A Man Born Blind Meets Jesus

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, (3April), 2011.

Text: John 9:3 “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” ~Jesus

This is our third sermon in Lent on people who met Jesus in John’s Gospel. Does it seem like overhearing conversations in a restaurant? We know who Jesus is, but often the people in these encounters do not know who has reached out to them. Last week we met a rabbi who arranged to meet Jesus at night. Nicodemus, a teacher of God became the religious seeker. Two weeks ago a Samaritan woman met Jesus at a Jacob’s Well. Though a person of questionable credentials, she became, after her encounter with Jesus, a disciple and an evangelist. Today a blind beggar was healed by Jesus during a chance meeting and became a disciple. In the process, Jesus’ enemies found more fuel for their anger at him and those who should see did not and the one who cannot did see!

This blind fellow was begging in a public place when Jesus and his disciples came upon him. Before Jesus did anything to help the man, Jesus instructed his disciples about his blindness from birth. They wondered why he had been born this way. Was it sin of the man or his parents? No, Jesus said, without equivocation. His blindness was to reveal God’s glory. (An odd statement!) Jesus put a little mud on the man’s eyes, and when he washed his eyes at the Pool of Siloam, he could see. This caused a sensation, particularly among Jesus enemies. They debated if he had violated the Sabbath, if the healing was fraudulent, whether the blind man and Jesus were sinners. In all the theologizing the man himself seemed forgotten. Though the authorities wanted to use the man to trap Jesus, he refused, eventually becoming a disciple. Of interest to scholars, this man didn’t know much about Jesus, except his name. He did not have faith in Jesus before the miracle, only afterwards.

The story raises several issues. The disciples asked were his parents sinners that the man was born blind? Or was the man himself at fault, they wanted to know. Then there is the issue of the Sabbath, because Jesus performed the miracle on the obligatory day of rest. There is a third issue of what the miracle signified. Isaiah had prophesied that when the blind saw, it would be a sign that the Messiah had come.¹ Last, there is a peculiarly modern issue. We get hung up on the miracle itself. Was it possible? The ancients were more accustomed to miracles than we. The fact that a miracle occurred seemed not to have caused a ripple among anyone in the story, except the poor man born blind.² He could not believe everyone was talking about sinners, Sabbath

¹ Isaiah 35:5; 6:9-10.
² Although several asked to make sure the newly-sighted man was indeed the blind beggar, John 9:8-9.
breaking and Messiahs. He said, “I only know one thing, that though I was blind now I see.”

Perhaps naïve, but I still believe in miracles. If Jesus is who he says he is, he can do whatever he wants. I am more troubled by Jesus’ answer about the reason of the man’s blindness: “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

If we put ourselves in the blind man’s shoes, this is a question he must have asked himself more than a few times. Why was I born blind? There are several possible answers: (1) Was it punishment? It is interesting how many people when disaster strikes ask some variation of this question. What did I do to deserve this? Jesus categorically rules this out. (2) Was the man’s blindness an accident? ‘Some things just happen,’ we say. Somehow this is no better than the punishment theory, is it? Is there no fairness in the universe? Moreover, this view seems also incompatible with the idea of God. (3) Some might posit a diabolical cause to his blindness, that the devil did it. (4) Finally, we come to Jesus’ own answer: There is a divine purpose to the blindness, or in Jesus’ words: “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” But how can this be, given what we know about the character of God? Jesus is inscrutable on this point. But then again, so is life.

Why do the righteous suffer is a question older than Job. Why the disasters in Japan? Why war in Libya with the innocent caught in the crossfire of belligerents? Why illness in children? With insight, Calvin noted in his comment on this text: “God sometimes has another purpose than punishing men’s sins when he sends…afflictions.” He pointed to the examples of Peter, Paul, Jesus—all executed—not because they were evil but for other reasons. Human punishments and suffering do not, he said, indicate God’s wrath.

We live in an age of science and we expect science to explain everything. But science works on the description of how things happen, not why. Why is more the religious and moral question. It is a special burden for Christians and Jews to explain why given that we believe God made everything. Even if God went off and left us to our own devices, ultimately the blame for making a world where such things happen is God’s. “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” the disciples wondered.

Do you wonder about the blind man and what Jesus said about his blindness before he restored his sight? He must have been blind for 25 or 30 years and was reduced to begging. All so Jesus could someday walk by and heal him? This could make you cynical or faithful! Here’s something else to consider. All of us are essentially blind to God’s plan while we live through it. Few can of us see from God’s perspective. Much of life seems unfair and wrong. But God has his reasons. In the intersection of people and real life there are crosses. Whether they are from the devil or God—at times it feels like it could be by either. But in the suffering God’s plan and love can be revealed.

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3 John 9:25.
4 John 9:3.
5 John 9:3a.
In this respect our suffering is like Jesus’ cross. How can affliction lead to salvation? Yet it did on the cross and that seems to be related to our suffering, as well. “If anyone would come after me, he must be willing to take up his cross,” Jesus said. Jesus wasn’t speaking hypothetically. The Pharisees from the safety of their theological certainties debated about sin, Sabbath breaking and blasphemy. The blind man knew only one thing: “Once I was blind; now I see.” He told the learned theologians Jesus gave him his sight. The authorities missed the point, didn’t they? They were more concerned about what Jesus did wrong than with the poor blind man’s problem! The blind man, paradoxically, sees through their arguments immediately. His blindness revealed God’s glory, just as Jesus said it would. I do not understand why God did not give him sight at birth. But perhaps all we can say is that blindness is not the only form of darkness that people are born with. Perhaps everyone has something for which they need more light, healing and hope. All I know, “I was blind; now I see.” And Jesus did it.

The rest of the story is interesting. The formerly blind man refused to take sides with the authorities against Jesus. They were so enraged at the man that they expelled him from the synagogue. It is also interesting that immediately after the healing, Jesus left the newly sighted man. Later Jesus sought the man out in the market place. Then Jesus revealed to him who he was and brought the man to discipleship. The story ends with his “Lord, I believe.”

After his confession of faith, Jesus said—whether to the sighted man or to us, we don’t know: “For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” More paradox! What I think he meant is this. Judgment is not always punishment. Judgment also results in clarity about what and who are confused. When judgment is rendered, many things clear up. It straightens out situations, relationships and people. The choices about the evidence and verdict are ever before us. We would have to be blind to miss his point!

End

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6 Mark 8:34.
7 John 9:35.
8 John 9:38.