

“With Jesus: Near Siloam Pool”

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

This is the “Job Question” — the one that is asked by many people when times of difficulty come along. Throughout the story of his suffering, Job keeps raising the question: “*I know I am not perfect, but what did I do to deserve this?*” Essentially the disciples are raising the same concern — “*Who did what to deserve the penalty of blindness?*”

Note first: The blindness is viewed as punishment. When you begin with that premise, you almost have to proceed on to the follow-up question: “*Punishment for what?*” The disciples compound the notion by assuming that blame must be fixed. The idea that one could live in a universe where, as one of my T-shirt so elegantly states it, “*Manure Occureth,*” does not compute for them

And maybe not for you. Quite aside from whether or not you like that slogan, I have come to realize that it is more theologically profound than it first appears. This is a broken world in which we live, and that brokenness, sometimes in rather large chunks, rubs up against us every now and again. This ought not surprise us

But often, in the pain, in the frustration, in the sorrow, we want to cry out: “*Why me?*” Or “*Why now?*” . . . or “*Why this?*” We think we want answers; what we really want is to fix blame “*This cannot be my fault! So who’s fault is it?*”

³ Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Jesus basically responds to the disciples (and to Job and to us): “*Wrong question!*” The fundamental issue is not where to affix the blame. The fundamental issue is to see where God might be at work. The question we need to ask over, and over, and over again is: “*Where is God and what is God doing in this moment?*”

The problem, at the beginning, is that we lose focus. The blame-game is about Me . . . the cries of protest are about Me . . . the “why’s” basically come to be about Me. I’ve got news for you: It’s not about you. It’s about God. What’s about God? Everything.

In Romans 8:28 St. Paul says it this way [the Greek literally reads]: “*And we know (οἶδαμεν δε) that to the ones loving God (ὅτι τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν τὸν θεὸν) all things he works together into good (πάντα συνεργεῖ εἰς ἀγαθόν) to the ones according to purpose being called (τοῖς κατὰ πρόθεσιν κλητοῖς οὖσιν).*”

In other words, St. Paul tells us that God is working in everything — every event, every moment, every person, every time — to bring about His purposes. If that is true (and the Bible says it is), then we are missing a lot of what God is doing. Much of what we are missing is what God is busy doing in the midst of the troubles we go through. We miss it because we think “*God couldn’t possible be involved in this!*” We think that because we really think “*There’s no way that I should have to go through anything like this?*”

Jesus says about this blind man: “. . . *he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.*” Jesus doesn’t mean that God treated this man like some twisted puppeteer who delights to disfigure his marionettes. He means that God is working, even in the midst of things we cannot understand or explain, and that His good purposes will come forth if we would just shut up for a moment and seek the answer to this question: “*Where is God in this and what is He doing?*”

So the story reaches a significant point: ⁶ *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, ⁷ *saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.* Jesus is going to show forth the works of God (it's what He does; He told us *"I do what I see the Father doing."* [cf. John 5:19])

As is so often the case, it is done without fanfare. A simple: ***"Go, wash"*** is all that it takes to bring about a life-transforming moment for this man. [By the way, you gotta love both Jesus' humor and that fact that John picks it up — the irony of Siloam = "Sent"]

BUT ... Buried in that simplicity is a momentous reality that we can so easily overlook: The man ***"went and washed."*** He did what Jesus asked of him; he was obedient; he is, in every truest sense of that word, at that moment a disciple. How easy it would have been for him, as we might well do, to begin to question Jesus: *"Why should I?" "What's gonna happen?" "What good will that do?" "Who are you to tell me what to do?"* He does not question; he responds, ***"and [he] came back able to see."***

⁸ *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?"* ⁹ *Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."* ¹⁰ *But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"* ¹¹ *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."* ¹² *They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."*

Now the neighbors get involved (or maybe we should see these folks as the local congregation . . . say one named "St. Thomas"?) They got questions . . . we all got questions. Even when the situation is none of our business — or isn't it?

This man is so transformed by this event, he is unrecognizable to those around him. This has to be more than the fact that he can now see . . . it is feasible that his blindness made his eyes look opaque, or rigidly

centered, and now his eyes are jumping from one object to the next . . . that would be a difference worth noting. But here we have a man who has lived in this community all of his life (20 years? 30? 50? 70? we don't know; probably not the 70, since, as we'll soon hear, his parents were around). The question on everyone's mind is: "*What happened to him?*"

Isn't it amazing that the simplest answer is usually the best answer? "*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.*" Oh, well — that explains everything . . . *That explains nothing!* At least nothing that is at the heart of what we want to know: Why did Jesus do that? How did Jesus do that? Does He do this kind of thing for everybody? Would He do this for me?

But it does answer everything, if we would just settle down for a moment and again realize that this is not about us . . . it's all about Jesus. This blind man has it right. Asked what happened to him, he rightly placed the focus on Jesus. But pay attention! He says "*The MAN called Jesus . . .*" (Watch for it now!)

¹³ *They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.*
¹⁴ *Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.* ¹⁵ *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."* ¹⁶ *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.* ¹⁷ *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."*

Now the religious authorities get into the mix [the waters are going to get truly muddied!] At issue is Jesus' authority to do what He did. That He did it on a Sabbath makes it much worse in the eyes of the Pharisees. It was bad enough that He did it at all.

