

Sermon ☩ March 19, 2023

John 9:1-41

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It is a puzzling story that John shares with us. It is unique to John's Gospel. And it addresses an age-old question: *"Why is there suffering? Why does God allow suffering?"*

It was, first of all, a radical departure from the traditional Hebrew understanding of suffering. It was the popular belief that a person endured some kind of hardship due to some failing on their part or a member of their family. Suffering was simply a matter of *"getting what you deserved"*.

And then we encounter this wonderful story of Jesus and the blind man (which really comprises the entire ninth chapter). And right from the beginning of the chapter we see that Jesus has a different view of suffering.

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 made manifest in him."*

We hear that . . . and we think, *"Huh?"*

Do we suffer personal and corporate tragedy . . . just so that God can make a point? Does a family die in a tragic auto accident so that a well-intentioned friend can remark, *"It must be part of God's plan?"* Is that how it works? I think not!

Why do *"bad things happen to good people?"* . . . well, just because they do.

Suffering does not necessarily have a relation to sin—but Christianity has something to say about suffering.

Suffering has no necessary meaning in itself, it acquires meaning only as God is allowed to guide and direct it. If God is allowed to guide our suffering, we can grow and become better servants in the kingdom.

For one thing, suffering enables us to develop a greater appreciation of life itself. Through suffering we can be awakened to the fact that life is real and earnest and so very fragile. Life should not be lived flippantly nor thoughtlessly.

During a yacht race in the waters off of the California coast, a man fell overboard. He floated for 36 hours in shark-infested waters. When he was rescued, he had the look of *"another world"* on his face. When asked what he thought about while so near to death, he replied, *"I thought about time—all the time I had wasted in my life."*

Another thing that happens with the pain that God is allowed to guide is that we can become more sensitive, more deeply aware of other people's needs, difficulties and problems.

At many a funeral, I have overheard a family member say, *"I never knew how important it was to have people come to a visitation."*

People who have known tragedy and sorrow are usually more compassionate and understanding, but only if they have allowed God to walk with them. If not, they are usually embittered and angry.

Finally, the pain that God is allowed to guide can make us more serviceable to God. I am well aware that by, early on, experiencing my own sorrow through the deaths of my parents, I have been better equipped for ministry. I understand . . . I've been there. We all deal with our suffering in different ways, and as I am able, I understand the suffering of others.

The man who was born blind was no greater or lesser a sinner than any of us. And remember—God does not have total control over us. Free will means that there will be those who say no to God. That is why we kill each other and destroy the earth and think of ourselves first.

And many tragic things happen . . . just because they do. But when they do happen . . . God is with us.

But, if we allow God to guide us through our suffering, we can triumph . . . even in our troubles.

The pain will not be any less and there is no guarantee that something bad won't happen again.

But maybe our eyes will be opened and we will better understand as we walk hand in hand with our God.