

Why me?
A Sermon for March 26, 2017
John 9:1-41
Lansdowne UMC

Why me? When troubles come our way in life and they shake us, that's one of the first questions we ask. As soon as we're actually able to wrap our heads around the reality of what's happened, it doesn't take long for the question to follow: why me? When the cancer diagnosis comes, "Why me?" When someone you love betrays you. Why me? When you lose your job. Why me? When a parent dies unexpectedly, or even worse, a spouse, or a child. Why me?

Put yourself in the shoes of this man born blind. Why me? Maybe he asked it himself. Maybe he thought, "What have I done to deserve this?" His condition forced him to beg for bread, likely from the same people day after day, and year after year. And for the most part, they would pass him by without seeming to care. It seems that even his parents got tired of taking care of him. Even though he couldn't see, one imagines that his bigger problem was that people didn't see him. How often is that the problem of the sufferer? We become invisible. This man would be more likely to be tripped on than talked to. For this time and place, this man who was born blind would be justified in asking "why me?"

And yet in this story in John's Gospel, we're not told that the man asks this question. It's actually Jesus' disciples who ask the question. Essentially they say, "why is this man suffering? Why him?" And Jesus' answer is something that we need to pay attention to.

The disciples' question has its premise in sin. Suffering comes from sin. So who sinned? This man or his parents? But Jesus sees this as a false way to understand suffering. "Neither," he says.

But the premise of the disciples' question shows us something about the way we tend to think about suffering. When we ask that question, "Why me?" we tend to either get angry, or feel guilty. Ultimately, Jesus says that both of these ways of explaining suffering are wrong, but it's worth looking at how they play out.

When suffering comes, we say, "well there has to be someone to blame." And so we look for a scapegoat. We look for someone to be angry at. "Was it his parents that did this to him?" Blaming our parents is a very popular thing to do among my generation, and perhaps in yours too. On the other hand, sometimes we're tempted to blame our problems on an entire group of people. To point to them and say, "*they're* the reason for my problems." Still, we can choose to blame God. We say to God "other people aren't suffering like I am. Why did you allow this to happen to me? Why me?" Without ignoring the difficulty of this question, I'll just observe that we more frequently blame God because we're angry than because we actually think that God was out to get us.

But there is another reaction to suffering than to get angry. It's to feel guilty. It's not someone else that I need to blame for my suffering, it's me I need to blame. Was it this man who sinned that he was *born* blind? It's hard to imagine how that would work, which is probably one reason why Jesus' disciples asked the question. When we get guilty, we tend to exaggerate our faults. "Maybe I'm just a bad person." Maybe that's why this happened to me.

I'll just observe that in general, if you flip these two tracks of dealing with guilt and turn them into worldviews, you get two worldviews, neither of which tell the whole story. We generalize from the first one to say "if you're suffering, you're a victim and there is someone to blame." We generalize from the other to say "if you're suffering, it's likely your fault." In the case of this blind man, Jesus dispenses with both of these views.

So who sinned, this man or his parents? Jesus says, "Neither." Jesus will not be simplistic when it comes to suffering. Look at Genesis chapter 1, the very first chapter in the bible. It's a story about creation. Everything God creates, God calls "good." There is nothing that God creates that is not good in God's eyes. God does not look on suffering as good. Therefore God did not create it. If there is human suffering and sickness and death in the world, it's because of sin.

In general, it's true-- scripture is convinced that suffering comes from sin-- but, not from sin in particular, but from Sin in general. Sin, which has upset the order of God's good creation. And so it's false to look at one person's particular sin and to say, "that's why that bad thing happened to them." Things are much more complicated than that, and Jesus won't fall into that trap.

Plus, think broadly about all the bad things you've done in your life. Ask yourself this: if God sent you a piece of suffering every time you did something wrong, do you think you'd still be here? Do you think you'd have breath in your lungs or a penny to put in the offering plate? No.

You're here because God loves you, and gives you each moment of your life as a gift. God sustains you, in spite of your sin.

And so what is Jesus' answer to this man's suffering? It's so that God's work might be revealed in him. It's for God's glory. Now we have to be careful here about what we're not saying. Romans 8:28 tells us that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. God does not desire your suffering. But sometimes because of God's commitments to things like free will, or permitting the natural laws of the world to function, God will *permit* your suffering. Suffering is not good. But in it, God will work for good. In some way, God will work to bring some good out of it.

