



Margaret Poteet
Sermon on John 9:1-12
3/22/2020
The Brick Presbyterian Church

Where Is He?

A healing story. What the lectionary gave us this week is a healing story. When I first started to think about this sermon, the coronavirus was still something that only seemed to be impacting other places. While we knew it would probably reach us at some point, it was hard to think about when that would be or what its impacts would look like. I started to think about a sermon that would encompass the whole of John's ninth chapter, as it all tells of a healing and its aftermath. John's writing technique and story construction are beautiful. The metaphors are full and powerful. Those who were blind see rightly, and those who seem to see clearly are blind in the way that matters.

But, as I sat with this story in a week of cancellations and distance and anxiety, I was drawn instead to narrow our focus. As we still face so many questions in our lives—as a faith community, as a country, and as individuals—I want to invite us to sit with the questions that are asked, and in some ways left unanswered, in this passage.

We are often left with questions, as was the community in this story. The disciples get the first one here, asking Jesus whether the man who was

blind or his parents were to blame for his blindness. The idea that illness or disability was a punishment for sin can seem jarring to our “enlightened” ears, particularly the idea that someone would be born blind because of their parents’ sin. But for the disciples, this was a logical explanation for such an unfortunate circumstance. Surely some wrong must have been done. So who was to blame?

We may not ask such a pointed question now, but we also still search for reasons. We still ask “why.” Why was the man born blind? Why did we get the diagnosis we dreaded? Why has a new virus emerged that is changing our lives so dramatically? “Who sinned?” The disciples recognized something that we can sometimes be tempted to deny. Former pastor at Brick, Michael Lindvall, wrote in a commentary on this passage that “part of us longs for a clear causal connection between what I do and what happens to me, simply because it implies that I can closely control my fortune with my behavior.”¹ We are creatures who search for meaning and for control. It is part of our nature. The narratives that we come up with to make sense of our lives can either help us or hurt us, but we seek stories in any case. It seems to help to identify a reason for everything. This is what the disciples were trying to get at. Why did this happen?

¹ Michael Lindvall, “Commentary 2: Connection the Reading with the World for John 9:1-41,” in *Connections*, 91.

Jesus' response, however, is a resounding refusal to place blame. Here, counter to the underlying theology and wisdom behind the disciples' question, Jesus asserts that this blindness did not come from anyone's sin. The man was not to blame. His parents were not to blame. Even his grandparents were not to blame. This affliction was not a punishment. It existed "so that God's works might be revealed in [the man]" (v. 3b). While we might be glad to learn that this is not punishment for sin, the rationale Jesus gives can be equally troubling. It seems like a rather cruel trick, if God creates things that hinder a person's ability to be accepted fully into society for the sake of self-glorification.

The tiny word which Jesus uses here, "that," could be interpreted as indicating a purpose. However, it could also be read as indicating a result, as one scholar points out. "The man was born blind, not with the purpose that Jesus could heal him, but with the result that 'God's works might be revealed in him,'" R. Alan Culpepper writes.² God did not need for him to be born blind. God did not "will" it. However, the result of his blindness was that God's power was revealed in an undeniable way. The man gained physical sight after his encounter with Jesus, but as the rest of the chapter shows, he

² R. Alan Culpepper, "Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Vol. 1 Chs. 1-9* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 287.

also gained an understanding that in Jesus, God was at work. In Jesus, God was healing the world. Jesus is the light of the world, and the light reveals. It revealed God's power and love through the mud that Jesus made and put on the man's eyes. It revealed God's power and love in the commission that the man was given to go, to wash. He was sent out, and sent out not only to wash in those waters of Siloam—he was sent out to testify to the living water that he had met in Jesus.

