

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Why Did This Happen?
John 9:1 – 41

It is a true privilege to share the gospel with you, *wherever* you may be and *however* you may be. I look forward to the day that we can physically gather together again to worship, and in the meantime, I am thankful for the technology which allows us to gather in our homes and share this worship experience together.

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our hearts] be pleasing to You oh Lord, [our] rock and [our] redeemer” (Ps 19:14). Amen.

Today, we have a wonderful and timely Gospel story about Jesus, a blind man, Jesus’ disciples, and the religious people of the day. And *we* are invited into the story. We see Jesus walking away from the temple after quite the stir. He was nearly stoned to death because of his claim to be preeminent to Abraham and his claim that in so few words, he was *God*. Now, to claim to be God was blasphemy and deserving of death, so the people picked up stones to throw at him, but “Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (Jn 8:59b).

What comes next is *odd*. Jesus doesn’t seem to be self-concerned. He stared death in the face, walks away, and *sees* a man. When *we* are in precarious situations, our hearts pound, our pace quickens, and our vision narrows. But Jesus’ vision here *expands*, and he *sees* a man blind from birth. He sees a *beggar*, a *vulnerable* man who can do *nothing* to serve Jesus. He sees a man who cannot see him.

Jesus *sees* the man, and what do his disciples do? They perceive him, and want to have a theological conversation *about* him. “‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” (Jn 9:2b).

Their question was a fair one. There were a few beliefs of the day that *could* have attributed this man's blindness to sin. One belief was that babies in the womb could sin. Another was that children were punished for the sins of their parents. A third was that when a person died, their soul could go into the body of another. If the soul of the person entering the baby in utero was evil, that person could suffer for it.¹ The disciples translate this encounter with a blind man into an opportunity to get their theological query resolved.

Don't we often do that too? We see a homeless person and wonder what happened in their life, what they did, to become homeless. We hear of people with illnesses like lung cancer, and wonder if they were serious smokers, or what they must have *done*, to cause their cancer. We see someone who has achieved worldly success, and wonder what they must have *done* to deserve their success. We are tempted to blame the victim and attribute enviable outcomes to the goodness or deservedness of the person. The good are rewarded and the evil receive punishment. This is the law of the land and how we train children. Cause and effect.

There are many things in this world that works within the schema of cause and effect. If you wash your hands with soap and water for twenty seconds, the majority of the contaminants will be removed. If you sneeze into a tissue, your germs will be more confined. If we keep six feet of physical distance from one another, Coronavirus will be more difficult to spread from one person to another. All of this is within our control. It's *wonderful*.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 570.

Yet we know that there are *many* things in life which are *out* of our control. We *hate* that. We want to make sense of the world, and so we ask the question *why*. Why did this happen? How could it have been prevented?

In September, Alek and I discovered that we were pregnant! We commented that perhaps we were too old to be doing this, because we knew too much. We knew that sometimes babies don't make it, so we tried not to get too excited. We didn't put together a nursery, decide on baby names, or tell too many people, because we wanted to wait to see if this baby would survive.

As much as we tried to be logical and not get our hopes up too much, something inside us began to shift. We felt ourselves getting excited, especially after my doctor told us that I had a good chance of carrying this baby to term. Time progressed, and we began to believe that this great desire and prayer had been met. We were going to have a baby!

We headed to our second ultrasound appointment with great excitement. Within a few moments, my doctor turned to me and said that she did not see a heartbeat. She would bring in another doctor to confirm. Within a moment, the doctor confirmed that the tissue was no longer living and had not been viable for over a week.

I immediately began to wonder what could be done to bring this embryo back to life. And then I knew that that was not possible. The faces around me communicated that this was finished; nothing more was to be done. My doctor then said that we had some decisions to make to remove the tissue.

We didn't decide anything then, but it didn't take me long to decide that this was *someone's* fault. Did I not eat enough healthy food during my pregnancy? Did my stress suck the life out of this baby? Did my fall the day after I learned of my pregnancy harm the baby? If we had tried to get pregnant sooner, would *that* baby have survived? If we had tried sooner, maybe I would have had this miscarriage earlier, and we could already have tried for another by now.

Alek told me that it would do us no good to try to place blame; it would only hurt us. He of course was right, but I felt the *need* to do this. I couldn't simply *accept* this loss; I needed to process *why* this happened and *what* could have been different. I began to ask the painful questions, the questions people tell you *not* to ask. Was I not good enough, not deserving enough, to have a baby? Did we miscarry because I wouldn't be a good mom? Why didn't God give Alek to someone whose body worked as it should? Why didn't God save this baby?

