

## Sermon

March 19, 2023 [Gospel: John 9:1-41]

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Grace to you and peace from God who is life, and from Jesus, who is that life in this world, Amen.

Remember my question at the outset of the service? It was not *whether* God intervenes, but *how* God intervenes. My goal is that by the end of the sermon, we will have answered that question: “How does God intervene?”

I’m willing to bet a few of you know the “Parable of the Drowning Man.” It goes like this:

A storm descends on a small town and the downpour soon turns into a flood. As waters rise the local preacher kneels in prayer on the church porch surrounded by water. By and by one of the townsfolk comes up the street in a canoe.

“Better get in preacher. The waters are rising fast.”

“No,” says the preacher, “I have faith in the Lord. He will save me.”

Still, the waters rise. Now the preacher is up on the balcony, wringing his hands in supplication, when another guy zips up in a motorboat.

“Come on, preacher, he says, “We need to get you out of here. The levee’s gonna break any minute!”

Once again, the preacher is unmoved. “I shall remain,” he says. “The Lord will see me through.”

After a while the levee breaks and the flood rushes over the church until only the steeple remains above water. What a sight. The preacher is up there clinging to the cross when a helicopter descends out of the clouds and a state trooper calls down to him through a megaphone.

“Grab the ladder, preacher, this is your last chance.” Once again, the preacher insists the Lord will deliver him and predictably, he drowns.

A pious man, maybe a Lutheran, the preacher is raised to new life on the last day of creation. After a while he gets an interview with God. And he asks the almighty Lord, “I had unwavering faith in you! Why didn’t you deliver me from the flood?”

God, exasperated, shakes God’s head and responds, “What more did you want from me? I sent you two boats and a helicopter!”

Now the story obviously is meant to illustrate a point. For some, the point is this: God helps those who help themselves. Which as you know, is not in the Bible, but comes to us from Benjamin Franklin. *God helps those who help themselves*. The moral here is to be self-sufficient. That is one reading.

This morning, I would like to suggest an alternative. To me the point is that this story illustrates not *whether* God intervenes, but *how* God intervenes – and why that’s important for understanding our vocation, or calling, as Christians. So again, the story illustrates not whether God intervenes, but *how* God intervenes.

Now at first glance, it seems clear that God intervenes as well in today's Gospel reading. Jesus encounters a blind man and physically cures him of his blindness. This sign, in turn, teaches us something about Jesus. It points to His divinity, or more specifically, to the glory of God working through Him, which turns us back immediately to the Gospel reading. Take a look, if you will, at verses 1-4, and answer this question: "Why was the blind man born blind?" The text reads, "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."

So again, why was this man born blind? Was it because he or his parents did something wrong? Was it because he or his parents sinned? Well, clearly not. That however, is the answer we often still hear today. We interpret, or I should say, many interpret sickness, disease, illness, and death as punishment from God. You recall a story I shared some weeks back. When I was a hospital chaplain in seminary, I remember a 21-year-old young woman was brought in who had been swimming and had while she was swimming a brain aneurysm, which effectively spells her end, death. I remember getting there after the mother had arrived. She was with the girl in ICU. The pastor of the mother and her daughter was there already, and I asked the pastor, "Wow, what do you say to somebody in this kind of horrible situation?" To which he replied, "Well, I just told her the truth, and that is that God is either punishing mom or the daughter for something she had done for her sins.

That's revolting. And I'm here to tell you this morning that if you're on the side of Jesus, God does not punish people by making them sick or ill!

Now, Jesus's answer in this text is still less than satisfactory. Again, he says he was born blind "so that God's works might be revealed in him." I don't particularly care for that answer; I don't like the idea that this man served an ulterior motive, his blindness, that he suffered for it, so that God's glory can be revealed.

My view is that we all belong to a fallen creation. That nature as the poet Tennyson said is red in tooth and claw, that death and suffering are things that have been introduced into the world, but are not things that God wants, nor are they things for which God is responsible.

That said, at least, Jesus's answer here is better than blaming people for their illnesses and diseases. God isn't punishing them because they're bad, Jesus shows us.

Whenever we hear otherwise, even if we read it in the Bible, I want you to think here of John 9, where Jesus *rejects* that line of reasoning. In short, as my grandfather used to say, go with Jesus.

Now let's return to our *basic* question. How does God intervene in today's story to heal the blind man? Again, the answer seems obvious, that is, Jesus does it by way of his supernatural powers. God, through Him, physically intervenes. Jesus explains first what he's doing, then he put some mud on the man's eyes, and then he tells the man to

go and wash in the pool of Salome (which we're told means "sent") and *voila*, (I wish I had a Harry Potter wand for that) *Voila!*, the man can see; God has intervened physically to cure him of his blindness.

