

Sermon: John 9 (Lent 4A)
Christ Church Riverdale, 2 March 2008
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^{NRS} **John 9:1** As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." ¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." ¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰ His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." ²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ He answered them, "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?" ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰ The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴ They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. ³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the

Son of Man?"³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Beginning of sermon at 8:30 am:

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The disciples know the prevailing understandings of why someone would be born with a disability: one view said it reflected the sins of the parents, while the other view held that the fetus must have sinned inside the mother's womb. How will Jesus, their teacher, help them to understand which is right? How will he settle the dispute between these two viewpoints? He doesn't! Jesus doesn't adopt either one of the prevailing views. He doesn't debate the fine points of sin and affliction from birth; he doesn't answer the disciples' question who's to blame. Instead, Jesus makes some mud with his spit and goes about healing the man.

Beginning of sermon at 11:00 am: A reflection with the children on my worst bicycle wreck as a child, which was entirely my fault. The neighbor whose door I went to didn't ask me why I had wrecked; he just helped me.

Both sermons continued:

When we see something wrong, we want something to blame it on, something we can understand -- cause-and-effect, preferably one simple cause. But Jesus doesn't take time to get wrapped up in a blame game. The disciples see the man born blind as a problem to analyze, but Jesus sees him as a person, a person in need of healing, an opportunity for God to work. But it's important to distinguish what Jesus meant when he said the man was born blind, "so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus has rejected the idea of a scorekeeper God who causes someone to be born blind as punishment—either for the sins of parents or for sins in the womb. But does that leave us with a God who says, "I'll cause someone to be born blind and live into adulthood as a beggar, so that Jesus will happen along one day and my works can be revealed?" This isn't much better!

Jesus instead takes the disciples into the realm of mystery--beyond what we can explain through cause-and-effect. How God works is often a mystery, and why a person would be born blind is a mystery. Yes, today's technology can give us a list of medical reasons, but behind all of those reasons still stand the bigger questions, "Why?" and, "What place does God have in this?" Trying to force the answers to these bigger questions out of the realm of mystery can result in cruel oversimplifications: "If the parents didn't sin and the man didn't sin, then God must have done it."

But there is a different way. There is a different way, if not fully to understand situations like these, then at least to come to terms with them. Plenty of things wrong with our world can be directly attributed to human sin, sometimes individually, sometimes systemically. But other things can't like natural disasters, true accidents, or a baby born with a disability or birth defect. Even when we can't understand these situations to our satisfaction, we don't have to succumb to "paralysis by analysis." We can still count on God to *redeem* the situation to love us and support us and help us grow, and to help us see meaning in tragic situations, whether the result of human sin or not. A classic example is that thousands of lives have been saved by the improved safety standards brought about from the sinking of the *Titanic*.

God redeems the tragedy of a man born blind by Jesus' healing that many more people than the man himself. God's redemption has a ripple effect, and so the healing of one man spread the Good News of Jesus to his neighbors and acquaintances, to his parents and to some Pharisees.

God's works were revealed in this man far more powerfully than if he had always been able to see, and came to be a follower of Jesus, then talked to the very same people about Jesus but without the experience of being healed. After the man receives the ability to see in the regular sense, he also became able to see Jesus truly, to believe in him and worship him. Had the man not needed to receive his physical sight, he might not have gained his spiritual sight. We live in a broken world with more of its share of mystery. But the good news is that the brokenness can become the occasion for God's works to be revealed. And our own brokenness can be the way for us to gain the ability truly to see God in Christ, and to give that witness a powerful ripple effect into the lives of others.