Theirs is a Catch-22 argument: "*Jesus could not have done this miracle*

because He is a sinner. How do we know He is a sinner? He does miracles on the Sabbath.” Others question that logic (actually they question not so much the logic as its conclusion): **“How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?”** (They could have just as readily asked the obverse: *“How can anyone who does such signs be a sinner?”*) Both miss the significance of the event: To what does this miracle point? *“Where is God in this and what is He doing?”*

Divided as they were, they decided it might be a good idea to go to the primary source: **“So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’”** Pay attention here: Something is going on with this man born blind. There is a movement, a shift in his perspective. As he listens to the debate within the circle of the Pharisees, he is coming to a new awareness that Jesus is more than just *“the man who told me to wash.”* He begins to perceive that Jesus is something more than that . . . Jesus must be **“a prophet.”**

¹⁸ 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 ¹⁹ and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ 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.” ²² 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. ²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

It is obvious, in the view of the Pharisees, the primary source has become tainted. So now they have to question his integrity, his honesty, and his history. Enter the parents — simple folk, apparently; certainly not accustomed to being at the center of a conversation, much less a controversy.

They want out! They do not want to be caught in the middle of a fight between competing religious factions. How do you do that? You feign

ignorance: ***“we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes.”*** They don’t know and they don’t *wanna* know. How much do they resemble us? *“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies,”* is just this side of, *“Don’t ask me about my faith relationships, so I won’t have to own up to having any.”* So back to square one.

This is actually my favorite part of the narrative. ²⁴ ***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.”*** ²⁵ ***He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”*** ²⁶ ***They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”*** ²⁷ ***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?”*** ²⁸ ***Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.*** ²⁹ ***We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”***

In that culture, the man who had been born blind would have been considered something of a buffoon. It is, unfortunately, an attitude toward those with disabilities that persists among us yet today. It was likely true that his blindness kept him from receiving any kind of education or training, and likely left him out of the possibility of finding any kind of employment. But this man shows a savvy beyond formal education; he is able to see clearly now how the opponents of Jesus are thrashing about, looking for something to hold up as evidence to disqualify Jesus.

“Do you also want to become his disciples?” he asks in a most disarming manner. Two things we note here: First, he feigns surprise at their interest. Second, catch that word “also”: This man is coming around to identify himself as a disciple of Jesus. They, of course, jump all over that: ***“NO, NO, NO, NO, NO. You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.”***

And therein lies the distinction. As disciples of Moses, they would claim that it was absolutely necessary to know and obey all 613 commandments

(and that doesn't begin to cover the thousands of laws!) that they had mined out of the Talmud. By contrast, listen to the man born blind: ***“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”*** As we shall see, that is all he needed to know.

³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

He knows the one thing necessary: Jesus gave him sight. These leaders do not have any inkling about Jesus other than they are convinced He is a sinner. The blind man calls this ***“astonishing.”*** All the evidence should convince them that Jesus is anything but a sinner: God listens to Him. God obviously healed through Him. ***“If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”***

Do you recognize the movement in this man? First, he is reluctant even to admit what happened. Then he tells the simple story that he got his sight back. Then we recognize Jesus as a prophet. Now he is confessing the Jesus must be ***“from God”***. That's quite a journey.

As with most faith journeys, however, it is not without risks. They drive him out, labeling him a sinner as well. Again, the logic is circular: You defend this Jesus, whom we have labeled a sinner; ergo, you must be a sinner as well. What this meant for this newly-visioned man is that any hopes he may have harbored to be welcomed into his community were now dashed.

There is a tendency, still alive today, for religious communities and individuals to demonize whatever does not fully conform. A project doesn't go the way one person thought it should and suddenly that group

is devoid of the Holy Spirit. Something upsetting is said, and before there is any attempt at reconciliation the messages fly that Christ is not present in that place.

We arrive at what seems to be the dual point of this narrative.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹ 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.” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

First, the man born blind has now developed into a full-fledged disciple. *“Lord, I believe.”* is the true confession of a true disciple. How do we know this? *“And he worshiped him.”* (The Greek word John uses here means “to fall down prostrate before another”). Jesus comments on this arrival at faith: *“I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”*

We hear that word “judgment” and a little red light clicks on in our subconscious. The expected word here would have been the Greek word κρισις (krisis), “division”; but John uses the word κριμα (krima), “decision.” It comes to mean a verdict of some kind. Jesus is telling us that when we face Him there is always a verdict to be rendered on the evidence before us. Is Jesus who He claims to be? He tells us that is why He came into the world (He would later tell Pilate that He came to bear witness to the truth; it amounts to the same thing).

But now comes this exchange between Jesus and “some of the Pharisees,” *“Surely we are not blind, are we?”* This is the kind of question in Greek that assumes a negative answer; they expect Jesus to

tell them *“Of course, you are not blind. Don’t be silly.”* In effect, Jesus comes back this way, *“The very fact that you have to ask proves you are blind indeed.”* Denial of sin and the effects of sin always results in blindness to that sin. Remember the publican in the temple, ***“God be merciful to me, a sinner.”*** Only in confession can we have forgiveness. When we cloak our sin with pious behavior, judgments against others, self-righteous congratulation (the Pharisee in the Temple, ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other people . . .”***) we blind ourselves (somewhat purposefully) to our sin.

The entire narrative seems to come to this: On life’s journey we are asked to consider what it means to see and what it means to be blind. We are confronted with our prejudices against those who are disabled or “other” or “less than.” We are called upon to look within and take a full assessment of what brings us to faith in Christ.

The final denouement calls us to recognize that faith is seeing that the claims of Jesus Christ are true. We are not just intellectually to give assent to that proposition; we are to fall before Him in total surrender and confidence.

That is what true disciples do.

Amen.