

Going from "Why?" to "What for?"

8th Sunday after Trinity

John 9:1 – 7



Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

1As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

The healings of the blind performed by our Lord Jesus are truly the very best of healings! This is likely because our eyesight is such a wonderful thing. From the very first moment we behold the light of the world until our final hour when we close our eyes, our eyes reveal so many wonderful things to us! After a long life, such images remain in our minds as memories, allowing us to unfold them before us like a picture book—even with our eyes closed. Someone born blind cannot do this; they remain cut off from the outside world.

In Jesus' time, there was absolutely no hope that someone born blind would ever gain their sight. Consequently, there was no hope of them ever being part of the community again. The only remaining question was why such a fate had befallen them. This was precisely the issue the disciples were grappling with when they brought the case before Jesus. "Who is to blame?" they wanted to know. How does all this fit with a just God? How can it be that a just God allows one person to be blind from childhood while another has all their limbs—and many other gifts to enjoy besides? The disciples asked this question, yet they already held a fixed answer in their minds. Their reasoning went something like this: If there is a just God and someone is born blind, then the parents must have done something wrong. Or could it be that a newborn infant is so wicked that God strikes it with blindness right away? The disciples' age-old question persists to this day. Who isn't familiar with such conversations? Here, the world's torture chambers and the extermination of the Jews in Europe are listed alongside the child who met with a tragic, innocent accident; all of them lead to the same question the disciples put to Jesus: How can all this be reconciled with God's justice? Regarding these questions, one must first note: whoever asks in this way possesses, at the very least, a moral standard of good and evil. And usually, this question links that very moral standard to God. Thus, anyone who knows how God ought to act justly is reckoning with God in some way, and by the very act of asking the question, demonstrates that God exists.

And yet, the question is misguided. For it expects a clear answer that does not exist—at least not in our world. The disciples, too, assume there must be a clear answer to the question of who is specifically to blame for the suffering of the man born blind. Interestingly, Jesus does not answer this question with a logical explanation—any more than the Book of Job does. Jesus does something else. He does not respond with an explanation, nor with a philosophy attempting to account for God's actions in a way that satisfies our intellect. No, Jesus seeks to redirect the entire conversation so that we might see the God who acts in our world and believe in Him.

The vehemence of Jesus's rebuke to his disciples is unsurpassed, marked by a resounding exclamation: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned!" Jesus reacts so sharply because the question "Why?" is deadly. Whoever asks "Why?" is looking for the culprit and seeking to accuse the sinner—much like a mother bird does when a chick falls ill and she simply casts it from the nest so the other chicks may live. The question "Why?" is also a question of the Law. The Law accuses, saying, "You did something wrong!" It points out that a problem exists here. And this question concerns not only a blind man in Jesus's time, but all of us. Yes, whenever things go wrong for us or opportunities pass us by, we instinctively ask "Why?" We all know

that God has bestowed certain gifts upon us while withholding others. God has opened paths for us and closed others off. He has granted us joy, but also burdens to bear. And whenever things go wrong, the question of meaning arises: Why? In doing so, we also look for someone to blame—whether ourselves or someone else. In this way, we destroy both ourselves and others.

Jesus radically turns this line of questioning around. He transforms the question "Why?" into the question "For what purpose?" And at the same time, he answers that question by saying: "So that the works of God might be revealed in this person!" Through Jesus, the blind man is to come into contact with God—and in that, he truly finds his fulfillment, whether blind or sighted. One can easily picture this man, born blind, walking to the Pool of Siloam and—for the very first time in his life—being able to see! The Bible depicts the blind gaining their sight and the deaf their hearing in a very tangible, realistic way. And at the same time, it shows us what it will be like when God removes all suffering at once, and the many people who suffered stand healed before God, praising Him in heaven. Yes, this, too, is vividly portrayed for us in physical terms. The healed blind man draws our attention to this future time. Yet not everyone was healed even in Jesus' day. Nor are all people healed of every torment in our own time—not even if we are Christians. Moreover, we would not become truly whole even if all physical suffering were to vanish. If God were to suddenly remove sickness from our fallen world, we would simply take it all for granted without Him. Indeed, it is possible that, free from sickness, we might drift even further away from God. Ultimately, the goal is to be able to say: "Lord, I believe!" That is why the story of the man born blind must continue beyond his healing. Through this blind man, we see in a compelling way how he gains not only physical sight but also spiritual sight, step by step. At first, he finds himself in the unfamiliar position of having to defend Jesus, even though he does not yet know Him. "Jesus, who healed me, must be a good man," he reasons, "for He healed me, after all. Perhaps a prophet, or at least a holy man?" Yet he has not yet grasped the true essence of the matter. Health is a precious gift bestowed upon us by God. But where God is not at the center, life remains spiritually sick, despite physical health. Jesus' words in this context sound mysterious: "I must work while it is day. For the night is coming, when I can no longer work." This sentence almost makes it sound as though Jesus is under time pressure. Yet the meaning is different. Jesus is the Light of the world. It is through Him alone that we dwell in the light. As long as we are in this world, darkness will still prevail. The light exists only in Jesus. There are places in this world where Jesus' light does not shine. There are also places in our hearts where Jesus' light does not shine. We must clearly recognize this. And it is from this perspective that the urgency of Jesus' words arises. Jesus does not want us to remain in darkness. He wants us to remain in the light.

The man born blind stood at the threshold. Physically, he could see. Now, Jesus' light had to shine in his heart so that—whether blind or sighted—he could reconnect with God. Only now does the meaning of Jesus' earlier words become clear; He was responding to the disciples' question about who had sinned—the blind man or his parents. Jesus answers that question through the entire course of the story. He Himself is the light in this world. Whether blind or sighted, what matters is that we are connected to this Jesus. We come closest to the answer regarding suffering when Jesus Himself answers. Honestly, there is no better answer to the world's suffering than through this Jesus—Jesus, who embraces suffering. Ultimately, Jesus answers the question of suffering through His Cross and His Resurrection. For Jesus does not explain to us why some people suffer and others do not. Instead of explaining it all, He places Himself in the midst of all suffering. He takes the Cross upon Himself. He personally takes on the entire suffering of the world. And He overcomes that very suffering through His Resurrection. We should keep this healing of the blind man constantly before our eyes. In doing so, Jesus shows that God does not ultimately desire suffering. That is why He makes His way to us humans. And then, He brings the light to us personally. With the blind man, it was saliva that He placed upon his eyes. Today, Jesus does the same thing by personally placing His Body and Blood into our mouths. That is why we are here today.

Then, the amazing thing will happen once more. Where it was previously dark and unclear, the light of day will suddenly break through. We will be able to see again and be granted hope and a future. And the light begins to shine. Amen.