

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, March 22, 2020
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Mark McLennan

HERE'S MUD IN YOUR EYE!!!

Adam did it.

When God confronted him, Adam nervously blurted, "Eve made me eat that fruit." Well, Eve didn't want to take the fall, either. She blamed the snake.

This is the Bible's way of describing our instinct to dodge guilt by **laying blame**. Find a scapegoat, we think.

When we do not want to face the music, all too often we point fingers. Since we do not want to take the fall, the fall keeps taking us, which is why even kids are naturals at the old duck-and-point.

"Dad, Johnny hit me."

"I did not. And, besides, she hit me first."

What's a **parent** to do? What's **God** to do?

Sometimes we point fingers to dodge responsibility, but sometimes we point fingers to explain what we do not understand.

Just after the 9/11 bombings, various people point[ed] the finger at pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, the ACLU, and People for the American Way.

These folks, the argument went, forced God to lift divine protection from the good ol' U.S.A.

With the COVID-19 outbreak in our own country – the blame game has started again. The Chinese, Arabs, - "foreigners" of all sorts.

Faced with tragedy and confusion, most of us are quick to assign blame.

This instinct becomes most dangerous, however, if we point religious fingers, if we sign God's name to our personal grievances.

Jesus understood that we religious folks do this sometimes, and today's Gospel gives us some idea what Jesus thought about this habit of ours and, more importantly, what he did about it.

Jesus bumped into a man born blind.

In those days religious people assumed that blindness must come from God.

If you were born blind, people wondered whom to blame, whose fault it was.

Had **you** sinned or had **your parents?** It must be someone's fault. Even the disciples thought this way.

Jesus was ready for them. He always is.

He answers quickly, sharply. "Neither," he says. "Nope. Nada. No." Jesus simply refused to help them lay blame.

You see, God does not will human pain in order to punish us.

The Rev. Karl Travis

Just before my dad retired as pastor of a Texas congregation, one of his church members experienced a string of tragedies.

In 11 short months, she lost her father, her mother, and her husband.

She said to my dad, "*People say God doesn't send us more than we can handle. I just wish God didn't hold me in such high esteem.*"

God doesn't send us more than we can handle.

Of all the simple sayings of the Christian faith, I most wish we could reconsider this one.

It suggests that God intentionally sends us hardships, tragedy.

I do not believe God does this.

**GOD TOOK HIM GOD CALLED HER TO HEAVEN
GOD NEEDED ANOTHER ANGEL**

NO, NAY, NAY, NEVER!!!

Instead, I believe God promised that, though bad things happen, God will not abandon us.

You are probably wondering right now, and rightly so, that if God doesn't will human pain, why then does God allow it?

As usual, Jesus is ahead of us.

Immediately after he says that no one is to blame for this man's blindness, he adds that the man was born blind "*so that God's works might be revealed in him.*"

What Jesus means is that God is going to use this seemingly random meeting with the blind man.

You see, God is in the regular busyness of bringing good things from bad things.

Jesus knows that he is about to heal this man, and everyone who sees it will have a solid sign of who Jesus is and why he has come to us.

In other words, his blindness is not this man's fault and nor is it God's will.

Yet God can bring good from even this apparently senseless tragedy.

God did not cause this blindness, but God can work amidst this blindness, and that is why I would change the saying that God doesn't send us more than we can handle.

Would it be better to say instead, "*With God's help, there is nothing we cannot handle?*"

Nothing we cannot handle. Broken bones or broken spirits or broken hearts. Car wrecks or suicides or cancer.

With God's help, there's nothing we cannot handle.

The Rev. Karl Travis

Doug Huneke is a Presbyterian minister, my mentor and my friend.

In his book "*The Stones Will Cry Out*," he ponders how human beings deal with tragedy.

He suggests that the best question amidst tragedy is not *Whose fault is it?* or *Why did God do this to me?* but rather, *Who? Who will we be? How shall we love and do justice [amidst tragedy]? How shall we hang on and trust? How will we confront life's tragedies as people of faith?*

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John's Gospel often uses light as a metaphor.

You can read the story in your own Bibles in John's 9th chapter.

This man sees again and comes, even if slowly, to some understanding of who Jesus truly is.

Yet there's more to understand, because we, too, can be blind to Christ.

And no matter who is to blame for our blindness, still Christ comes to us always again and again, showing himself in order to heal our spiritual blindness.

And when we know Christ, believing is seeing.

Like Paul on the road to Damascus, we "*see the light*."

To be cured of blindness is to be empowered to see the light.

That's an archetype for us Christians - seeing ***the light***.

To see the light is to bolt from darkness and to be bathed in the light of Christ.

As the old hymn puts it, ***I was once lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see.***

Amazing grace indeed!

Christ is still at it, you know, curing our blindness, shining upon us, transforming us for lives of new vision and bold faithfulness.

Everything around us is changed. We see the world differently now. What used to be fuzzy is clear.

God's intentions for us and for the world are coming into ever clearer focus.

It's as if God has given us new eyeglasses, new spectacles.

Now we see the world through spiritual lenses.

Christians are people learning to see the world as God sees it - full of the possibilities of grace.

The Rev. Karl Travis

My brother is also a minister.

Told that he was farsighted, he asked his optometrist exactly what that meant.

"Well, technically, the optometrist replied, "it means that you focus on infinity."

My brother thought, "That's a pretty good habit for a preacher."

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That's a pretty good habit for all of us.

We can focus on infinity only because God in Christ has cured our blindness.

