

Jesus heals the blind man

John 9:1-43

The Rev. Bob Becker

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Church of the Holy Cross

My sister, Carol, rarely goes to church anymore. And it's for one primary reason. "All you clergy people want to talk about is suffering," she told me when we stayed with her and my brother in law in Florida last month. "Don't talk to me about pain," she said. "I know all about that. What I want to hear is something that will lift me out of my pain."

I tried to explain that the Bible is filled with stories of great suffering and pain. But those stories provide a backdrop to show us how Jesus comes into our lives to relieve our suffering and bring us the joy and peace God intends for us.

Frankly, that's what's happening in this Gospel lesson. It's about this man who has been living in a world of perpetual darkness all his life –And it is indeed a downer.

Which is probably why the disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned here, this man or his parents since this man's been blind from birth?"

The question goes back to ancient debate over what determines one's future fate: payback for some sin we've committed, or the idea that divine will – God's will – determines what happens in life, or, whether suffering was simply the penalty for sins committed by one's parents.

Frankly, this whole issue of cause and effect of suffering has always bugged me. Somehow, this notion of getting sick or having been run over by a truck or some other horrifying tragedy being the result of some grievous sin has wormed its way into our theological DNA. I still hear people say things like, "What did I do to deserve this?" in times of great pain or some God-awful setback.

The truth is folks -- and write this down -- there's no biblical evidence for thinking like this -- at least not in the New Testament. The truth is, it's just not true. And right here in this passage, Jesus says as much. "Neither this man nor his parents did anything to make him deserve his blindness," he tells them. But God will take his affliction and work wonders for all to see. Indeed, Jesus had no interest in the origins of the man's blindness. His only concern was about relieving the man's suffering.

But notice something else about this man. Unlike other stories of healing, there's no evidence that the man is a person of great faith. No indication he even knows about Jesus. He doesn't call out to him. Doesn't ask to be healed.

My sense is that he simply accepted his condition—almost to the point of indifference and ultimately to the point of despair. His despair was born, I suspect, in the thought that nothing will ever change in his life. And so he closed himself off to any hope of a better life.

And that, I believe is why Jesus stopped and without any words or questions or expectations. Instead, he silently and meticulously proceeded to apply this strange mixture of dirt from the earth

and saliva from his mouth to the man's eyes. And after he applies the mud, he simply tells the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam.

No promise that anything will happen. There's no quid pro quo here. Just Jesus' compassion for one who has endured a lifetime without experiencing the joy and beauty and wonder of the world around him.

I don't know too many people who have lost their eye sight. But I sure know a lot of people who are blind. I'm talking about all of us who've been spending most of our life groping around in the darkness searching for meaning in our live wanting to be relevant, wanting to be wanted, and wondering and worrying over the direction our lives is taking us.

In one sense, it's a good problem to have, especially during Lent when we take time to dig a little deeper into our souls, do the hard work of repentance. And then, listen to what God is asking us to do with our lives.

For some folks, though, this desire to wallow around in darkness runs counterproductive to what God has in mind for us. I know people who for one reason or another are simply unable to take the first step on a new path that God clearly wants us to follow. They become like that blind man, frozen in place, completely unable to take any step to move out of the darkness into the light of the new life that is waiting for them.

I remember a good friend I used to work with who simply couldn't make the decision to retire. A relatively benign situation to be sure. But he had become traumatized over the prospect of leaving his job – even after 35 years of service. You see, he had lost the love of his life when he and his wife parted after a bitter divorce just two years earlier and he became estranged from his two daughters when his ex-wife took them to Florida. Since then, his workplace had become his only safety zone.

He was trapped by his inability to break out of this pattern of behavior, at least until his friends tried to convince him that there is a new life out there somewhere just waiting for him. And he surely wasn't going to find it by cloistering himself in his office.

That blind man had wrapped himself in that very same cocoon -- at least until Jesus entered the picture, and told him to take one small step toward wholeness. "Go and wash your eyes in the pool," he said. And by simply hearing and responding to those words, a whole new world suddenly opened up before him.

By now, I suspect you all know the punch line. There is a new life out there waiting for us, you know. A life of light instead of darkness, a new lease on life made possible by the Resurrection of Jesus after those terrible three days of darkness in the tomb.

Don't be surprised when over these remaining days of Lent, some completely unforeseen "intrusion" happens in your life. A few words of encouragement maybe, a suggestion or two.

Because it just might be God's way of breaking through to us, to lead us out of whatever darkness we are enduring.

Oh, and my friend? He retired a month after that intervention by his friends. He's now living in Florida where he plays a lot of golf. He sees his precious daughters nearly every day and even manages to have an amicable relationship with his ex-wife.

Over the next few weeks of Lent, ask yourself what is your blind spot. Listen to what God is asking of you, what new direction – a new way of life, what new purpose is waiting for you on the other side of your darkness. And be ready to take the next step toward the light – the light of Christ in our lives.