

Where is God in the Corona Virus?

John 9:1-41

'His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" John 9:2

Well, this is different. I've been a pastor for 24 years and I think this is the first time I have ever cancelled a worship service. COVID-19 has disrupted our lives. It has brought with it death and unemployment and debilitating isolation and loneliness for many. But for a lot of us, it has only brought inconvenience—giving up restaurants or movies or malls or sporting events or corporate worship. As people of God, we accept those inconveniences for the good of all those with which we share this planet. We do it as an act of **love** because we are a people known by love. We do it in **faith** knowing that God is in the middle of this bringing blessings we can't see yet. We do it while speaking a message of **hope** to world.

This Gospel reading from John about the man born blind (a reading set hundreds of years ago to be part of our cycle of readings for today) is very appropriate. The disciples' question "Who sinned" and thus caused this to happen, is our question too. How can an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God allow the Corona Virus to exist in the world that we believe God both created and loves?

The question is like crab grass—it just keeps coming up. It's been around since believers started pondering what it means to have a God who is both perfect and loving. So far, no one has come up with a nice, neat answer. But the question remains. It has to—to ask this is part of what it means to be a thinking, reasoning human. In fact, we human beings seem to be wired this way. We want everything to have a reason, a clear explanation, so that we can understand it and wrap our brains around it.

Jesus and His disciples encounter a man blind from his birth. His disciples asked the age-old question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" There it is. They have a need for some explanation in the face of tragedy, pain, and suffering. And so do we.

We know about this. We know that much of our pain – and the pain in the world – is hard to understand. It's like the fate of the man born blind; it just happens. So, we all ask our own versions of "Who sinned, this man or

his parents?" We ask why we can't be in worship today with other Christians. We ask why school and work and trips and state tournaments have to be cancelled. We ask why there is so much pain and why people get sick or get hurt when it isn't their fault. We wonder about tornados and floods and pandemics.

The disciples wanted to understand this tragedy – and with it, other tragedies. Sure, if the man had become blind because of his own carelessness, or if someone else had blinded him on purpose, then it would still be a tragedy, but it would make more sense; it would be easier to deal with. But that's not what happened. So, the disciples ask.

One of the traditional answers had been that tragedies such as this are a case of God visiting the sins of the parents on the children. Both Numbers (14:18) and Deuteronomy (5:9) say this quite specifically, and it had become a common proverb: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." The parents sin, the children suffer. While this isn't particularly reassuring, it is at least something; it does offer an explanation. It shows how God, who has to be a part of everything, could also be a part of this.

But there were problems with this answer. The prophets Jeremiah (31:29) and Ezekiel (18:2), had flatly and very specifically denied this. They had insisted that God treated people as individuals and not as heirs of someone else's sin. So, there was a contradiction in the tradition. It was a puzzle.

So, when the disciples asked Jesus their question, they were asking Jesus to choose from the two standard, traditional answers to the ancient question of "Why?" They were asking for an answer to the ancient cry for meaning and justice.

It's important to realize what Jesus does when He responds to this question. First, He rejects both options. In doing this, Jesus is rejecting all explanatory answers to the question of "Why?" He doesn't say, "No, that is not the reason, but this is." Instead – and this is very different – Jesus refuses to make sense of this situation by explaining it in terms of either the divine will or human sin.

So, He rejects the explanation that bad things happen because the victims are bad, or because the devil makes them happen, or because people don't have enough faith, or because they don't pray correctly, or whatever explanations folks had come up with before and have come up with since.

Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith offers any clear, rational, sensible explanation of senseless suffering. Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith gives us answers to the problem in the way we want answers.

Instead, we're left with the brute fact that we live in a world that really isn't fair, a world that is marked by ambiguity and inconsistency, a world that is dangerous. We live in a world where tragedy happens for no apparent reason to folks who absolutely do not deserve it. The point is not that if we just have enough faith then these questions won't matter, or we'll somehow understand without an answer. The questions do matter, but we will never understand to our satisfaction, and it doesn't do any good to pretend otherwise.

But that's not all Jesus says. Jesus says two more things. They are not answers to the question of "why," and we make several important mistakes if we treat them like answers. The first occurs when Jesus says of the man born blind that through him, the works of God can be made manifest. That is, the place to look for God in this tragedy, or in any tragedy, is not at the front-end of it, causing it to happen. God won't be found there, sitting in heaven, passing out cancer cells, birth defects, earthquakes, strokes, car wrecks and blindness like some hideous dealer at a high-stakes cosmic poker game.

Instead, the place to find God is in the middle of the mess, in the very worst parts of it, working there to bring forth something new—not something that fixes the mess, but something that redeems and transforms it. The God who is found there – the God who is active there – is the God who has wounds on His hands and feet and side. It's the God who knows, who cares, who is intimately and keenly aware of what suffering is like—the God who shares our suffering and pain and who takes it into Himself on the Cross.

Remember, please remember, this is not an explanation of what happens. God didn't poke the man's eyes out before he was born, so he would be handy for Jesus to use as a sermon illustration.

Instead, the point is that God can be found in very real ways, even in transforming ways, in the very heart of undeserved and inexplicable pain. That's the first thing Jesus says.

The second thing Jesus says is this: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day." Notice that Jesus says "We." We must work the

works of God. Tragedy, pain, and suffering are also calls to ministry and to service. This may or may not be a call to fix whatever the problem is – often, we simply cannot do that – but it is always a call to reach out and to care. It is always a call to discover, to bring, and to share the presence of God in the heart of the tragedy.

Note that this isn't an explanation, either. Terrible things don't happen so that we can have an opportunity to minister and serve. God doesn't work that way, either. But the call to such ministry and service is part of Jesus' response to the reality of tragedy and suffering—not a rationale or a justification for them.

These two things are what Jesus says to the question "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They're also the way Jesus responds to our cries for explanations.

For us Christians, what makes sense out of the world's and our suffering is not answers or explanations. Instead, what makes sense out of these is the presence of a God of compassion and love, along with the opportunity to serve. What makes sense out of tragedy is not that we understand it. Instead, it's that God has taken it upon Himself, and that God is present in it and through it, and that God calls us to love Him, and to serve Him, and to find Him, in our own pain and in that of our brothers and sisters.

This isn't the explanation we ask for; it almost certainly isn't the answer we want. Still, it's the truth. It's honest. And it promises that we matter, that our service and care are important. It promises that we are never alone, never forsaken. God is indeed with us, even in the very heart of the very worst. And that gives us what we need to be the people of God—to stand in the middle of the Corona Virus-ridden world and be known by **love** and live by **faith** and be a voice of **hope**. Amen.