There's an undeniable connection, then, between being cured of blindness and seeing the light.

And this light image is helpful, isn't it?

We understand instinctively what it means to compare light and dark, brightness and black.

In northern climates, doctors warn against Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD.

It's a painfully accurate acronym.

It means that deprived of sunshine, we tend to become depressed.

Light is good. Light helps us to live faithfully, happily.

Little wonder, then, that the metaphor of light is used throughout the Bible.

It's in today's epistle reading from Ephesians.

Recall those words: *For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.*

Did you catch that? Not only is Christ shining upon you. You have-in some strange, wonderful, divine way - you have become light.

Christ removes the scales from our eyes and fills us with his light.

That's how Ephesians can encourage us to live as the very "*children of light.*"

And if Christ's light shines not only upon us but somehow through us, too, well, that changes everything.

Because if the light is shining through us, surely, we cannot cast shadows upon others.

It's only when we block the light that we cast others into darkness.

It's an old Protestant conviction that Scripture interprets Scripture.

Maybe today's Gospel and Epistle lections are paired for a purpose

- to remind us that our Christian faith at its best isn't so much about casting aspersions as it is about casting light.

Let's be like Jesus.

He wasn't much interested in pointing fingers at our past.

Rather, Jesus shines the light on our futures.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND SPIRIT.... AMEN

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John 9:1-41

This is Jesus' sixth sign in the Gospel of John.

It shows us what the Prologue has already told us: that he is the One sent from God to be the light of the world."

"The Pharisees, in John, see God work as restrictive.

Jesus sees God's work as permissive."

OFFERING QUOTE - *Iroquois Confederacy Maxim*

In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Gracious and loving God, we come before you in praise.

You are compassion, hearing all who call out for mercy.

You are healing, offering wholeness to all who cry out in pain.

You are truth, showing the way to all who seek the fullness of life.

You are hope, bringing the promise of a new day to all people.

You are happiness, blessing all who love you with abundance and joy.

At all times and in all circumstances, you are perfect grace and hope

and we are moved to worship you as Creator, Redeemer and Guide.

Almighty and merciful God;

We confess that we have not lived into the abundant life that you offer your people. We resist the fullness of your truth, taking up only those parts that fit in with our lives or our limited vision. When we see miracles, we dismiss them, pointing to some other explanation. We demand proof of your presence and power over and over again, instead of fully embracing you. Afraid, we judge others harshly and fail to see your grace at work in their lives.

Help us to be a people that can see and discern your presence in the world. Open our eyes to your healing power and mercy. Change our hearts so that we experience the fullness of Christ's love and light.

One thing we know, once we could not see you in every moment, but now our eyes are opened wide, and so we pray together, saying, OUR FATHER.... AMEN

Assurance of Pardon

Once our lives were touched with darkness but now in the Lord we live in light.

Live as children of light knowing that you are forgiven and strengthened

to extend grace and forgiveness to others.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Loving God, you are majestic beyond all other light and beauty and power, yet you are more intimate than all other friendship and love. By the strength of Christ, please lift us high above common wants and expectations, into the light and power of your Presence.

Lead us to wonder, and from wonder to love, and from love to that worship that only lovers can offer.

Be our vision, Lord of our minds! Enable us to see things as you see them:

To discern in the ebb and flow of life the Providence that knows our every need before we ask.
To look upon both neighbours and enemies with compassion.
To recognize in the beggar, stranger, hungry and homeless the face of the Child of God.
To look in the mirror and see a much-loved disciple called by Christ to an abundant life.
Please, healing Christ, anoint our eyes with your salve, that we may see better than ever before and follow your way with anticipation and joy. In your name, and to your praise, we pray.
Merciful God, the world is full of doubt, judgement and despair. Yet, amidst this despondency, your light shines and brings new hope to all places. Open our eyes and restore our sight so that we may see the fullness of your vision for the world.

We remember before you this day:

People who are in want and do not have enough friendship or support...

People who are lonely or confused and lost in life...

People whose minds are troubled by any addiction or oppression...

All who suffer pain in body mind and spirit, the dying and those who grieve any kind of loss...

Places where leaders are ruthless and greedy, and laws are unjust and self-serving...

Our families and friends: spouses, partners, parents, children, companions and co-workers. May they find contentment, meaning in life, peace and faith.

People whose lives are impacted by the virus – victims, caregivers, doctors, nurses, paramedics, hospital and clinic staff

Those with precarious work, struggling to carry on

Businesses and employers faced with economic challenges moving forward

Grant all your people grace mercy and peace - today

In the name of the Creator, Christ our Saviour and the Holy Spirit.... AMEN

Offering Prayer (Psalm 23)

God of light and love and peace, we praise your name for leading us in paths of righteousness, that we may come into your presence, forgiven and free.

We give you thanks for guiding us to this place:

where we may rest beside the still waters of your grace, where we are filled with the good gifts of your goodness and mercy.

We worship you with all that we are, and we bless your name for all that we will be as we continue on our journey—a journey that leads us to your kingdom, where we will dwell with you forever.

We offer you these gifts, that you might bless them and send them out into the valley of the shadow of death, and everywhere in need of your light. Amen.

SENDING FORTH

Go into the world, carrying the light of Christ
into the darkness!

Go, with hearts full and eyes open!

Receive God's love and care and share that love and care with others!

Go, with eyes reflecting God's light and hands open to share it!

May you walk in the light of Christ

all the days of your life!

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR AND THE HOLY SPIRIT...AMEN