

## Blind-Sighted

*A sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 based on the Scripture readings from I Samuel 16:1-13 and John 9:1-41*

*Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits Thou hast given me, for all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.* (A prayer by Richard of Chichester [1197—April 3, 1253] used in the rock musical *Godspell* hundreds of years after he lived.)

“I came into this world for judgment,” Jesus declared “so that *those who do not see* may see, and *those who do see* may become blind. . . .” (John 9:39; italics mine).

Years ago, when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast, a state senator in Alabama claimed *to see clearly* that the hurricanes had hit Mississippi and Louisiana because those states had legalized gambling. God sent the hurricane, so said the senator, *who saw so clearly* because “New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast have always been known for gambling, sin and wickedness.”

After hearing the senator’s theory on hurricanes a Methodist preacher in Alabama responded by saying, “Well, if the Lord was shooting for all those casinos then he needs to improve his aim because those hurricanes took out only about eight casinos,” the preacher noted, “but [they] destroyed nearly a hundred Methodist churches!”

The rationale goes something like this: If God is good and just, well then, if there is suffering and tragedy, it must be our responsibility.

Some call it the “problem of suffering,” “the mystery of evil,” or “theodicy.” The question of “natural” suffering from illnesses or natural disasters differs from that of “moral evil” in which suffering is related directly or indirectly from the actions of individuals. As James Martin, a Jesuit priest and author writes during this time of Covid-19, “But leaving aside theological distinctions, the question now consumes the minds of millions of believers, who quail at steadily rising death tolls, struggle with stories of physicians forced to triage patients and recoil at photos of rows of coffins: Why?”

Martin reminds us:

*Over the centuries, many answers have been offered about natural suffering, all of them wanting in some way. The most common is that suffering is a test. Suffering tests our faith and strengthens it: ‘My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance,’ says the Letter of James in the New Testament. But while explaining suffering as a test may help in minor trials (patience being tested by an annoying person) it fails in the most painful human experiences. Does God send cancer to ‘test’ a young child? Yes, the child’s parents may learn something about perseverance or faith, but that approach can make God out to be a monster.*

Jesus himself rejects the argument that suffering is a punishment for sins. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus responds to the story of a stone tower that fell and crushed a crowd of people: “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you” (Luke 13:4). And we hear time and again in the gospels that Jesus will have no part in this simplistic cause-and-effect theology, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. . . . He was born blind in order to reveal the glory of God.”

Something so powerful—so powerful that it is beyond anyone’s comprehension—has happened to a man blind from birth. He doesn’t have a clue about how he received his sight, or what he did to get chosen for it, or who it was that smeared mud on his eyes. None of this really matters to the man; all that matters is that “I once was blind, but now I see.”

But now, everybody else is asking questions, “How can a man [Jesus] who is a sinner perform such signs?” “This man [Jesus] cannot be from God because he doesn’t observe the Sabbath.”

The poor beggar is assaulted by questions from every side, “How were your eyes opened?” “Where’s the man who did it?” “How could he do such a thing?” “What did he do to you?” “How did he open your eyes?” “What have you to say about him?”

Maybe you’ve noticed that not one living soul—not even the man’s parents— said an “Alleluia!” or an “Amen”

or a “Praise be to God.” Nor did anyone ask the man what it was like for him to see for the first time in his life. All we hear is blanket skepticism and implied accusations.

While everybody else is so concerned about whether this healing is right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, sinful or not—the man who has received his sight couldn’t care less about right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, sinful or not. The categories that concern the man are blind and not blind, seeing and not seeing. So what if his interrogators want to insist that *blind is right and seeing is wrong*. The man will gladly accept being wrong because *he would rather see and be wrong than to be blind and be right*. Right and wrong have little to do with seeing and not seeing. And sometimes we need to see beyond right and wrong in order that we might see the glory of God.

Note that the blind man comes a long way in a very short time. At first his answers are timid, fearful one-liners: “I’m the man,” “I don’t know,” “He put mud on my eyes. I washed, and now I see.” But as the questions go on and on until Mom and Dad even go quietly, meekly off stage, the man grows in his eloquence, confidence and courage until he finally sasses so sharply at the big bosses that they threw him out of the congregation.

Hear this from a poor, blind beggar who now sees: “Here is an astonishing thing!” he lectures the experts, “You don’t 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.”

Here, a nobody from nowhere, a man who was blind and begging until about thirty minutes ago, has just told the authorities that they can “go chase themselves”—that they couldn’t see God if God was standing directly in front of them.

At the beginning of the story the blind man called Jesus “a man,” then he calls him “a prophet,” then “a man from God.” It seems that his vision just keeps getting better and better until he sees more and more clearly who it is who has given him his sight. Finally, the man gets the right name and confesses in an act of worship, “Lord, I believe.” But the others, who claim to see so clearly, actually see less and less, until they say, “‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.”

Some people think that they can see so much better than anybody else can see, and they don’t mind telling you that you don’t see as clearly as they do and that what you are seeing is wrong. I don’t suppose we do this to be mean. Maybe we do this because we want to love God and we also want to love you. Maybe we are doing this to protect you from believing and doing the wrong things.

The Pharisees have a reputation in the New Testament for being so sure of everything—sure that God would not spit in the dirt and make Play Doe on the Sabbath; sure that Moses was God’s only teacher; sure that anyone born blind must be a sinner; sure that anyone who broke any of the 39 Sabbath laws was wrong; sure that God could not *work through sinners* like Jesus; and sure that God did not *work on sinners* like the blind man; and sure that nobody else had anything to teach them.

Meanwhile, the man born blind, who was not sure about anything, becomes the one who gradually “saw the light.” The one and only thing that he absolutely was sure about was that he could see. If that made Jesus wrong, then he hoped that he could also be wrong.

Like the man born blind, maybe like the suffering, righteous man Job (see Job 38:1ff), James Martin suggests, “In the end, the most honest answer to the question of why the Covid-19 virus is killing thousands of people, why infectious diseases ravage humanity and why there is suffering at all is: We don’t know.”

“In these frightening times,” Martin writes, “Christians may find comfort in knowing that when they pray to Jesus, they are praying to someone who understands them not only because he is divine and knows all things, but because he is human and experienced all things... For Jesus, the sick or dying person was not the ‘other,’ not one to be blamed, but our brother and sister. When Jesus saw a person in need, the Gospels tell us that his heart was ‘moved with pity.’ He is a model for how we are to care during this crisis: with hearts moved by pity”

(<https://nyti.ms/2wrFq5O>).

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