

March 22, 2020

Why So Much Trouble?

John 9:1-7

Fourth in a Series of Sermons, “Questions of Lent”

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As Jesus passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed 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.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last week we studied the story of the thirsty nation of Israel grumbling and complaining and quarreling with Moses and God about their lack of clean drinking water - the question, “Why Do We Quarrel? Two weeks ago, we explored the account of God asking Abram to pull up roots and move to a destination unknown. We imagined the questions of his wife and servants, “where are we going? Are we almost there? How much farther?” And three weeks ago, we studied the account of Adam and Eve falling into sin and then God’s first four recorded questions - Where are you? Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten of the tree that I commanded you not to eat? To Eve - what is this you have done?

Today’s sermon theme started out to be “Why was this man born blind?” But in light of the coronavirus and all of the trouble it has brought along with it, the theme morphed into “**Why So Much Trouble?**”

Two answers to this question today - 1) The Theological Answer, and 2) The Practical Answer

The Theological answer to the question “why so much trouble” is that we would go looking for God. In our text for today, the disciples were perplexed about this beggar’s blindness. On the one hand, many Old Testament rabbis had been teaching that the sins of parents are punished in their children, but one or more prophets like Ezekiel had taught that every individual must bear his own sin. And so they it just didn’t make sense to the disciples that it could be the blind man’s specific sin, since he was born blind. And neither did it make sense that if God was a loving and gracious God, that he could allow such misery to be passed onto a son for his parent’s iniquity.

So also today, in these days of trouble that most of us have never seen the likes of, we wonder if these outbreaks of disease and death should be blamed on specific groups of people? Shall we blame this pandemic on the Chinese? How about that older generation which is being hard hit? Or maybe it’s the spoiled baby boomer generation? Of maybe we should point our fingers at everybody’s favorite punching bag - the millennials?

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Jesus answers *clearly none of the above, but that the works of God might be displayed in us. We must work the works of the Father who sent Jesus while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.*

The rest of this sermon is an attempt to unpack what Jesus means with this answer. Jesus would teach us that in days of trouble instead of looking back to find a possible cause of sin, we should rather look forward to the divine purposes which God may have in permitting such trouble. To be sure, all suffering in this sinful world is the outcome of sin in some way or another, but this is only half the story. The other half is that the works of God could be displayed in us as we endure whatever God is asking us to endure. It is that God’s omnipotence could be displayed over and against human impotence. That God’s works of mercy and grace could be displayed for everyone to see. The verb “should be manifest or displayed” implies that the works of God are often hidden from general view.

Which brings us back to the theological answer of why there is so much trouble in these days, which is that God is hiding from us so that we would come looking for him.

Speaking of hiding, I remember as a North Dakota farm boy with all kinds of cousins, we did a lot of playing hide and seek. I remember one time playing with cousins older than it - and they didn’t seem to care if I was playing with them or not. At a certain point I found a really great hiding place - I climbed up my favorite tree and waited. And waited. And waited some more. It was quiet, and so I went back to the house, only to find out that they had all quit playing hide and seek, nobody bothered to come looking for me, and they had all gone in to eat!

Luther had much to say about God hiding from us in the circumstances of life so that we would come looking for him. Isaiah in chapter 45 declares, **“Truly, you are a God who hides himself.”** In chapter 55, Isaiah urges, **“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.”**

A professor from St. Paul, MN, has this to say about why God might hide from us, *“One hides initially, of course, so as not to be found. Yet even in the game of hide-and-seek a child initially hides so as not to be found in one place, only later to reveal himself in the safe goal, with a cry, “Here I am.” The game would have no point if remaining forever unfound were its goal. God’s game of hide and seek is not far different, though the “game” is a matter of life and death. God hides so as not to be found where people seek him, and reveals himself where he is not sought.”*

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Why so much trouble? The theological answer is that God’s name would be hallowed and his kingdom would come as sinners by the millions would be seeking the Lord while there’s still time, it is that confused and lost folks all over the world would be calling on the name of the one true God while he is still near.

