

Our Gospel begins with a blind man. A blind man and a question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

This is how Jesus’s disciples react to the sight of a blind beggar by the side of the road. The question sounds callous to our modern ears and doubly so when we consider that the question is asked by followers of Jesus. They’ve been following this man around Galilee for a good while now; this is John chapter nine, not chapter one. This isn’t their first day hanging around this guy.

But to them, the blind man isn’t a person. He’s just part of the scenery, a chance for Jesus to offer some insightful lesson on the meaning of life. They think they’re being clever when they ask the question–”Who sinned, this man or his parents”--within the blind man’s hearing, because remember, he’s just part of the scenery! Jesus is supposed to furrow his brow, stroke his beard, and offer some sage truism about the meaning of sin and suffering.

But that is not, of course, what Jesus does.

And we should not be too harsh on the disciples. The great question “Who sinned, this man or his parents” echoes across human history. It is a question that sounds within each of us whenever we are confronted with the reality of human suffering. “Who sinned?” we ask silently whenever we see the homeless, the imprisoned, or the suffering. “Who sinned, Lord, to cause this suffering–and most importantly how do I keep this from happening to me?”

We want the easy answers. We want to hear that it’s all someone else’s fault. We want God to shield us from suffering, to tell us it’ll all be alright, that if we play by the rules and eat our vegetables that everything will work out for us.

But Jesus is not about to give us the answers we want. His yoke may be easy, but it never comes made to order in the form we most prefer. And so it goes with our Gospel reading this morning.

You may have noticed that this Lent our lectionary has graced us with many, many long readings from the Gospel of John. I admit that this is a little annoying at times (especially

for the people who have to fit them into your bulletins and then read them in front of you) but I wouldn't have it any other way. Nothing is omitted from the account of the blind man—not his healing, his trial and rejection, his second encounter with Jesus—and there is much to discern in this passage.

There is so much to find! How Jesus heals the man, not by some mystical waving of hands but through the very physical smearing of mud, rejuvenation through Earth just as God shaped Adam from dust at the beginning! How this beggar vagabond defends himself against his entire community with this simple declaration of faith: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” Or how when Jesus hears what has happened to this man he seeks him out to comfort and affirm his faith.

We find in this reading not only one of the most striking accounts in a Gospel full of memorable testaments to Jesus's ministry but also the tale of our own journey of faith and salvation. For in this blind man the works of God are truly revealed.

We start with the problem, a person afflicted from the day they were born. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” the disciples ask. But the problem runs deeper than any one act of sin. We all sin. Spiritually we are all the blind man, regardless of the state of our bodies or abilities, caught up in our own sin and the systems of sin at work in the world around us. We are all those Isaiah writes of who sit in deep darkness and the shadow of death. We are helpless in this darkness - we can do nothing for ourselves.

But there is still hope! “I am the light of the world!” Jesus proclaims as he spits on the ground to make the mud that will heal us. The blind man did not ask for this and neither do we. In fact, we might resist. We might turn away. This man is trying to smear our face with mud he made from his spit! Salvation isn't the stuff of white robes and halos. Salvation is dirty and messy, because that was how Jesus lived his life and that is where we encounter our Savior: in the dirt and mess of our lives.

Some of us can point to an exact moment in our lives when we encountered Jesus. But for others it was a slow journey through messy years and times of great pain and doubt. Like the blind man we sat by the side of the road looking for answers in all the wrong places until Jesus opened our eyes to the light of the world.

But the healing is only the beginning of the Christian journey. There are troubles on the road ahead. The powers of this world resist the light. Obstacles are thrown in our path. The blind man was confronted by people who did not want to see the light, did not want to rejoice in the miracle that had taken place. All they saw was an abnormality to be repressed and shoved back into line.

In today's Gospel the inquisitors take the form of the Pharisees and temple authorities. In our own lives our inquisitors can be friends, family, co-workers, or simply the systems and forces of temptation that drive a wedge between us and our relationship with Christ. Sadly the opponent may even come draped in the trappings of Christian tradition and authority. Whatever form they take, they will be strong and persuasive. They will seem to hold all the power.

The early Christians knew this reality well. So many of the epistles call for endurance because the path of the cross is never undertaken without cost. When we testify to the light that we have seen we risk rejection—or worse. The blind man, finally given his sight, finally able to rejoin his community, is condemned and cast out by that very community. “And they drove him out” is maybe one of the most cutting lines in any of the Gospels.

To be a Christian is to be an exile, as theologian William Stringfellow puts it, a stranger in a strange land. Sometimes the exile is imposed upon us and sometimes we impose it upon ourselves as we set aside our idols and step away from the principalities and powers of this world. The loss hurts. It is messy. And worst of all we cannot always be sure that we were right.

But Jesus never abandons us. He finds us when we are lost, again and again, just as he did the blind man, and the most blessed words we can utter are “Lord, I believe.”

The light of the world will shine upon our darkness and make us children of light.

As Christians we must always examine ourselves. We form ourselves to better see the truth of what God calls us to do in this world, through prayer and through reading scripture and

through our membership in this Body of Christ. God calls us to be children of the light, and our eyes become shaped and attuned to see the light of Christ in the world.

Saint Paul, who himself became blind in order to see the light of the world, writes to the believers in Ephesus, calling on them and upon us to search for the fruit of life in all that is good and true. At our baptism we were called to be as the light of Christ in the world.

In this season of Lent, let us seek the works of light. Let us catch ourselves when we begin to fall into the sleep of complacency, secure in the faith that Jesus is with us now and forevermore. He will find us when we are lost, shake us awake when we are asleep, and lighten the darkness that clouds this world.

May each of us have the grace to admit when we are blind and allow ourselves to see through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. And when we stand face to face with our Redeemer, may we all echo that wise blind man and say “Lord, I believe.”