

St. David's Episcopal Church, Lent 4C, 3/22/2020 John 9: 1-41 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Wow. Two weeks ago I was looking forward to the Fourth Sunday in Lent, when we would again have our pink stuff that we only get twice a year. Two weeks ago I didn't imagine that we would have worship today via livestream only.

But I did know two weeks ago that I would get to preach on one of my favorite stories from the Gospel of John about the healing of the man born blind. We can divide today's reading into seven scenes: the actual healing; neighbors' reactions to the healing; the man and the Pharisees; the man's parents and the Pharisees; the man and the Pharisees *again*; Jesus and the man; and then Jesus and the Pharisees, although that could be a continuation of the same scene with Jesus and the man.

What strikes me this year, in the circumstances in which we find ourselves—that is, worshipping without the physical presence of each other—is Jesus' absence in this story. So in those seven scenes I just mentioned, Jesus is not in four of them. He's totally gone from verses 8 through 34. That is Jesus' longest absence in the Gospel according to John.

With Jesus away, things get a little wackadoodle, don't they? The neighbors are puzzled when the man born blind is suddenly walking around with sight, no longer begging for a living. They don't believe it's the same guy. He tells them about Jesus, but when they ask him where Jesus is, he doesn't know.

Then the Pharisees catch wind of it and ask him what happened. He tells them the story, too. They focus on the sabbath being violated. Then they decide he must not really have been born blind so they drag his parents into the drama and interrogate them. The parents verify that, yes, he was born blind and yes, he can now see. They are afraid of the Pharisees and tell them to ask the man themselves, so then the Pharisees ask the man again. My favorite part of the story is when the man gets fed up with the Pharisees, who seem determined to badger everyone until they get the answer they want, so the man finally kinda loses it and says, "Here is an astonishing thing!" Then goes on to repeat everything he has said, but a little crankier. I like that the guy kinda loses his temper—totally justified. I don't like that then they drive him out, after saying that he was entirely born in sins.

At that point, Jesus comes back into the story. He has heard that the man was driven out, and he goes to him. Jesus showed up because he knew the man was down. He had lost his community.

I wonder if any of you feel right now like you have lost your community. Here we are, meeting only via a camera for the second Sunday in a row, and while last week we hoped this Sunday would be the last time, now we know it won't be. The bishop has said that we will continue to be closed to in-person worship through Easter

That was a difficult decision for her to make, and now I need to share something personally difficult: I need to stay home myself for another three weeks. As most of you know, I started radiation for breast cancer last week. While I was getting scanned for radiation, they discovered a mass in one of my lungs. A CT scan led to a PET scan and a visit with a pulmonologist, who is recommending a biopsy, which will be March 30. Until we figure out what's going on, because

this issue is with my lung, I have to consider myself at a higher risk for a bad outcome of the respiratory illness that is causing all of this havoc in our country and in the world, and I need to stay at home when I'm not making my daily trips to the hospital. I intend to be back here on our livestream at Easter, and I will continue to work from home leading Zoom Bible studies and meetings from home and perhaps some Facebook live prayer services, but Matthew White will lead Sundays the next two weeks, Sheri Blume will take the lead on Wednesdays, and the two of them will officiate three Holy Week services.

This really is the Lentiest Lent ever, isn't it? This all makes me feel a little like that man born blind who lost his community. I saw Jane Brock from a safe six-foot distance on Thursday when I was writing my sermon and she was picking up checks, and as she left she said, "See you on the computer monitor." But now I won't even be here on your computer monitor for a couple of Sundays. I feel like I am losing my community.

On the other hand, on Wednesday, I began to see ways that Jesus is present even when he is physically absent like he was from verses 8-34 of today's reading. I loved being led by Sheri Blume and Kathy Love on Wednesday. I prayed the Compline responses out loud and knew others were doing so as well, even though we couldn't hear or see each other. I was grateful for this way of connection, and for seeing Jesus through Sheri and Kathy.

The story of the healing of the man born blind begins with a question: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" While that's a "who" question, the larger question is "why."

Why did this happen?

We feel better about lousy stuff when we can blame someone. Some of us blame the government for its handling of this current crisis. Some blame the media for their portrayal. Some blame the bishop for closing too soon. Some think bishops are overstepping their authority by closing churches. Some of you probably blame me for something, but right now you're too nice to say so because you feel sorry for me because I have cancer. On the other hand, some might think "Well, she must have gotten cancer because she did something wrong." Isn't that what people always do when someone is diagnosed with lung cancer, for example? We want to blame it on smoking. Why did this happen? Because that person smoked even though they knew it was bad for them.

In Jesus' day, that view was prevalent. If someone was blind, they or their parents must have done something wrong. But don't commit heresy by thinking that was an Old Testament view that Jesus fixed. Jesus, remember, was a faithful Jew. What we call the Old Testament does not present one monolithic viewpoint that Jesus overturned. The whole book of Job addresses the question of why bad things happen to good people. And even this question of children paying for the sins of their parents is addressed in the Old Testament. Check out Ezekiel chapter 18, for example, which challenges the idea, presented elsewhere, that children are punished for things their parents did.

Jesus answered the who/why question with “Neither,” and performed a miracle—a miracle which then caused all kinds of problems and ended up with the man losing his community. Then Jesus went back to him, and comforted him, and challenged the Pharisees.

One commentator I consulted this week¹ wrote about moving from the question of “why” to the more answerable question of “how.” Instead of “why was this man born blind,” move on to “how will this man live now that he has received sight?”

Instead of “why are we not able to gather for worship during what most of us experience the holiest time of the year,” let’s struggle together to figure out *how* we are going to continue to repent in Lent and praise God during Easter. How will we take care of one another in a time when we can’t squeeze each other’s hands and share and physically consume the sacraments? How will we observe Maundy Thursday when we are not washing one another’s feet? How will we move from Lent to Easter when we are not back together in this sacred space?

“How” is a question we can answer, together, and we will. We will be back here together. We will make it through this Lenten trial. We will be moved by Holy Week worship. And we will celebrate the resurrection of our savior at Easter.

¹ Lindvall, Michael, “Commentary 2: John 9:1-41,” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019, 91.