



Lent 4 (A)

Who Sinned?

[RCL]: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

That long reading from John about the man born blind is always very current. We only need to look at the news, or around town, or in our own lives, to ask the disciples' question: "Who sinned" and thus caused this to happen? Today, let's set aside most all of John's wonderful theology and his powerful metaphor with spiritual blindness, focusing on this question: How can an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God allow totally undeserved suffering to exist in the world that we believe God both created and loves?

The question is a hardy perennial; it's been around since folks started thinking about what it means to have only one God who is just, loving, and good. So far, there have been no really satisfying answers, no nice, neat conclusions. But the question persists; it has to—to ask this is part of what it means to be a thinking, engaged person. In fact, we human beings seem to be wired this way. Things that happen must have a reason, an explanation—they have to make sense—if we're going to wrap our minds around them.

So, Jesus saw a man blind from his birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" There it is, that hunger for some explanation in the face of tragedy, pain, and suffering—especially tragedy, pain, and suffering that apparently make no sense, that we can neither understand nor justify.

We know about this. We know that much of our pain – and the pain in the world – is hard to understand. It's like the fate of the man born blind; it just happens. So, we all ask our own versions of "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" We ask why there is so much pain; why people, especially good people, get sick or get hurt when it isn't their fault. We ask why so many die so young. We wonder why families so often do not work out the way they should work out, the way everybody wants them to work out. We wonder about earthquakes and tsunamis. We wonder about a lot of things.

The disciples wanted to understand this tragedy – and with it, other tragedies. Sure, if the man had become blind because of his own carelessness, or if someone else had blinded him on purpose, then it would still be a tragedy, but it would make more sense; it would be easier to deal with. But that's not what happened. So, the disciples ask.

One of the traditional answers in Jesus' tradition had been that tragedies such as this are a case of God visiting the sins of the parents on the children. Both Numbers (14:18) and Deuteronomy (5:9) say this quite specifically,

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and it had become a common proverb: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” The parents sin, the children suffer. While this isn’t particularly reassuring, it is at least *something*; it does offer an explanation. It shows how God, who has to be a part of everything, could also be a part of this.

But there were problems with this answer. It just didn’t feel right. Many of the great thinkers in Israel’s tradition, notably the prophets Jeremiah (31:29) and Ezekiel (18:2), had flatly and very specifically denied this. They had insisted that God did not skip generations, that God treated people as individuals and not as heirs of someone else’s sin. So, there was a contradiction in the tradition. It was a puzzle.

By and by, some other rather ingenious teachers came up with an interesting alternative. Perhaps, they speculated, a child could sin while it was still in the womb. Being born blind would be punishment for that sin. Again, while this was a really weird explanation, it was at least some sort of answer. There was some justice to be found, some sense to all of it—even if it wasn’t good sense, even if it felt less right than the earlier answer.

So, when the disciples asked Jesus their question, they were asking Jesus to choose from the two standard, traditional answers to the ancient question of “Why?” They were asking for an answer to the ancient cry for meaning and justice.

It’s important to realize what Jesus does when he responds to this question. First, he rejects both options. In doing this, Jesus is rejecting all explanatory answers to the question of “Why?” He doesn’t say, “No, *that* is not the reason, but *this* is.” Instead – and this is very different – Jesus refuses to make sense of this situation by explaining it in terms of either the divine will or human sin.

So, he rejects the explanation that bad things happen because the victims are bad, or because the devil makes them happen, or because people don’t have enough faith, or because they don’t pray correctly, or whatever explanations folks had come up with before and have come up with since. Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith offers any clear, rational, sensible explanation of senseless suffering. Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith gives us answers to the problem in the way we want answers.

Instead, we’re left with the brute fact that we live in a world that really isn’t fair, a world that is marked by ambiguity and inconsistency, a world that is dangerous. We live in a world where tragedy happens for no apparent reason to folks who absolutely do not deserve it. The point is not that if we just have enough faith then these questions won’t matter, or we’ll somehow understand without an answer. The questions *do* matter, but we will never understand to our satisfaction, and it doesn’t do any good to pretend otherwise.

But that’s not all Jesus says. Jesus says two more things. They are not answers to the question of “why,” and we make several important mistakes if we treat them like answers. The first occurs when Jesus says of the man born blind that through him, the works of God can be made manifest. That is, the place to look for God in this tragedy, or in any tragedy, is not at the front-end of it, causing it to happen. God won’t be found there, sitting in heaven, passing out cancer cells, birth defects, earthquakes, strokes, car wrecks and blindness like some hideous dealer at a high-stakes cosmic poker game.

Instead, the place to find God is in the middle of the mess, in the very worst parts of it, working there to bring

forth something new—not something that fixes the mess, but something that redeems and transforms it. The God who is found there – the God who is active there – is the God who has wounds on his hands and feet and side. It’s the God who knows, who cares, who *remembers* what suffering is like—the God who shares our suffering and pain and who takes it into himself in the vastness of his compassion and love.

Remember, please remember, this is not an explanation of what happens. God didn’t poke the man’s eyes out before he was born, so he would be handy for Jesus to use as a sermon illustration. That’s not the point. Remember what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says: “If it isn’t about love, it isn’t about God.”

Instead, the point is that God can be found in very real ways, even in transforming ways, in the very heart of undeserved and inexplicable pain. That’s the first thing Jesus says.

The second thing Jesus says is this: “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.” Notice that Jesus says “We.” *We* must work the works of God. Tragedy, pain, and suffering are also calls to ministry and to service. This may or may not be a call to fix whatever the problem is – often, we simply cannot do that – but it is always a call to reach out and to care. It is always a call to discover, to bring, and to share the presence of God in the heart of the tragedy.

Note that this isn’t an explanation, either. Terrible things don’t happen so that we can have an opportunity to minister and serve. God doesn’t work that way, either. But the call to such ministry and service is part of Jesus’ response to the reality of tragedy and suffering—not a rationale or a justification for them.

These two things are what Jesus says to the question “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” They’re also the way Jesus responds to *our* cries for explanations.

For us Christians, what makes sense out of the world’s and our suffering is not answers or explanations. Instead, what makes sense out of these is the presence of a God of compassion and love, along with the opportunity to serve. What makes sense out of tragedy is not that we understand it. Instead, it’s that God has taken it upon himself, and that God is present in it and through it, and that God calls us to love him, and to serve him, and to find him, in our own pain and in that of our brothers and sisters.

This isn’t the explanation we ask for; it almost certainly isn’t the answer we want. Still, it’s the truth. It’s honest. And it promises that we matter, that our service and care are important. It promises that we are never alone, never forsaken. God is indeed with us, even in the very heart of the very worst. And that, finally, is enough.

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