We received the report from my doctor after the analysis – the baby had had a chromosomal abnormality and wouldn't have survived; this was no one's fault. But as to the *existential* questions that plagued me, no person could answer. I tried to theologically reason – because sin has entered the world, our bodies experience brokenness, and it doesn't mean that the brokenness is our fault. But my reasoning and my inability to place blame on anyone, even myself, didn't help the pain.

We want life to make *sense*. We *crave* answers and solutions. We were given brains to reason and to make wise decisions. We want to protect ourselves, and those we love, from pain. And so we do our best to pray, to seek God's guidance, and

to act with wisdom. But why some have cancer, why some endure so much pain, why the Coronavirus is a part of our lives, we don't know.

We *don't* know, but Scripture invites us to bring these longings, these questions, these *pains* to God. We are invited to join the psalmists who cried out to God. "Why, O Lord, do You stand afar off? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps 10:1). "Why have You rejected me? Why do I go about mourning?" (Ps 43:2b). We are invited to join Jesus, who quoted Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34b).

We are invited to bring *all* of this to God, who *hears* our questions and *sees* us with compassion. We bring our longings, our questions, our pain to the God who is present to us in our distress and is the same One who saw the man and cured him of his blindness. He *didn't* place blame on the man or his parents for his blindness. It *wasn't* because of their sin that this man was born blind, but "that the works of God might be displayed in him" (Jn 9:3b). This man was born blind that the works of God might be displayed in him. This man's blindness was *not* for nothing.

Jesus spits on the ground. He anoints the man's eyes with the mud and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam (Jn 9:6 - 7).

The man obeys. He asks no question and makes no protest. He goes to the pool and comes back *seeing*. He has been cured from a condition that he has had his entire life! For the first time in his life, he *sees*.

His community sees him and proceeds to debate whether or not this was the man they knew who had been born blind. They *don't* offer him words of congratulation, that he is no longer resigned to begging. They *don't* marvel at the

miracle or the One who made it happen. They argue their way through this conundrum and decide that this is probably something best sorted out by the religious leaders.

The man is brought to the religious leaders, and they go through the same rigmarole. *Was* this man born blind and healed? *How* then was he healed? He was healed on the Sabbath, so the man who healed him must not have been from God. But if the healer was not from God, how could he do this kind of healing? The man knows that this man's name is Jesus, and that he healed him. He is a prophet.

The religious leaders are not satisfied and can't agree. Maybe sorting out once and for all if he was really born blind will satisfy them. So, they bring his parents forward and ask them.

They interrogate the parents. Yes, he was born blind, they say. But how he now sees, we don't know. Ask *him*. His parents know that if they say too much, they will be kicked out of their community. Ask *him*, they say.

The man is brought back for further interrogation. The religious leaders are now convinced that this man has been born blind, but that the man who cured him is a sinner. They just want him to *say* it. Agree that this man is a sinner, and they will be satisfied.

But the man *won't* say something he does not believe. He *does not* know whether Jesus is a sinner; he *does* know what has happened to him. And what has happened to him is that he once was blind, but now he *sees*. Jesus must *not* be a sinner because God listened to him. Jesus *must* be from God because never before has someone been healed of blindness. The man is increasingly convinced, but in the

end, he is unable to convince *them* of anything. He is accused of being born in sin, and is thrown out of the community.

As he was at the beginning, the man is alone. But he's not alone for long. Jesus finds him, and reveals who he is. The man believes in Jesus and *worships* him.

Throughout this story, the man demonstrates *remarkable* humility. He bears the accusations of those who claim that he or his parents *must* be to blame for his congenital blindness. He obeys the man named Jesus, who tells him to go wash in a pool. He is the center of arguments concerning his healing and doesn't retaliate or offer biting words. At great risk to himself, he faithfully shares his experience. He does not fight exclusion from the community. He believes and worships the One who healed him.

You are like the man. *You too* are isolated from society. *You too* experience hurt because of that which is out of your control. And *you too* receive the compassion of Jesus. You are seen and known by him. You are *not* forgotten.

And you are invited to be *like* the man. To receive Jesus with humility, to hear his word and obey it, to treat others with kindness, and to believe and *worship* Jesus. You are invited to see Jesus as he truly is and to give your life to him, because he is worthy.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." Amen.