

4th Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2023
John 9:1-42

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Three years ago, the last time we had these readings before us today, we were in the very early days of the Covid pandemic. There was uncertainty. There was worry. Three years later and we are still dealing with Covid, but we have vaccines for that now, and a succession of boosters, so it's not quite as scary as it was. This will be just one more thing that we have to be careful about going forward, like the annual strains of flu that we also get vaccinated against. But having mostly come through the Covid crisis has not brought us to the bright and shining back-to-normal that we may have fantasized about in the depths of the pandemic. Other uncertainties and worries have cropped up to replace the old ones. Now we are more than a year into a full-blown war in Eastern Europe with its own uncertainties and potential for escalation, as that encounter with Russian fighter jets and a U.S. drone this past week demonstrated. And what else happened the past week or so? Oh yeah, a couple of bank failures, and some other banks needing help so that they don't fail. The stock market hasn't taken kindly to that. What else? Right, a former president may be indicted this coming week, with fears of violent protests reminiscent of January 6 two years ago. How do we live with all of this: fears of recession, political disfunction, violence, and even war?

We tend to lose sight of the fact that people of every time and place have faced worries like these, and in fact have faced much worse. A case in point is the community of early Christians for whom the Gospel of John was written. Scholars tell us that this Gospel was written sixty years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, at a time of conflict within the broad Jewish community in the Mediterranean world. And although at one level John is writing about the events of Jesus' earthly ministry, he is also addressing the current events of his own community in the way he is telling the story. And what was happening at the time of writing was that Christians and Jews were separating from one another, going through a divorce, you might say. It is essential to remember that the first Christians were all Jewish, descendants of the people of Israel and Judah. Christians, as they later came to be called, believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, the promised Messiah. Those who continued to be called Judeans, and later Jews, did not believe that Jesus was that fulfillment. The community was polarized.

There is a whole lot to talk about here in this long reading, and I'm not going to have time to do it justice. But I want to make a few observations that I hope will help you to see the relevance of this story to the times we are living in and to your life of faith.

The first thing to be said before anything else, is that John's Gospel has been weaponized, as we now say, in the service of anti-Semitism, and this story today has been employed in that nefarious project. I want to be as clear as I can be that that is a misreading and misuse of John's Gospel. The Gospel itself is not inherently anti-Semitic. The conflict here is not ethnically or racially focused. It is not a fight between ethnic Jews and non-Jews. Everyone here is ethnically Jewish. This is a conflict between religious factions, Pharisees and other religious leaders who opposed Jesus, and Jesus who is advocating a new religious approach. In this way, it's not unlike the rhetorical war between Democrats and Republicans these days. All of them are Americans, even if they each accuse the other of wanting to destroy America.

Second, I want to address the disciples' question to Jesus about the blind man and Jesus' response. They ask Jesus whose sin cause his blindness, his own or his parents'. Jesus' short answer is that the cause of his blindness has nothing to do with anyone's sin. But then we maybe wish he'd left it at that, because what he says next is shocking: "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Really? God made this poor guy suffer his whole life just for this moment

when Jesus and his disciples were walking by, so that Jesus could demonstrate who he is? That seems to be what he is saying, but it doesn't have to be read that way. The disciples asked about the cause of the man's blindness, and Jesus does not give them a cause. But he does give them a purpose that this man's blindness will now serve: to glorify God. What I think we should infer from this is that when people are in unfortunate circumstances it is not because they deserve to be, or because God caused them to be this way. Jesus wants to discourage this traditional and instinctive attitude that I think is as common today in our culture as it was in the ancient world. But the purpose suffering can serve – not its cause, but what we can do with it – we can use suffering to glorify God when we become the instruments of God's love in caring for those who suffer and helping to alleviate their suffering.

Third, this story continues the light and darkness theme that I've talked about over the past two weeks, a theme that goes right back to the beginning of the Gospel. Jesus has come to be light in the darkness, but we love the darkness rather than the light. The resistance to Jesus' healing of the blind man here is an illustration of that. Those who claim to know God's will and to speak for God do not recognize their own love of the darkness, and they do not recognize the true light. There is an ironic reversal in this story between the man born blind and the religious leaders. And there is a double meaning. This is not only about physical blindness and sight, but spiritual blindness and sight. The man born blind starts off physically blind and also in the dark about Jesus. Over the course of the story he first gains his physical sight, but then gradually comes to "see" who Jesus is. At the same time, the religious leaders are moving in the opposite direction. They are the most enlightened representatives of their people, but they refuse to see what is right in front of them. They are so focused on the Sabbath law that they fail to recognize the work of God in the blind man's cure, or that God would even care about such a man.

Fourth, and finally, this story of the blind man is an image of coming to faith in the early church that culminates in baptism. I mentioned last week that these Lenten texts from John were used in the early church to teach new Christians the basics of the faith. Today's story was used to help teach baptism. Because John wrote it that way. We heard Jesus in last week's conversation with the woman at the well speak of himself as a source of living water gushing up to eternal life. What we missed in the texts between that one and this one is Jesus repeatedly speaking of himself as the one sent from God. And so because we skipped those chapters, we miss that when Jesus tells the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam, and are then told that Siloam means "sent," is that this clearly is an allusion to being baptized into Jesus. The man, who was born entirely in sin, as the story says – not because he was blind, but because *all of us* are born in sin – he went and washed in the pool called "sent" and came back able to see. Get it? John's original audience certainly did.

How do we live in uncertain times, and times of polarization, and dysfunction? The answer of this story is that we look to the light who has come into the world. That doesn't magically transform difficult times into easy ones. There is going to be uncertainty, polarization, and dysfunction, and we are likely to be negatively affected by them. The man born blind was expelled from his community for looking toward the light. But he was also comforted by Jesus in the midst of his difficulty. Looking to Jesus, living our lives trusting in the promise of our baptism, the promise that his love, forgiveness, and mercy are for all people, runs counter to the ways of the world. It will make us enemies of those who prefer to use God, or the idea of God anyway, in the service of their own self-serving agendas. But we have the promise of Jesus' comforting presence with us, and the honor of mediating that comforting presence to each other in our weekly gatherings and our ongoing care for one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. Let us look to the light, and reflect that light to the world around us. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.