This is where we need to not be spiritually blind ourselves. We need God to give us the eyes to see the ways in which God's work might be revealed through and in spite of our suffering. We'd always prefer that this would happen by God giving us a miracle to take away our suffering. But we know too well that that doesn't always happen. Things are more complicated than that. But perhaps the way God brought you through your suffering can help someone else. Perhaps one day you're going to be able to walk with someone going through something similar. Perhaps you're going to have a change of heart-- your heart will grow in love and compassion for God and others. We need the spiritual eyes to see Jesus at work.

In this story, the religious leaders have in front of them the plainest possible example of the work of God. It could not get any more plain. And yet they try every possible tactic to dismiss it. We skipped over a lot of this in our reading for the sake of time. I don't usually do this, but

I took out a few large chunks of the reading to make the bulletin insert, so please do go look at John 9 in a real bible sometime.

But the Pharisees try to dismiss the miracle in every way possible. It couldn't be, because Jesus is a sinner. Or maybe the man wasn't blind to begin with. Or maybe this isn't the same man that used to sit here and beg. (By the way, how crazy is it that they don't even recognize the man as the one that had been sitting there all the time? Suffering makes us invisible.). They also say, well maybe he wasn't *born* blind, and so they call his parents to verify. They try to make the man explain how Jesus did it. The man describes the scene: the mud on his eyes, and the trip to go wash in the pool of Siloam. But ultimately he comes to depend on the only thing that any of us can say when God's grace comes into our lives: I can't answer all your questions. But I do know this: I was blind, and now I see. Explain it away if you want. Put me out if you want. But you can't take away *my* story. Well they did drive him out of the synagogue. But they couldn't change the facts of what happened.

Can you imagine being that man right after having been healed? He's never even seen Jesus. Jesus sends him to go wash in the pool, but when the man got back, Jesus apparently wasn't there. Eventually after Jesus hears that they drove the man out of the synagogue, he comes to find him. But the man doesn't even know he's talking to the one who healed him. And so Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man, and the man wasn't sure who he was talking about. Then Jesus he reveals it to be himself, and the full gravity of what has happened hits the man, and he falls down and worships Jesus. Bear in mind that people aren't worthy of worship-- only God is. But Jesus does not correct the man, because the man's worship is not misplaced.

Imagine being that man. At first I would be saying “why me?” Why did this happen to me. Who sinned to bring this about me? Was it somehow something that I did? Was it something my parents did? God, did you bring this on me? Why me?

But then Jesus comes in, and his Amazing Grace transforms the “Why me?” Would would God favor me so much? Why me? I’m a nobody in the eyes of the world. But God has lifted me up. In the words of Mary, “[God] has brought down the powerful..., and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Amazing love--- how can it be?

But God is always choosing the down and out. David, the son of Jesse, had plenty of reasons to ask “Why me?” David was the runt of the litter. He’s the one that gets stuck spending the night out in the fields with the sheep. The last son of many. His father forgets he exists sometimes, or at the very least doesn’t think he’s worth mentioning. His brothers look like kings. But God doesn’t see like humans do. Humans look at outward appearances, but God looks on the heart. And so God chooses David. And God transforms David’s “why me?” David will pray in Psalm 8 “what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?... Lord our Sovereign how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

David will be far from perfect. And there will be times when his sin will bring him suffering and he’ll tear his clothes and cry “Why me?” But David will never bow down and worship any God except the Lord. All his life, David looks to the one God.

What about you? Are you in a “why me?” moment right now? Are you angry? Are you guilty? Let the light of Jesus come into your life. Don’t look at things the way humans do. Ask God to give you spiritual eyes.

Look at your own life in light of the gospel of Christ. There have been times of real darkness in my life. Maybe not by the standards of the world-- by the standards of the world things were going well for me. But God doesn’t see as humans do. Apart from the light of Christ, we can’t truly see. But when I look at my life through the gospel of Christ, that’s when all the hymns come true for me. Why me, Jesus? Why me? To grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be. Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night, but then thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

Why me, God? Why me? Thank you!

I wonder if there is some darkness in your life that you want to invite Christ to bring some light to. Maybe you’re going through some suffering that seems completely pointless.

Or maybe you’ve come to a point of realizing that you simply don’t want to walk in darkness anymore.

If that’s you, I just want to lead you in a prayer. Lord, you see the darkness in my life. You see the suffering. You see the anger and the guilt that I carry. You know them intimately. You bore them on the cross so that I wouldn’t have to be burdened by them. Give me spiritual eyes

to see as you see. Send your light to me. Transform my “why me?” from despair at my circumstances to joy in your salvation. Amen.