

John 9:1-41

⁹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The 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?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He 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.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then 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.” ¹⁶Some 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. ¹⁷So 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.” ¹⁸The 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 ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but 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.” ²²His 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. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” ²⁴So 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.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He 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?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus 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.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near

him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

Gracious God, illumine our hearts and minds by your Word of truth and hope. By the power of your Holy Spirit, may we see what is good and right and true, and may we be stirred to share this grace for the sake of your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Who sinned? Who sinned that the man was born blind? The ancient belief held that disease, deformity, blindness, or maladies of any stripe, were punishment for sin. This belief dies very hard. Somehow I learned to subscribe to it myself as a teenager. I remember being in a jolly mood one day and I went bounding down the cellar stairs.

I literally bounced down the steps to the first landing, turned left to a second landing, turned left again for two more steps to the basement floor. On my last bounce my head caught the framing above...ouch! My immediate thought was; what did I do to deserve a bruised noggin? My question was aimed at God.

Isn't that our assumption, that God is the one who punishes? Isn't that what the Old Testament says? It certainly appears that way. If we follow the theology of the Old Testament, the witness is quite clear that God is the one who hands out punishment. Here's a passage from Ezekiel 7.3-4.

Now the end is upon you,

I will let loose my anger upon you;

I will judge you according to your ways,

I will punish you for all your abominations.

My eye will not spare you, I will have no pity.

I will punish you for your ways,

while your abominations are among you.

Then you shall know that I am the LORD.

There are many other examples. Here's one from the time Moses went up the mountain to receive the second set of stone tablets with the 10 Commandments inscribed on them:

⁶*The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,
‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
(so far, so good)
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation.’*

The idea that God would punish by daughter for *my* sins seems abhorrent today, but no doubt its purpose was to plant the fear of God in the people! God’s punishment is a theme that runs deep throughout the Old Testament (a.k.a. the Old Covenant), which is to say that we come by this theology – that God punishes our sin – honestly.

Yet in our current modern era we know that accidents happen, which have nothing to do with God, and that babies are not born sinners. Of course there are consequences for the poor choices we make. An addicted woman who gives birth while using, will visit her pain upon her new born child, but I don’t for a minute believe that is God’s punishment.

God knows we are human, fallible, and that we make poor choices from time to time. The consequences we suffer are not God’s punishment. Jesus makes that very clear when referring to the man born blind. He said, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned.”* Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Blaming God for it, I believe, is a mistake.

In fact, if we were to hold God solely responsible for our suffering, we would be disinclined to take responsibility for the consequences of our poor choices and actions. This is somewhat related to another piece of dubious theology; “the devil made me do it.” When we can confess to our screw-ups, we will maintain a much healthier outlook for ourselves; and others will be more likely to trust us, even respect us.

Letting go of the old theology is not easy, because it is so deeply imbedded in the stories of our ancestors as they were being formed into a people of God. The Old Testament chronicles the ancient stories of the people’s struggle to trust God rather than their own devices. Their struggle was a very human one, and thus we can see ourselves in their trials and tribulations.

Today, we call ourselves Christians; we are a people of the *New Covenant*, issued forth from God in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The evangelist, John, reveals Jesus to us as the *Word of God*, the Word of God made flesh. In John, Jesus and God are one. In John, Jesus claims the name that God gave to Moses at the burning bush; “I Am.”

Perhaps you remember Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. The woman talked about her people’s expectation of Messiah. Jesus answered her, “I am he.” But what we miss – if our Bible doesn’t have the notation – is that Jesus’ answer was simply, “I Am,” in the Greek text. Jesus responding, “I Am,” reinforces his unity with God; they are one in the same in John’s gospel.

John included in his gospel several “I Am” statements that Jesus claimed for himself: *I am* the bread of life; *I am* the light of the world; *I am* the gate; *I am* the good shepherd; *I am* the resurrection and the life; *I am* the way, the truth, and the life; *I am* the vine. They all refer to the name Moses heard from God when he asked God, “who should I say has sent me?” and God told Moses to tell the Israelites, *“I am* has sent me to you.”

Which is all to say that when we see Jesus, we see God. In his ministry, Jesus revealed a very different face of God. The God who keeps love to the thousandth generation comes to the fore in Jesus. But the push-back from the religious elite was relentless. Those who were the keepers of the Law were rigid and unbending; for them the Law was black and white, and the idea of a forgiving God seemed to be hidden from the light of day.

Jesus, however, in the light of his healing ministry, revealed a loving and forgiving God. Just think of all those healing stories; why was Jesus always healing the people wherever he went? In every case,

Jesus was showing that God's love and power was to be used for healing, not punishment! If the people thought blindness was punishment for sin, Jesus, acting as God incarnate, showed God's healing power instead. In the Word of God made flesh, we see that God wants healing, restoration, reconciliation, not punishment.

Probably the most powerful story of God's desire for reconciliation is the story of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15. The younger son treated his father as if he were dead, then took the money and ran! How could we imagine a story with stronger images of tearing apart? Yet the story portrays a fatherly God, who, like a loving parent, longs for his son's return, keeping vigil, always watching in hope.

Today's story was Jesus' invitation for the Pharisees to give up their black and white thinking about the Law in order to see God in a new light; a light that heals, a light that is freeing, a light that makes new, a light that transcends the rigid boundaries that keep people imprisoned in boxes.

Unfortunately the Pharisees could not receive the same light that Jesus gave the man born blind. Their fear, I believe, was that seeing God in a new light would mean that the whole structure they built around the Law would crumble. Jesus pronounced them blind, because they could not see how the Law could actually be a source of freedom.

The apostle Paul spoke of this spiritual truth in his letter to the Galatians 5:13-14): *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

This story challenges me, and all of us, to an awareness of our own resistance to the light of God, the God who makes all things new. Black and white thinking tends to keep us in the dark. Jesus, however, invites us into the light of this new day. Are we ready to take responsibility for the new life Christ offers us?

O Lord, open us to the opportunity you lay before us this day. Amen.