Dear friends in Christ, God hides so that we go looking for him. He does not want to be found in money and all that money can buy, but rather in the preaching and the teaching of His Word, both Law and Gospel. God does not want to be found in the eating and the drinking and the being merry this world offers, but rather in the eating and the drinking local congregations would offer. God does not want to be found in the comforts and the luxuries and the successes and the savings accounts and the pension plans and the good times a healthy economy offers, but rather in the benefits the waters of Baptism offer.

Or to say it another way, and we’re still speaking theologically here, God wants to be found ultimately in the suffering and in the death and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That’s why St. Paul resolved to know nothing among the early Christians than Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Theologically speaking, Jesus would teach us two truths in our text for today.

1. The physical healing of the blind man was secondary to his spiritual healing.
2. Instead of looking back and focusing on the reasons for so much trouble in this world, we do well to look forward to how God will be working everything for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes in the days ahead.

Which brings us to our second point today - The Practical answer to the question “why so much trouble” is that we would go looking for opportunities to serve one another.

It may be too soon to put my rose-colored glasses on for many of you, but I’m going to do it anyway. On the one hand, we have to accept that tragedies are by definition shrouded in mystery. On the other hand, Jesus would teach us this morning that every tragedy is an opportunity for the grace and the mercy of God to be displayed in us. On the one hand, suffering hurts and it destroys, but as soon as we see it through the lens of the cross, we find that it builds character. On the one hand, Satan and the forces of evil have their agenda in this pandemic, but on the other hand Jesus and His angels do as well. On the one hand, the forces of darkness seem to be prevailing in these days, but on the other hand, Jesus has declared us to be the light of the world, every Christian congregation across the world has an opportunity to be like a little city set on a hill where the darkness doesn’t have a prayer.

James writes it this way, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let**

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steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Paul said it this way to the Ephesians, **“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.**

This is the rhythm of Christianity. First, we receive from God His good gifts, and then we go looking for folks hungry for those good gifts. Sunday after Sunday we bask and we revel in the light of God’s grace, and then we go looking for little corners of darkness where God has appointed us to let our lights shine. Day after day, we count our blessings which are too many to number, and then we go looking for folks wondering if anybody gives a rip.

Of course, Christians don’t have a corner on doing good works in the sight of people, but we do have a corner on doing good works in the sight of God. All kinds of folks both Christians and non-Christians are reaching out these days with hearts of compassion and deeds of mercy. But the people of God are compelled by the love of Christ, which makes our motivations different. We serve knowing that the whatever we do for a neighbor in need, we are doing for Christ Himself, which makes the burden seem lighter.

This past week, I saw one of our church volunteers on her knee’s day after day in our church kitchen scrubbing the tiniest of cracks and cleaning out the remotest of corners and helping to give our facility a cleaning like it hasn’t had for a long time. Her cheerfulness was contagious, and you and I know it all started with Jesus Christ on His knees beaten bloody by soldiers who wanted him to hurt, it all started with our Savior stooping down out of heaven and being crucified until he couldn’t breathe anymore, there were no ventilators available for Him, there was no turning back for Him, it was looking forward to his resurrection that allowed him to endure what he endured, it was for the joy that was set before him, the joy of spending eternity face to face with millions of followers, that’s why he kept going until he could declare it is finished, and then into the hands of his Father he could commit himself.

The kingdom of God is like little congregations of believers all over the globe whose cheerfulness is contagious even in these days, many of them have spent decades seeking and finding God in the places where He wants to be found - in the preaching of His Word and in the Sacraments of His Church. These days, they have resist the temptation to pinpoint the reasons for so much trouble. Instead they look forward to God’s purposes being displayed in the days ahead. They see suffering all around them, and their most common response is to get down on their knees night after night, to cry out in their family circles for forgiveness and for the peace and the contentment that only God can give, in the mornings, they make

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the sign of the cross, they remember that they are the precious and the redeemed and the chosen people of God, and then they go looking for opportunities to serve. Their favorite question these days is this one: Which of my neighbors most needs my help today? In Jesus' Name. Amen.