

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year A
2 March 2008
St. Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri

John 9:1-41

In the name of the one holy and undivided trinity, one God. AMEN.

Over the past two weeks of this Lenten season, we have overheard incredible conversations between Jesus and two individuals as related to us in John’s Gospel. And, in these conversations and the situations surrounding them, we have seen light and dark holding prominent places in the story – as they do throughout the Fourth Gospel.

First, there was Nicodemus - a teacher of the Hebrew law and a member of the Jewish religious leadership – who came to Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness. This one who came to Jesus, curious and seeking answers to questions. This one with whom Jesus talked about being born from above – a spiritual birth – a chance to make one’s life new.

And, the Samaritan woman – a woman coming to draw water at Jacob’s Well – who encountered Jesus in the bright light of the noonday sun. This one to whom Jesus first revealed that he was the promised Messiah. This one with whom Jesus talked about “living water” – the kind of water that would quench human thirsts so that those who drank of it would never be thirsty again. This woman who left her water jar at the well and ran into town to bring her neighbors and friends to meet the “Savior of the world.”

Today, we have moved further into John’s Gospel and have been observers of a drama, a drama that brought together dark and light - a drama that has unfolded in four acts.

In the first act of this drama, Jesus restored the sight of a blind man, bringing light into a world that had been forever dark - ever since this man had been born.

In the second act, Jesus exited the stage, and the man with newly found sight was questioned by those around him, questioned about just what had happened to him and how his eyes had been opened.

In the rather lengthy third act, the man was brought before the Pharisees who investigated the healing that had occurred. First, they interrogated the man himself. Then finding that avenue of investigation unsatisfactory, they brought his parents in for questioning. Then, finally, after the parents wouldn't answer their questions, they re-interrogated the man who had been healed by Jesus and were only angered by his answers to their questions. The act ended telling us that the Pharisees "drove him out."

And, in the fourth and final act of this drama, Jesus came back onto the stage, revealing his true identity to the man. And, the man whose sight had been restored believed and worshipped Jesus.

The act and the drama concluded with Jesus speaking of spiritual sight – an ability to see the light, God's very presence and being revealed in Jesus – and spiritual blindness – a darkness that prevents one from seeing Jesus as God incarnate in human flesh.

Well, it is indeed quite a story. A story that presents a preacher with a true plethora of possible sermon topics.

For a preacher, this story is sort of like standing at the front of the line at a buffet table, where you can see so much incredibly delicious food in front of you that you know you just can't eat it all in one sitting. At least, you know it wouldn't be wise to try to eat it all in one sitting.

So, where can we begin? Today, I'd like for us to take a small bite out of this big buffet of a story. I'd like for us to go back and look at the first few verses of this story and how the drama began .

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi (teacher), who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

This drama began with Jesus' disciples asking just who was the cause of this man's blindness – surely someone was to blame for such a tragic thing to have happened. Was it the man who was blind or was it his parents?

Now, the disciples should have known better, they should have known that apportioning blame, pointing a finger at sin, was not what Jesus' ministry was all about.

Just a short time before Jesus' healing of the blind man, he had been presented by the Pharisees with a woman who had been caught in adultery. Here the question of sin must have seemed a whole lot more straightforward than it did in the situation of a man born blind.

Yet, even in that situation, the one that would seem so straightforward, Jesus had refused to point the finger at sin and to get involved in a blame game. No, instead he had sent the woman's

accusers away without a word and in this freely given acquittal – “Go your way and from now on do not sin again” - he urged the woman to begin a new life, different from her past.

Now the disciples must have known what had happened there with the woman caught in adultery, maybe they had even been right there with Jesus when that situation happened - but they just didn't seem to get it. Because, here they are asking about sin and blame again.

One writer has suggested that Jesus' answer to the disciples' question about the cause of the man's blindness was really a rebuke. Can you imagine an exasperated Jesus, standing with his hand on his hips, maybe even rolling his eyes just a little bit and saying –

“What are you asking me? You're asking the wrong question. Sin isn't the point. You're looking for someone to blame. And, there's is no such cause and effect like that here.”

Okay, so sin isn't the point here. No one's sin – not the blind man's nor his parents' sin – caused the blindness.

But, what is the point?

He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

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What was Jesus saying here? Was he saying that God put this disability on this man just so Jesus could heal him? Did God create suffering just so Jesus could take the suffering away and prove something to the Pharisees and others?

No, I think Jesus was trying to tell the disciples that all of us are born – whatever gifts or deficits we may have - for one purpose. The purpose we are given life is so that God’s works can be revealed in us. So that we can bring glory to God. Each of our lives – including the blind man’s life – present an opportunity to manifest God’s work of bringing light to the darkness.

And, then Jesus said,

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.

We? We, who? Who is this “we” that Jesus was talking about?

I think he must have been talking about all of us, all believers, all of us who have seen the light of God’s presence in Jesus. We are the ones he was talking about.

Personally, I’d like to think that the disciples finally got what Jesus was talking about. I’d like to think that, as Jesus put the mud in the man’s eyes and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, it was the disciples that recognized what Jesus was talking about and that they were the ones who helped the man find his way to water, to the pool of Siloam, so he could wash his eyes and see.

They realized that they, too, had to work the works of the one who had sent Jesus. They had become the light of the world because of Christ’s presence in them.

One of my favorite authors was Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest who died several years ago but who left us with many wonderful books reflecting his deep spirituality . In his book *The Sabbathical Journey*, he wrote this,

“We spend a lot of energy wondering who can be blamed for our own or other people’s tragedies – our parents, ourselves, the immigrants, the Jews, the gays, the blacks, the fundamentalists ...

“But Jesus doesn’t allow us to solve our own or other people’s problems through blame. The challenge he poses is to discern in the midst of our darkness the light of God. In Jesus’ vision everything, even the greatest tragedy, can become an occasion in which God’s works can be revealed.”

Nouwen went on...

“How radically new my life would be if I were willing to move beyond blaming to proclaiming the works of God...All human beings have their tragedies...We seldom have much control over them. But do we choose to live them as occasions to blame, or as occasions to see God at work?”

I think Henri Nouwen had it right when he asked this question. And, it is a question which is worthy of our attention and our reflection.

In this Lenten season, may God strip away our tendency to seek blame and to point the finger at someone else’s sin or even to point the finger at our own sin. Instead may we grow in faith and love, seeing the events of our lives and the lives of others as opportunities for God’s works to be revealed.

AMEN.