren't, he could do nothing. I'm gonna follow him. Are you going to follow him? Because you should.

But they won't. They revile the man for even saying this. How dare he suggest that they become Jesus' disciples? How dare he suggest that they rely solely on the works of God for them and not on their own works?

Jesus did a miracle for that man. He opened his eyes and now he sees. Jesus has done a miracle for us as well. He has opened our eyes. And now we see.

We see him dying on a cross to pay for our sins. We see him rising again, in victory over death and grave. We see him promising that same resurrection from the dead to all who believe.

We see the works of God displayed in this man born blind. And we see the works of God displayed in us. As we are washed in the waters of Holy Baptism. Washed like that man washed the mud from his eyes. And now we see everything.

Right now, in this time of disease and suffering, we feel like we could all use a little healing. But we already have. We've already been healed. And we have the promise of more healing on the last day. None of this is permanent. None of this is eternal. This sinful world that we live in is not normal. And nothing we can do will make it normal.

Normal is what we find in Jesus Christ. Normal is what he created for us in Eden. And normal is what he will give us when he returns on the clouds.

So how do we respond to all this. How do we respond to a chaotic world, filled with the effects of sin? Filled with death and suffering? We respond the same way St John did. We look to the heavens and we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.