Now, for many people, this is where the story ends. The whole purpose is simply to believe it, as an expression of faith. But I think that lets us off way too easily. And I think as well, there's something more to the story than simply the little miracle of Jesus curing a blind man. There is, as it were, a bigger miracle. And that's why we have another 33 verses of the story following the incident. This tells me that something else is going on.

So what, as Paul Harvey would ask, is the rest of the story? Well, this morning, I'd like to suggest a deeper, more profound type of divine intervention at work in this narrative. The kind that makes whether Jesus physically cured the man of his blindness, irrelevant.

As a parallel, I invite you to turn to another miracle story in your mind to illustrate this point, namely, Jesus feeding 5,000 people with only a few loaves of bread and some fish. Is the miracle in that story simply that Jesus magically multiplies all the bread and the fish to feed 5,000 people, showing us he could do whatever he wanted, or as a former student of mine from Seattle U once put it, "could fly around and do as he pleases." Is that really the point? Or is the author trying to tell us something more profound? I believe the answer of course is yes. We should distinguish the lesser miracle from the greater miracle, and the greater miracle in the story is this: in the presence of Jesus, *people with no means whatsoever shared the little they had to provide for one another*. The bigger miracle is *sharing*. And that's what the kingdom of God is all about.

And so it is with our Gospel reading for today. Is the meaning here simply that Jesus can do whatever he wants, that through Him God physically intervenes, physically violates the laws of nature to cure a man's blindness? Or is it, as we see it during the 33 verses that follow, how God intervenes *socially* in Christ, like crossing a boundary after boundary, just as he did last week by talking with the Samaritan woman at the well?

Think about it. To religious leaders of the day, sickness was a sign you had been abandoned and punished by God. You were a sinner, or your parents, in this case, were sinners. To be blind or have leprosy meant that you were being punished, which meant you were to be ignored, rejected, and in the case of lepers, cast out of the community entirely. The bigger miracle in this story, therefore, is that God in Christ cuts through *all of that* by reaching out to the least of these, the blind man, and restoring him, as well as the leper, the mentally ill, to the rightful place within the community of God. Wow.

John Crossan author of *Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography*, puts it like this: "Seen from this perspective," he writes, "a leper who met Jesus had both the *disease*, say psoriasis, or in the case of today's story, blindness, and an *illness*, which is to say, the personal and social stigma of uncleanness, isolation, and rejection. Now what if the disease,"

Crossan asks, “could not be cured, but the illness could somehow be healed? This is the central problem of what Jesus was doing in his healing miracles. Was he curing the disease through an intervention in the physical world? Or was he healing the *illness* through an intervention in the *social* world? I presume,” he writes, “the latter; that Jesus, by refusing to accept the disease’s ritual uncleanness and social ostracization, *healed* this man. Miracles accordingly are not changes in the physical world, so much as they are changes in the social world.”

How then, does God intervene in Christ in our story today? *Socially*, that is, by cutting through barriers that kept the blind man on the margins, in the gutter as it were, and restoring him back into the kingdom of God, the fellowship from which he had once been ostracized.

Now, it’s easy to get caught up in debates about whether Jesus could cure people of their physical diseases, or do whatever he wanted, or fly around; but that kind of argument totally misses the point, ignores the greater miracle by focusing exclusively on the *lesser* miracle. Jesus, cures a blind man, okay, but the real healing occurs when that blind man is brought back into, is restored into community. In manifesting the kingdom of God, Jesus fundamentally heals and restores people by reincorporating them back into the community from which they had once been ostracized.

Now, this is really important for us to understand. Many of us, myself included, have prayed to be physically cured of disease for ourselves or a loved one, and not gotten what we wanted. God did not physically intervene to cure my mother of her cancer. It’s easy to conclude, therefore, that either God doesn’t care, or God doesn’t exist, or God is punishing that person.

But if we expand our understanding of *how* God intervenes, which I believe the story invites us to do, we can see that it’s through Jesus first, and then through *us*. As such, we begin to see God at work all around us. And we begin to realize *our* purpose, *our* vocation, *our* calling, when it comes to doing God’s work: God intervenes – and this answers the question – *through us*, when we welcome the stranger. God intervenes – and this is the answer to the question – *through us*, when we welcome people into our church community who have been cast out by our society because of everything from their criminal record to their sexual orientation; and God intervenes, once more, *through us* when we tend to those who feel isolated because they are sick, homebound or in need. God doesn’t help those who help themselves – that’s blasphemy! No, God helps those, as in the “Parable of the Drowning Man,” *who help others*. God inspires them. God works through them. God uses natural causes to bring about *greater* miracles, namely, the re-inclusion of people who have been estranged from true human community and fellowship.

As Christ was God’s ambassador to us, may we therefore be His ambassadors to others. “Joining,” as our Gathering Hymn says, “our hearts with those who weep, that none may weep alone, and bearing one another’s pain, as though it were our own.”

Amen.