

## Sermon, March 22, 2020

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the ninth chapter.

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 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; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The 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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him."

He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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." Some 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. So 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."

The 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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."

His 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So 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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

The man answered, "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."

They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven

him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus 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." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

### The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, Amen.

I hope all are well as we endure the current health scare that has canceled worship this week and next. Hopefully the coronavirus picture is a brighter one after next Sunday and we can plan to resume worship as usual just in time for Holy Week and Easter. Please do check the website [stmarksoakland@verizon.com](mailto:stmarksoakland@verizon.com) or the Facebook page for updates. Council and I will continue to discuss these things and update you on our plans as the situation changes. We vow to do our best to keep you all safe.

As a protection for our hospitalized parishioners and those in nursing homes I am following the rules of those institutions not to visit except in emergency circumstances. I am avoiding homebound shut-ins as well to make sure I do not carry outside germs to them. I am trying to keep in touch with them by telephone, and have offered to run errands for them as needed. Please try to keep in touch with them too. These are tough times for everyone.

Let's keep each other and our families, neighbors and friends in our community, state, nation, and world in our thoughts and prayers.

The first reading assigned today (1 Samuel 16:1-13) comes from the book called First Samuel, and that doesn't happen very often. It tells the story of God's selection of David to become Israel's king. He was an odd choice when you think about it. David hardly measured up morally to the likes of Abraham or Noah or Moses, and he went on to become arguably an even worse sinner than his predecessor Saul.

David was deceitful and conniving at times. He was guilty of both murder and adultery. Yet while Saul was disgraced and punished for his sins, David went on to become the most successful and beloved leader in Israel's history. What was the secret of David's success? We are told time and time again throughout the David story that, despite his many flaws, "God was with him." Apparently, "Warts and all."

We also just read the entire ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, which is the rather lengthy account of Jesus healing a blind man. Health and healing seems an especially appropriate discussion topic for us these days. (And just in case you wondered, the Blue Cross Vision Plan does NOT cover spit mud ophthalmological treatments. I checked.)

Blindness is referenced over a hundred times in the Bible. Sometimes it is portrayed as an affliction directly and intentionally caused by God, but not always. Where the Bible contains lists of impairments, blindness is always mentioned first. In the ancient world they considered it the toughest disability of all.

One thing most ancient Near Eastern religions agreed on is that only God or the gods could cure blindness, hence the significance of today's story to John's gospel. And by the way, the story's claim by religious leaders that treating blindness on the Sabbath was a violation of the law

is simply not true. In fact, the Talmud specifically exempts any acts intended to assist a blind person from all Sabbath prohibitions.

Blindness was fairly common in the biblical world. One of the leading causes was likely trachoma—a highly contagious bacterial infection. Like today’s coronavirus, trachoma pathogens live mostly inside human cells, so the disease can be very difficult to treat. Scientists have found evidence of trachoma infections in the Near East dating all the way back to the first century BCE.

According to the World Health Organization, even today two hundred million people in forty-four countries are at risk of contracting trachoma. In 2018 alone, more than 146,000 were treated surgically for advanced disease, while eighty-nine million were diagnosed early and successfully treated with antibiotics. Unfortunately nearly two million people are still blinded by Trachoma annually. The W-H-O is working hard to wipe it off the face of the earth. Their initial goal was no new cases by the year 2020. Sadly they didn’t meet it.

The Old Testament Hebrew word for blindness is “ivaron.” In New Testament Greek it is “tuphlos.” In today’s reading and elsewhere in the Bible blindness is a common metaphor for people who are spiritually unaware.

Blind people in the Hebrew Bible include many of its heroes, like Isaac, Jacob, Samson, Eli, Achiya and Zedekiah. Many of the most respected Rabbis of the Talmud had impaired vision, largely attributed to old age.

But the Talmud also warns blindness CAN be a divine punishment for certain serious crimes, like taking bribes or mocking one’s religion. Or combing your hair when it is dry. Or drinking wine straight from the barrel.

