

4 Lent Year A

Lections: 1 Sam. 16:1-13; Ps. 23; Eph. 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

As you can hopefully tell from our Gospel reading this morning, the drama as we approach Jesus's final days in Jerusalem is heightening to a full crescendo. A lot has happened between Jesus's empowerment of Photini, the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4, which we heard about last week, and this healing of a man who is blind in chapter 9 that we read today. In the intervening chapters, Jesus is moving back and forth between Jerusalem and Galilee. He keeps performing miraculous signs and being more upfront—to both believers and doubters—about his true identity: the Son of God, the Messiah, the Word made flesh.

But as he both proclaims himself and is acclaimed by others as somehow divine, the doubters become an increasingly angry opposition. Several times, including in the set-up for this morning's passage, this opposition has threatened to even kill Jesus.

Yet, despite this opposition, Jesus is undaunted. He knows who he is and whose he is. There is more vulnerability he has to risk, more of himself he has to disclose to people in his own time and to seekers of the Light throughout the ages, including us, so that we might trust him.

And so, we hear the story of an unnamed man born blind. Like Photini, post-biblical tradition, particularly in the Eastern churches, would give him the name Celidonius. And like Photini, Celidonius's circumstances, his congenital blindness, made him a social outcast, most likely forced to beg and unable to provide for himself.

From the start, Celidonius and his genetic disease pose a challenge to the faith both Jesus's disciples and his detractors have in a God who is supposed to be both almighty and all just. If God is the ultimate source of all goodness, then the evil and suffering we experience must have another source. But if God also is all powerful, then They could and sometimes do intervene to overcome evil and stop the suffering we experience. But in some situations, that doesn't happen, the suffering continues, and that leads to the theological explanation that opens our reading: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

It is important to note that this belief in a natural consequence that is a divine judgement for human error is one that has occurred in many religions and cultures, even for some Christians today. While present in parts of the Old Testament, it was not the summation of how all 1st-century Jews tried to resolve and reconcile this problem of evil and suffering. Other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, from the poetry of prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah to the books of wisdom like Job and Ecclesiastes, assert that there are some situations that have no one-to-one relation between a single human's actions and any suffering that chronologically follows.

Following in that part of his Jewish heritage, Jesus asserts that sometimes a situation of acute suffering which doesn't seem to adhere to the customary rules of cause-and-effect, sin and punishment, is actually a site of miraculous possibility, a chance to witness God's wondrous works, not just for the person who suffers, but for all of who are called to follow him. And so, Jesus heals Celidonius, giving him sight, and beginning a fascinating drama as he, his family,

and his religious community all try to understand what just happened. It leads to Celidonus becoming a disciple and leaves Jesus in deeper conflict with the religious authorities.

But it is at this point, where the evangelists cleverly intertwines a healing miracle with an extended metaphor of physical sight as belief in Jesus, that this story has been misused, particularly by Christians, to discriminate and act unjustly against people with disabilities.

And it is also here where I have to admit my privilege as an able-bodied person. Aside from near-sightedness easily fixed by contact lenses, my body does what I ask of it. The physical world largely conforms to my needs. I don't have to wonder if a new space will have stairs I can't climb or entrances I can't access. If I'm tired, I can rest and not have to worry if people, even medical professionals, think I'm faking it or not trying hard enough.

Our friends and family members who are disabled have experienced all of this and more. So, with these acts of healing that we read about in Scripture, it can be easy to mistakenly conclude that "physical restoration is a necessary component of their entry into the community."¹ So many able-bodied Christians for so many centuries have done so.

And this is not to say, that if you are suffering, especially from bodily illness or injury that you should not ask God for healing and relief. But it is a warning for any of us who are "temporarily abled"² to not confuse healing for wholeness, physical restoration with a much-more important spiritual restoration. As the Australian disability rights activist, Elizabeth Hastings put it, we should also hear Jesus saying to us "this disability is an ordinary part of human being, go ye and create the miracle of a world free of discrimination."³

After all, there was a vitally important moment in the story that can be easy to miss. Because the religious authorities cannot accept that the source of Jesus's power to heal Celidonus is divine, they cast out Celidonus from the community.

But Jesus isn't done healing. He seeks Celidonus out. He finds him. And he loves him, bringing him into his wide embrace.

This then is the full truth of Jesus's response to the problem of unjust suffering: he joins us in it. In the face of a hopeless diagnosis, in the midst of darkest depression, and in all the mundane pains and indignities that come with being human, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, does not abandon us.

No, my friends, instead he will go all the way to the cross to show us just how much he understands our suffering. And then, with his resurrection, he will redeem it, bringing us into the light of true and eternal wholeness. Amen.

¹ Colleen Grant (1998) quoted here: <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/528/705>

² A term coined by disability theologian, Nancy Eiseland.

³ <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/528/705>