

4th Sunday in Lent: I Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41; Psalm 23

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Today in our Gospel from John, the disciples ask Jesus why a blind man was born blind. The problem being, since the man was born blind from birth, how could he have sinned before he was born thereby deserving to be blind? And so, the disciples try next blaming the parents. I do this often. I like to blame my parents. Yet the fact that the disciples want to blame the parents reveals our human tendency to believe that bad things happen to bad people. Because we are somehow okay with this concept of bad people getting their just deserts. But what say we to the situation where bad things happen to good people? This is the harder question to answer. Yet Jesus answers this question for us today. Today Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." And so, think on this. God knew that this man would be born blind. And that he would live at the time of Jesus' incarnation and be of age to speak for himself right when Jesus was walking through this very town, and on this very day for it be the Sabbath. And so God knew everything about this man, his struggles, where he lived, where he begged in the streets, and on what day he would encounter Christ. And so let me repeat this. God knew the very date and time that this man would encounter Christ and be given an opportunity to believe. And God knew this man's heart. Just as we are told today in I Samuel, "The Lord looks on the heart." God had been working on this man's heart all his life. And not through ease or affluence but rather through many years of blindness and having to beg for a living. Suffering both physically and financially. But so why does God permit suffering?

And *I believe*, for we are told of this in scripture, that the world is not as God created. God created the world without suffering, but because of our gift from God to choose, and from not choosing rightly, suffering entered. And God is permitting the world to continue on in this manner for reasons that Jesus explains as not wanting to pull up the wheat with the weeds but rather to allow time for us to be able to choose to believe in him thereby birthing eternal souls up until the time of the harvest. After the harvest, there will be a new world where there will be no more death or pain and God will wipe every tear from our eyes and things will be again as God created.

And if there is one thing that is crystal clear in scripture, it is though it be humankind that creates suffering and not God, God uses our suffering to re-create us into God's image. It makes me think of Newton's Third Law of Motion where every action has an equal and opposite reaction because bad creates good in equal measure if we permit God to work in us through our sufferings.

The Apostle Paul told us about this last week saying: "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Paul does not say that we boast in our ease or our affluence or our health and stability, we boast in our suffering because it strengthens our hope. Yet what is it that we are hoping for? Given we know *who* we are hoping *in*. Our hope is *in* Lord Jesus, but what is it that we are hoping for? And Paul goes on to say that as a result of our sufferings, we hope of "sharing the glory of God."

And there is a double understanding in this statement from Paul when he says: "We hope of sharing the glory of God," because we hope to share about the Glory of God with others that they may see and believe, but also we hope to share in God's glory, because God grows us up into God's image through suffering.

And so, wait, what? Despite suffering, I am to be hoping to *share in the glory of God*? I mean, I hope to bear fruit, and I hope to live a life pleasing to God, and I hope to be able to overcome trials, and I hope to age okay so that I can still get around and accomplish things and so forth, but never once have I actually presumed to hope to *share in the glory of God*. That is a rather large statement. But think on this. This blind man today, did share in the glory of God. Given God's works were revealed in him. We are still reading about this man's response of belief in Jesus two thousand years post occurrence. And can we live with the hope of this glory? That whatever is on our plate, whatever befalls us, whatever we are facing, we can pray, "Lord, how can this glorify you?"

Ironically and sadly the Pharisees demand that the blind man give glory to God by denying Jesus is the Christ. This is the spirit of antichrist, to deny Jesus is the Messiah. We are pointblank told today that the Jews had already agreed that

anyone who confessed that Jesus be the Messiah, they would be put out of the synagogue. And so, I believe, Jesus wasn't upset at the Pharisees all the time because they were sinners like all the rest of us, with their particular sin be self-righteousness...given all of us can struggle with this particular sin at times. I believe that Jesus was upset with the Pharisees and the Scribes, the leaders, and the teachers of the law because they were trying to get people to deny that Jesus be the Messiah, the savior of the world. Yet it is by believing Jesus to be Messiah that we give glory to God.

Conversely, to deny Jesus is the Messiah is to reject God because Jesus says to us, "Whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." And so, the Pharisees in their own blindness are asking this man to deny God by denying Jesus. Ironically, the blind man schools the religious leaders saying: "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." First of all, in saying this, the blind man has more discernment than the religious leaders because he does not commit blasphemy. Jesus warns that to say the work of the Holy Spirit is from an evil source is blasphemy. And here the Pharisees are accusing this holy miracle of being from a sinner. When we call good evil, God doesn't like this. And I believe it is because it hinders others from seeing the work of God. It confuses and misleads others and hinders their belief. It replaces the truth with a lie. And the second thing the blind man is correct in saying is that "if this man were not from God, he could do nothing." And Jesus says the same to us. Apart from me you can do nothing. But with Jesus, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Just as this blind man did. He was strengthened not only through his years of blindness but strengthened to stand up against a lie from Satan and a temptation to deny that Jesus be the Christ. For when Jesus comes to the blind man later, the blind man says: "I believe." The blind man's entire life prepared him for this statement of faith in Jesus Christ. And it wasn't because his life had been easy. And people witnessed this statement of belief in the streets, and it glorified God.

Friday was St. Patrick's Day. And as you may know, St. Patrick was not actually Irish. He was Romano-British. But at the age of 16 Patrick was captured by Irish pirates spending six years as their slave. Which sounds to me like suffering. It was probably a hellacious six years. Yet when Patrick escaped and returned home, we are told he began to prepare for the priesthood and to study the Bible. His pain drove him to immerse himself in the holy pages of scripture, and he was strengthened to return to Ireland to convert a pagan nation to Christianity. I wish we could use our sufferings to convert a pagan nation to Christianity. But more importantly, I believe God wishes this of us. As such I would say that St. Patrick is remembered not really for green beer, but because he chose rightly in permitting God to convert his sufferings to glorify God.

And so, whatever it is that is happening to us, can we trust that God works all things together for our good given scripture promises us that this is true? And are we able to pray, "God, please use my sufferings that Your works be revealed in me?" For this be at the heart of the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.
Amen.