

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
*Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on March 22, 2020 (Lent 4 Year A)*

Our Middle School Youth Group has a habit of asking the real, honest, big questions. And over the last few weeks, we have been grappling with the essential and timeless question—if God is good and powerful and loving, why does God allow suffering to happen?

That one word question—why—is a fundamentally human thing to ask. It begins as early as 2 or 3, when we ask incessantly—Why? Why? Why? We are wired to make sense of the world around us, to try to understand what happens and why.

But sometimes, we are too quick to answer the why. At the beginning of this morning's epic Gospel, Jesus and his disciples encounter a blind man—let's call him Ben. At that time and place, and really in many times and places since, blindness meant much more than not being able to see. It also meant exclusion. The people who are blind that we encounter in the Gospels are usually found begging by the side of the road. Many had no other way to earn a living. To be blind meant to live outside of human community.

Jesus' disciples want to know-- why is Ben blind? There must be a reason why he was born blind, why he suffers, and we do not. There must be some way to justify this apparent injustice. The reason they propose—which comes from one strand of thinking at the time—is that this Ben's blindness is a punishment for sin. "Rabbi," the disciples ask Jesus, "who sinned—this man or his parents?"

At this point, if you have the bulletin or a bible in front of you, I want you to grab it, and preferably also a pen and pencil too. There are two critical things I want you to know.

- First, in biblical Greek, there is no punctuation. The punctuation you see here is added by translators.
- And second, Jesus' words-- "he was born blind--" do not actually appear in the Greek. Again, this is an interpretation by translators!

Some scholars and pastors have begun advocating another-- and I think better-- translation. I invite you to write it in. Ready? Jesus answered, "Neither this man or his parents sin. End of sentence. Then, cross out the words "he was born blind." New sentence: So that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is still day."

Even before we changed the text, notice that Jesus completely rejects the disciple's question. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus says. He rejects the whole notion that suffering is God's punishment for our sin. And our new translation rejects the idea that there is any reason, any why for Ben's suffering at all. It just is.

Kate Bowler is a professor at Duke. She's a historian who studies the so-called prosperity Gospel—the idea that, as she puts it, "if you are good and faithful, God will give you health and wealth and happiness." Then, at the age of 35, a year after the birth of a much longed for son, she was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. She says:

Despite telling myself, "I'm just studying this stuff" ...when I got my diagnosis, I suddenly understood how deeply invested I was in [this] theology. If you live in this culture...it is extremely difficult to avoid falling into the trap of believing that virtue and success go hand in hand. The more I stared down my diagnosis, the more I

recognized that I had my own quiet version of the idea that good things happen to good people....The gospel of success drove me to achieve, to dream big, to abandon fear. It was a mindset that served me well until it didn't... until I found myself saying into the phone, "But I have a son," because it was all I could think of to say. That was the most difficult moment to accept: the phone call, the walk to the hospital, when I realized that my own personal prosperity gospel had failed me. Anything I thought was good or special about me could not save me -- my hard work, my personality, my humor, my perspective. I had to face the fact that my life is built with paper walls, and so is everyone else's.

It is so fundamentally human to want a reason, a why. It gives us some sense of control in a world that, as we are now experiencing in a new way, is wildly chaotic and unpredictable. And a God who metes out justice in the here and now is so much easier to understand, so much *cleaner*, than a God whose ways are sometimes beyond our understanding.

In this morning's Gospel, some of the Pharisees think they understand exactly how God does and does not work. The result is tragic. They completely miss the incredible miracle that has happened right in their own community—that a man who was blind can now see, that his life, which was so confined, is now full of promise and possibility. And they miss that the very person of God is present in their midst, in the unlikely person of Jesus.

It is, ironically, the blind man, who can see, who is open to what God is doing in Jesus, which is actually not primarily about restoring his vision. In John's Gospel, Jesus comes to offer us a relationship with him, one that draws us in and holds us fast in the love of God the Father and God the Son. When Jesus hears that Ben has been kicked out of the synagogue, Jesus searches him out and finds him to offer that relationship.

Bad things happen. Sometimes humans cause them. Sometimes they are just accidents of biology or circumstances or natural forces. Often it is some of both. There are no promises that if we are faithful and good, God will protect us from those bad things. It is just, for reasons we can't fully understand, not how God works. But it is exactly for those bad things that Jesus came, and to those hard places that Jesus goes, offering himself. *That* is why we need not fear. Whether we are in the deepest valley or the mountain top—whether we live, or whether we die-- we are held in that loving care. What we *are* promised is that, no matter what happens, we will dwell in the house of the Lord, in our home in God's heart, forever. Amen.