

For those who were unable to join us for worship online today, here is Pr. Jim's Sermon. Join us next Sunday at 10:15am for more livestream Lenten worship!

Today's Gospel reading: John 9:1-41

Let it never be said that the Beaver Lutheran Church adult Sunday school class is afraid of hard questions. Over the past few weeks, we've been wrestling with the book of Job together. It's no easy book, filled with hard questions about the nature of God and human suffering; but the class has been up for the challenge.

In the midst of the conversation, someone asked, "is the coronavirus God's way of punishing the world?" Some verbally agreed, some nodded, and some dared not move a muscle lest they inadvertently express an opinion and then be held to it. As you may know, one of the themes of Job is the unjust suffering of innocent people. So the next question raised was, "what about innocent people who die from coronavirus? Is God using their death to bring others back to God? Is that justice?" Well perhaps, some pondered, no one is truly innocent. Maybe there is no such thing as the suffering of innocent people because, in one way or another, we are all sinful and all deserving of punishment.

I have struggled with these questions often in my own life whenever I encounter tragedy or struggle. There is a comfort in thinking that God inflicts suffering because at the very least, it shows us that God is in control. But at the same time, isn't God supposed to be loving? How can a loving God make people suffer?

It is so very important that we think through these challenging questions, and I am so grateful to the Sunday school class for having the courage to ask them. The heart of those questions is this: "who sinned, individuals or societies, that coronavirus is spreading among us?"

Enter today's gospel reading.

In today's story, Jesus and his disciples are walking along and they encounter a blind beggar on the side of the road. The disciples use the man as an object lesson, asking Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This becomes the preoccupation of the story: "who sinned?" Did the blind man sin? Did his parents? Does Jesus sin when he heals the man on the Sabbath? Someone must have sinned, so who!?

The disciples and Pharisees, and even the blind man's own parents, all believe that the man's blindness is the result of sin; but Jesus dismisses that idea outright. Who sinned? "Neither this man, nor his parents," Jesus responds. Which is to say, "no one."

So why was this man born blind? What is the cause of his suffering? If he is suffering because of some guilt, what is the guilt? If he is innocent, why is he blind? Job's question of innocent suffering lies at the heart of the disciple's question. And Jesus gives an answer.

But not the answer you think.

Your Bible has a faulty translation. Well, actually it probably has several, but today I want to talk specifically about John 9:3-4. The NRSV reads like this: "Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.'" But here's the thing: the words "he was born blind" are not present in the original Greek. That was added in later by translators struggling to understand the text.

The passage should read: "Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned.'" Period. And then: "In order that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day."

It changes the meaning completely, doesn't it? In the NRSV translation, the implicit theology is that God made this man blind so that God could then heal him and be glorified. That's pretty sadistic, isn't it? In this theology, God makes the man suffer blindness, ridicule, and social derision all so that God can look good when Jesus heals him. People have used this faulty translation to attribute all kinds of suffering and struggle and evil events to God, all in the name of "revealing God's glory." I don't know about you, but I don't want to believe in that God.

In the more faithful translation, Jesus doesn't answer the question of why the man is born blind, but he also doesn't attribute the blindness to God. Jesus is less interested in speculating about why innocent people suffer, and more interested in ministering to people in the midst of their suffering. While the disciples, the Pharisees, and even the blind man's own parents objectify him as a case study in the problem of evil, Jesus sees the blind man in his full humanity. While the others stand around and speculate about this child of God, Jesus jumps in and helps him.

John's gospel shows us that our God is a God of relationship and that Jesus restores the relationship between God and humanity. Jesus does not draw all people to himself by inflicting sufferings upon people; Jesus draws all people to himself by taking on their sufferings through the cross (John 12:32). It is only by joining in our sufferings, not inflicting them upon us, that God is able to restore a mutual relationship of compassion, love, and friendship with humanity.

We can sit in our socially distanced isolation and wonder "who sinned?"; but that would be to miss the point. Jesus does not get bogged down in that question and neither should we. Who sinned? "neither this man, nor his parents." No one is to blame; it is what it is. We can sit around and speculate and treat our suffering world like a case study, or we can jump in and do something about it.

Coronavirus is spreading. One way we love our neighbors is by quarantining ourselves and not contributing to the spread of the disease. But in isolation, the temptation to loneliness, fear, and despair compounds. Instead of giving into the fear and despair, reach out—we might not be able to enjoy each other's physical presence, but we can still email, text, call, video chat.

Don't live in isolation and don't let your neighbor do so either. When we reach out in these ways, we remind each other that Christ has restored our relationship with God, and God is always with us.

And if a moment should come that your neighbor desperately needs you: go. Jump in. Be there. Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Jesus laid down his life for us; now we get to do the same for each other.

So take heart, my friends. Though diseases spread, though fear mounts, though economies falter, our God is alive in this world—not in punishment or vengeance, but in love and grace and friendship.

Amen.