

**The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2023**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

**Seeing Like the Man Born Blind**

John 9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*

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In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells the disciples and us: **“It wasn’t that this [blind] man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him”** (v 3).

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If God is the Father Almighty; if He made heaven and earth; if He therefore made me and all creatures and has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, all my members— in short, if God is responsible for creating each individual person, then why are some people born blind? How can a good and all-powerful God permit people to be born with physical deformities and genetic abnormalities? Why does God make a blind man?

## 3.

This is the problem of suffering and evil. But it’s not just an abstract problem. For us, it often has a name and a face. You might see the problem of suffering in the eyes of your daughter or your sister, of your son-in-law or your close friend. It’s one of the deep questions that man wrestles with in this world. For millennia, philosophers and some theologians have attempted to resolve this problem through reason and logic. Trying to solve it, to come up with a satisfying answer, has been a stumbling block. It trips people up. It’ll trip you up too, if you stare at it too long. In the end, it’s a riddle without a solution, at least without a solution that lets God be God and that also admits the reality of suffering.

The only two “logical” answers to this problem are either to deny God or to deny the one who suffers. The first way puts God on trial. It makes man His judge. It demands that the Creator be subject to His creatures. It fosters doubt about God’s existence or His goodness or His power and ends finally in unbelief. The second way to deal with the problem is to deny the reality of suffering, to justify it, to explain it away. For example, some Eastern religions and Christian Science (which, by the way, is neither Christian nor scientific) teach that suffering doesn’t actually exist but is just an illusion of the human mind. Other people justify suffering by claiming that a person deserves it or that it will be rewarded or made up for in the future. This implies that suffering isn’t as bad or as wrong as it seems. It tries to “make sense” of our suffering.

So how do you explain the man born blind in our Gospel reading? How do you deal with the suffering in your own life and in the lives of your loved ones?

We know what the disciples thought. They had their answer. Since God was innocent of wrongdoing, the sufferer must be the guilty party. He must deserve his suffering. The disciples were so sure that this man was born blind as a punishment for sin . . . but whose? So they ask Jesus: **“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”** (v 2). They saw the man’s blindness as an example of God’s just and righteous wrath against sin. A logical view, but a wrong one.

Jesus answered, **“It wasn’t that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him”** (v 3). These “works of God” are the works done by Jesus in His earthly ministry. He says, **“We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it’s still day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I’m in the world, I am the Light of the world”** (vv 4, 5). The disciples focused on what caused the blindness. Jesus turns the focus to Himself. What will happen to the blind man now? The works of God will be displayed in him for all to see. So rather than seeking the works of God in human suffering, rather than explaining suffering so that it “makes sense” to us, we should look instead to the works of God in Jesus Christ.

## 2.

Then Jesus dives into His work. **Having said these things, He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then He anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to Him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam”** (vv 6, 7). For the benefit of this blind man, Jesus attached His word and promise to the water of Siloam. And the man took hold of Jesus’ word. **He went and washed and came back seeing** (v 7). The first work of God on display in the man born blind is the gift of physical sight. Just as God made Adam’s eyes from the dust of the ground, so from the earth God in Jesus Christ remade the eyes of the man born blind.

It’s tempting to consider this the only point of the passage. He was blind but now he sees. On display is the awesome power of God to deliver from physical afflictions, even those inherited from birth. It might seem like this explains why the man was born blind to start with. He’s been specially selected as the object lesson for an impressive show of God’s strength. He’s a prop for God to reveal His glory in His power to heal. Is that what you want to take away from this reading? Some churches even make the healing power of Jesus the centerpiece of their message. It’s known as the “health and wealth gospel.” Beware, for it really has nothing to do with the actual good news of Jesus Christ.

Even here, the healing isn't the end. It doesn't say that the man born blind lived happily ever after. He actually goes on to experience further suffering. He becomes a target for the scorn of the Pharisees. He endures their verbal abuse. He ends up getting kicked out of the religious community, the synagogue. Honestly, the raw power of God offers no comfort or hope. It leaves us once again with an all-powerful God—an all-powerful who could deliver us and our loved ones from suffering but often doesn't. It might even lead to the conclusion that God is against us, that His power is out to crush us—that, if we make health and wealth the measuring stick.

But there's another work of God on display in the Gospel reading. Along with receiving physical sight, the blind man also receives spiritual sight. When he first meets Jesus, he's given the ability to see earthly things. Only at their second meeting does he come to see fully. There he learns to see Jesus as more than a miracle worker, more even than a prophet sent from God: He's given eyes to see Jesus as the Son of Man, God in human flesh. **Jesus said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is He, sir, that I may believe in Him?" Jesus said to him, "You've seen Him, and it's He who's speaking to you." He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped Him"** (vv 35–38). This—this is what eyes are for. Eyes are made to see the Lord Jesus, and the body is made to worship Him.

### 1.

This isn't just about the blind man. It's also about us.

#### THE WORKS OF GOD DISPLAYED IN THE MAN BORN BLIND OPEN OUR EYES SO THAT WE SEE AND WORSHIP JESUS WITH HIM.

In following this man's story, we—whether we're suffering in some fashion or are completely healthy—we follow him to Jesus. Our eyes are opened just like his. We learn to see Jesus with him, to confess Jesus him, to worship Jesus with him. We learn to know not just God's power but His mercy and compassion. For this is how the good and all-powerful God deals with our suffering: not through logic and reason, not through philosophy and theology, but through the flesh and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus came in the form of a man, as the Son of Man, to bring an end to our suffering by His own suffering and death on the cross.

To bring an end to our suffering . . . that's the part of Jesus' work we don't see yet. Troubles remain, so God uses them for our good. In our weakness, God manifests His power, not by healing but by granting faith. When faced with suffering, what do we need? Not just for that suffering to end. We need our Lord Jesus Christ and His works, His death for our sins and His resurrection for our justification.

Jesus is the only Son of God, my Lord, who has redeemed me and you from death, and He's risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity. This is God's own word and revelation. In it we can be sure that our suffering has been dealt with and that it will come to an end. Having put on Christ in Holy Baptism, our bodies will be raised from the dead imperishable and this mortal flesh will put on immortality. Having seen with our eyes and tasted with our mouths His saving body and blood, our own bodies are readied for the resurrection. Jesus has opened our eyes that we might know His salvation.

So our present sufferings—real and deep—our sufferings lead us to see Jesus again and to follow the example of those who've suffered before us. With Job we say confidently: **"I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another"** (Job 19:25–27). With the psalmist, we confess: **"I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord"** (Psalm 27:13, 14). With St. Paul, we look to what lies ahead: **"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face"** (1 Cor 13:12). Simply put, we have this promise: though we suffer here, in eternity we shall see God's face, which already shines upon us in His Son Jesus Christ.

What a blessed comfort He is for us, **so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction** (2 Cor 1:4).

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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*Revised from a sermon preached for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2011,  
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