

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
March 26, 2017  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Samuel 16:1-13;  
Psalm 23  
Ephesians 5:1-14  
John 9:1-13, 28-38

Of all the different kinds of questions we ask in life, perhaps the “why” questions are the ones that give us the most difficulty. “Why” questions are often the easiest to ask, but the most difficult to answer, if they can be answered at all. This is especially true when suffering or tragedy is involved.

Maybe it’s human nature to find fault. Maybe it’s a coping mechanism, a way to try to answer questions that ultimately are unanswerable. But there can come a point in life where if we persist in asking the “why” question, we find that it takes us down a dead-end street. The answers we seek are locked away in the vault of God’s impenetrable wisdom.

Such a scenario surfaces in our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who has been blind from his birth. Of all the questions that might be asked, it is the “why” question that comes up: “Why was this man born blind? Who sinned -- him or his parents -- that this happened?”

The question assumes, of course, a direct correlation between suffering, tragedy and sin. The disciples are not the first to make this assumption.

Remember Job's friends? Job's friend Eliphaz said to him: "Stop and think. Does the innocent person perish? When has the upright person been destroyed?" (Job 4:7)

Job's friend Bildad had this to say to Job: "Your children obviously sinned against [God], so their punishment was well deserved" (Job 8:4).

And Job's friend Zophar pleaded with Job and said: "Get rid of your sins and leave all iniquity behind you. Then your face will brighten in innocence" (Job 11:14).

When the disciples see this blind man, the automatic assumption is that someone is to blame. Someone is at fault. Someone did something wrong. This man was born blind, and there *must* be a reason why.

Indeed there is, says Jesus. But the answer is not to be found in the places the disciples customarily look for it. The answer to this man's blindness is not to be found in some tidy system of cause--and--effect, some neatly manicured theology of *quid pro quo* where suffering and misfortune are always the direct result of someone straying off the path.

The answer to this man's blindness, says Jesus, does not lie in the well-worn places you disciples look for it. There is no blame to be placed here, no fault to be found. There is no one person at whom the finger can be wagged and pointed.

Nobody “ticked” God off or made God angry. *This man was born blind so that the power of God could be seen in him.*

In the mystery of God’s providence, this man’s blindness is not the *result* of something, but the *occasion* for something. It is not the *punishment* for something, but the *possibility* for something. It is not the sign of *limitation*, but the occasion for *liberation*.

And in the span of a few minutes -- the time it takes for Jesus to spit on the ground and rub the mixture on the man’s eyes and send him to the pool of Siloam - - the man receives his sight. He is never the same again.

I suspect that each of us here today, if we were honest, would be able to say that there is some area of our lives that challenges us and where we are often prone to ask the question, “why?” Why did it have to happen this way? Why did it have to happen at all? What did I do wrong, that things are as they are?

And we may even bring our questions to Jesus. Why Jesus, did things work out this way? Or perhaps this question, a personal favorite of mine: Jesus, what’s wrong with me, that things happen the way they do?

If you’re here today, and you have a “why” question that keeps rising to the surface of your life, I’d like to ask you a question: *Is it possible that this area of your life that seems to be full of darkness, that perplexes you the most, is the very place in your life that God wants to use to show forth his power and glory?*

Is it possible that God wants to help you stop asking “why” so that you can move forward and begin focusing on what it is that God wants to do in this area of your life?

Is it possible that God wants you to lay down your burden of guilt over the way things have been, and to step out and trust him for what *might be*?

As we come to the Lord’s Table, I invite you to bring all of your “why’s” with you. Bring them not so much to receive answers, for sometimes answers aren’t enough even when we receive them. Instead, bring them here to Jesus. Bring them and ask Jesus to reveal God’s power through them. Open yourself to the glory of God shining through what you don’t fully understand. You might be amazed at what you begin to see.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.