As we might imagine, when he did appear to his community, seeing with his own eyes, those who knew him best had more questions. Rather than asking “why,” they wanted to know “who” and “how.” Was this the same man they had seen, day after day, sitting by the side of the gates begging for help? Hadn't they seen him grow up, dependent on others for his every need? Confusion on his identity abounded, even with his own testimony that yes, indeed, it was he. It was too impossible to believe. They didn't wonder why he had been blind from birth, but they wondered how it could be the same person. Surely they knew everything there was to know about him. This sudden, complete change needed to have an explanation.

The light of the world was revealing things, but what it was revealing was difficult to recognize. The community that had surrounded this man,

perhaps without paying him all that much attention before, could no longer overlook him. How had this change occurred? They wanted details. If our news outlets and media are any indication, we also want details. With up-to-the-minute updates on what is happening in our world, we never have to be left in the dark for too long unless we choose to be. Details can be comforting—but they can also have a down side. A clinical psychologist, Dr. Jana Scrivani, said that, “Subjecting ourselves to an endless barrage of tragedies and trauma can foster a real sense of being out of control.”³ Sometimes, knowing every detail can actually make our desire for control, and fear of losing it, worse. But still, we ask. And so did the man’s neighbors.

His answer was as thorough as it could be but, as happens still, having all the details didn’t stop the questions. Now the question shifted to “where.” If this Jesus is the one who healed you, “where is he?” This is a question that the reader is left with, as well. After the man washed at Siloam, we don’t encounter Jesus in the story again until much later, in verse 35. “Jesus is strangely absent,” writes Marianne Meye Thompson.⁴ The man replies to this question, saying simply, “I don’t know.” He doesn’t know where Jesus has

³ Dr. Jana Scrivani, quoted by Nicole Spector “‘Headline Stress Disorder’: How to cope with the anxiety of the 24/7 news cycle,” *NBC News BETTER*, June 20, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/what-headline-stress-disorder-do-you-have-it-ncna830141> Accessed March 16, 2020.

⁴ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 208.

gone. He doesn't even know what Jesus looks like. All he knows is that he was met by Jesus, and that he has been given sight. The light of the world has shone on him.

Perhaps this last question is most poignant of all of them right now: Where is he? Where is Jesus in these days? This question causes us to experience some humility, as the man who was healed did. Mark Ramsey notes this in his commentary. He describes the man's responses to his healing this way: "First a confession of identity, second a testimony to obedience, and finally an expression of humility."⁵ When it comes right down to it, our questions often don't have answers. We may have to confess, "I don't know," more often than we would like. Where is Christ now? It can be easy to say "I don't know," and that would be an honest answer.

But I think we get a hint in this passage. Verse 1 tells us that, "As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth." Jesus was there to see the man. Jesus was there and, without being asked, took the initiative to approach the man, and to heal him. Jesus was there. Evidence of that presence was in the man's sight, testimony, and presence in the community. So what about now? Where is Christ? Christ is here. Even if we can't see him physically, our faith has always been that Christ is here. We can say that with

⁵ Mark Ramsey, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol. 1 Chs. 1-9*, 289.

confidence because, though he died, yet he lives. We can say that with confidence, because we can see the evidence around us. We might see him in different ways. Perhaps you have seen Christ in scenes of neighbors singing together through open windows in Italy. Perhaps you have seen Christ in loving words that have been extended to you. Perhaps you have seen Christ in online gatherings, like this, where we are able to be community even at a distance.

Where are we? We're in our various homes... and some of our community members are finding shelter wherever they can. We're in a time of disrupted schedules and uncertain futures...and some of our community members are still putting themselves on the line to try to help keep us safe. We are in all kinds of different places, emotionally and physically. But this one thing I hope we can know and share. Even while we may sometimes feel like we do not know where Christ is, we actually do. We know where Christ is. Christ is among us, even in our unanswered questions. Christ is among us, as he always promised to be—healing and commissioning, shining his light in this world. Christ's light is revealing where God's works are being done, even in the middle of the most unlikely of circumstances. Let's look for that

light, and share our testimony of what we find with one another. We will not be disappointed. Thanks be to God.