

## **"Seeing our Way Through Suffering"**

John 9: 1-11

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Second in a series *When Life Happens*

This morning we hear the familiar story of the man born blind. It is a lengthy and well-written account in the Gospel of John, consisting of a drama presented in seven scenes. This morning we will listen to the first two scenes of the drama. In the first scene Jesus encounters the blind man and heals him. The second scene finds the man talking with his neighbors about what has happened to him.

**As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.**

**The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, "Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he"; others said, "No, but he is like him." He said, "I am the man." They said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went and washed and received my sight."**

All of us are born blind.

All of us are infirm,  
dis-abled,

un-able to see what God possibly could be doing

in and through our broken hips, broken hearts, broken homes

in and through an oil spill bigger than South Carolina

in and through disease, disfigurement, death

We seek explanations. . .

Why this? Why now? Why us?

Was it something we did?

Some error, some mistake, some sin?

Was it something our parents did?

The disciples asked these questions, too.

"Why is this man blind? Why this one and not THAT one? Why him and not me? Why must he suffer through life with no sight? Who's to blame?"

The answer Jesus ultimately gives is not much of an answer at all.

***"He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."***

Jesus speaks in riddles. This is not the first time, nor will it be the last. Later on in this account, Jesus says,

***"I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." (John 9:39)***

Wait a minute. Jesus came to give sight to blind and to blind the sighted? I thought Jesus was supposed to heal, not to make people blind.

Those of us who can see stare at Jesus; our mouths hang wide open. We are clueless. Jesus doesn't make sense.

And we WANT Jesus to make sense. Western civilization is founded on a particular way of making sense, a way we learned mostly from the Greeks. As Aristotle, we approach life as a series of problems to be solved. We gather data; we ask questions; we break things down into component parts. This method has much to say for it, but it is only one approach to reality.

The reality we experience in the gospel of John (indeed, the reality we experience in the life of Jesus, the reality we experience every day) is entirely different. It is the reality of mystery.

We wonder about the mystery of sin and suffering.

We marvel in the mystery of God revealing God-self to us.

We wonder about the mystery of Jesus' radical, political actions. He pits himself against the powers that be. He breaks the law! He meets the marginalized. Jesus doesn't hesitate for one second about breaking the law. He tosses out convention in favor of compassion. This drove the Pharisees absolutely up the wall, and it is, finally, what made them want to kill him.

Didn't make sense. Wasn't logical.

We seek logical explanations for suffering, but the conundrum of suffering does not yield to our analysis. *Suffering is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.*

We are blind. We cannot see our way through the darkness of suffering. We need light. We cannot see our way through suffering---through anything---without light.

**"He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."** If we rely only on our logical problem solving abilities, we are blind, deaf, and dumb. We need Christ to put the healing balm on our eyes, to stick his fingers in our ears, to open our sorry throats. We need a larger vision. Christ gives us this, but people also point the way.

Recently, entertainer Art Linkletter died. He was 98. What a delightful man! It was fun to watch the video clips of him that were all over the news. I especially enjoyed the ones where he was talking with children. This man had it easy. What a joyful presence. What a success!

But did you know he was a man of sorrows? Three of his five children died before he did.

Decades ago, Linkletter's young daughter jumped out of a sixth story window. Thirty years ago one son died in an automobile accident; more recently, another died of lymphoma. Linkletter knew the mystery of suffering, and he knew there was more than one way through it. Here is what he said about his experience of suffering, "When you are hit with terrible circumstances, one of two things can happen. It can destroy you, or it can enlarge you."

To put it in gospel terms, you can be blinded or given sight. For Linkletter, suffering was not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be transcended.

Margaret Spufford was a classical historian who knew suffering first hand. As a young woman, she suffered an extreme form of early onset osteoporosis. She would spend much of the rest of her life severely limited in movement, often bedridden. To add to this, her second child was born with a terrible blood disease. That child spent her short 22 years of life in and out of hospitals. Spufford used her own suffering as an opportunity to examine mystery. Spufford

found her only comfort in Christ, Christ who cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

We cannot fathom the mystery of suffering, but we know we have a Savior God who shares in it. This is the astonishing mystery of the center of our faith: God becomes human and completely participates in the human condition, in all its messiness, in all its frailty, in all its suffering.

God enters into the life of a man who has lost three children. God participates in the suffering of a bedridden woman.

God enters the confines and hazards of life--- God threw himself whole into space and time. God's goodness shares our suffering, redeems it, and helps us see our way through it.

We had some friends years ago who were unable to have children. John and Julie are about the same age as me and George. They were married a long time, no children. John told me he used to ask "Why us? Why did God not give us children?" About five years ago at about age 45 and 50 they adopted two little girls from China. Now this wasn't easy on more than one level! John and Julie didn't have much money. It was a huge sacrifice for them to come up with the money to travel to China and go through the expensive process of adoption. Bringing the girls home was only the beginning of the hardships.

Vivianna was about 18 months old when they adopted her. There was no way to know what she had and hadn't been exposed to as an infant. They knew she was very far behind developmentally (she was not walking or talking), but John and Julie really didn't know how very serious things were until much later when Vivianna was diagnosed as autistic.

When they fell in love with their girls, when Vivianna began to communicate with a picture book, when she made the slightest progress in her eye contact, John said he finally knew "why us." God gave Vivianna to John and Julie; God gave John and Julie to Vivianna--- because God's vision was bigger and brighter than anyone had guessed.

God gives us light to see through our suffering.

And finally, this one of our LHPC saints, who recently told me, "There is not much I can do from my sick bed, but I want to be an encourager. I want to use my experience of suffering to help other people. I want to support others in whatever they are struggling with."

We thank God for these saints---entertainers and historians, friends and fellow pilgrims. They help us see Christ, our way through suffering.