I suppose I could talk today about spiritual unawareness. Or maybe what it meant to refer to Jesus as a prophet, or the Son of Man. Or

perhaps why the author of John apparently “had it in” for Jews, especially Pharisees. Considering today’s reading was forty-one verses long, there is certainly a lot we COULD talk about.

But the light bulb went on over my head at verse two. That is where Jesus was asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” I’d love to say, “That was clearly a misguided and outdated way of thinking. You know--that human illness and suffering are punishments from God, and well-deserved.” Unfortunately that way of thinking turns out not to be so outdated after all.

Father Giovanni Cavalcoli is a respected and accomplished Dominican theologian. Who unfortunately believes the three devastating earthquakes that hit central Italy in the latter months of 2016 were direct punishment from God. Why would God destroy buildings, disrupt thousands of lives and kill more than three hundred people?

The good Father said it is because in the previous year Italy officially legalized same-gender unions. His reasoning seems especially whacked, since the list of quake victims included mostly singles, heterosexual couples, the elderly and more than a few young children; including an eight-year-old girl who died shielding her four-year-old sister from harm. (Really? God would do that?)

Father Cavalcoli’s comments led to suspension from his Talk Show at Radio Maria, Italy.

They also elicited strong condemnation from Vatican officials, including Archbishop Angelo Becciu, the Deputy Secretary of State and close personal friend of Pope Francis.

The Archbishop denounced Cavalcoli’s words as, “Offensive to believers and scandalous to those who do not believe;” calling them, “Contrary to the vision of God offered to us by Christ.” Still Cavalcoli remains convinced, and unfortunately, he is not alone.

Various Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders claimed that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment for America, or maybe just New Orleans. Or perhaps the entire planet for a variety of alleged offenses ranging from legalized abortions to lack of support for Israel; Gay Pride events, and the fact that Black people don't study Torah enough.

That last one came from controversial Brooklyn Rabbi Yehuda Levin, who by the way, also agrees with Cavalcoli that homosexuality causes earthquakes. Televangelist Pat Robertson still insists the devastating 2010 Earthquake in Haiti was God punishing the Haitians because their ancestors supposedly made a pact with the devil to overthrow the French in the Haitian Revolution. Rabbi Levin thought Robertson was wrong—that that particular earthquake had something to do with LGBT people in the military.

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And in a nutshell, thank God Jesus said, "Neither." Allowing that sometimes innocent suffering is neither God's will nor anybody's fault. And I believe him, because way back in the Book of Genesis, God vowed NEVER to cause innocent suffering. Truth is, ours is an imperfect world where disasters DO happen. Even seemingly harmless viruses can mutate and threaten much of humanity, like today. But it is also true that more innocent suffering is caused by human beings than by acts of nature.

In fact I recently read where after centuries of fierce government persecution, Christianity had almost been wiped completely off the face of Japan near the end of World War II. Except for two very close-knit faith communities that survived in a couple of remote southern cities. Cities named Hiroshima. And Nagasaki. Yes, the innocent often DO suffer. Don't blame God...

Today Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." And then just a few chapters later Jesus would go on to challenge us saying that we, his followers, will do even greater works of healing than he did. Sounds preposterous, doesn't it? Unless you consider the 146,000 surgeries and countless regimens of antibiotics that cured 89 million cases of trachoma just last year.

Today WE do much of the healing work of God, in his name. Remembering God chose to send Jesus into this imperfect world in the first place not to curse or condemn it. But to save it. To fix it. To heal it.

Jesus taught by example that the proper response to human suffering is not to point fingers, but to extend helping hands, revealing God's love in all we do. Sure, God's work is tough work, often requiring blood, and sweat, and tears. And also sometimes antibiotics and maybe even a little spit and mud. And even though we are unfit to take-on God's work by ourselves, that's okay. Because when we are doing God's work, God is with US. You know—kind of like David. Warts and all.

Amen.