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Trinity Episcopal Church

1 Samuel 16: 1 – 13
Ephesians 5: 8 – 14

Psalm 23
John 9: 1 – 41

I remember the day quite clearly, although, ironically, clarity was precisely the issue. It was the fall of 4th grade, and I was sitting in the school nurse's office as she called to tell my parents that I really needed glasses. I didn't know, or didn't remember from previous years, that you were supposed to be able to read the blackboard from beyond the first row without squinching up your eyes. I didn't know that others actually could see the individual leaves on trees from the window. I had no ideas that my eyesight had changed; I didn't know that I couldn't see. And I didn't know *what* I couldn't see. Rather like the Pharisees in today's reading from John.

Obviously, thanks to contact lenses, I still have the gift of physical sight. However, like most people, I suspect, I still have trouble knowing what it is that I'm not seeing – what it is that I am blind to – especially those things which are not physical. A sighted person can't 'see' the world the way a blind person does. Unless we have been there, it is nigh on impossible for most of us to ever understand how a person blind from birth understands 'red' or 'skyscraper' or 'beautiful.' We cannot understand a blind person's experience of being marginalized from our society. We can never completely understand someone else's experience of suffering. Instead, we want to find a reason, a cause, *why* someone is different from us, *why* they are suffering. We want to place blame for this seeming 'unfairness.'

And so we, with the disciples, ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" In other words, Jesus, tell us why there is so much suffering in this world. Whose fault is it, anyway? We want to know so that it won't happen to us. We want to know so that *we* can feel safe, and maybe just a little bit better about ourselves (in a self-righteous, pharisaical sort of way).

But if we're waiting for Jesus to tell us why there is suffering in the world, then we will have a long wait. And we will miss the whole point. Because Jesus isn't focused on pointing fingers, finding culpability, making scapegoats, or sanctioning discrimination against suffering people. Jesus is focused on healing and on revealing the glory of God to all those who can't yet see it.

What we have printed in the bulletin is the traditional way (NRSV) in which this passage is translated. Take a look at Jesus' response to the disciples' question for a moment. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work..." My first year in seminary, one of the seniors pointed out something that I've never forgotten.

The original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts had no punctuation. The commas, semicolons and periods have all been added in the intervening centuries. And, of course, the editors and translators have punctuated the passage through their own theological frame of reference. So Rob, in his sermon, raised the question, what if Jesus' response was punctuated like this instead? "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. Period. He was born blind. Period. So that God's works might be revealed in him (comma), we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day..." That is a HUGE theological difference.

Instead of sounding as if God has caused this man to be blind simply to bring about glory for God's own self (which would seem to indicate a particularly manipulative, capricious and narcissistic

God), just perhaps Jesus is saying, 'This is the way that it is. God doesn't create bad, but out of bad, God can bring good. So let's glorify God by healing and redeeming the people and things in this world.'

British bishop and author, N. T. Wright agrees. He writes, "If something in the world seems unfair, but [we] believe in an all-powerful, all-loving, all-fair God, one way of getting around the [cognitive dissonance] is to say that it only *seems* unfair, but it actually isn't. There must be some secret sin that is being punished." This is a very comfortable way for us to think, Wright adds, if we happen to be well-off, healthy, and well-fed. In other words, if it appears that no one can accuse *us* of any secret sin.

However, Jesus firmly resists any such analysis of how the world works, Wright notes. The world is stranger and darker than that, but the Light of God's mercy and justice shining into the world is so much brighter and more powerful than that. To even begin to understand, we, like the disciples, have to be willing to let God rework our cherished assumptions about how the world and God can work. Wright says that we have to stop thinking of the world as a 'moral slot machine,' one where we put in a 'token' – a charitable act or a terrible act – and get back out a corresponding result – a reward or a punishment. Actions do have consequences, of course, but they are due to *our* choices, not God's. In particular, Wright emphasizes, we can't stretch the blame back to a previous life or generation – someone else's sins, because something else much stranger, both more mysterious and more hopeful is going on. What if, Bishop Wright suggests, what if the chaos and misery of this present world is the raw material out of which our loving, wise and provident God is making a new creation? (repeat, Process Theology, ebola outbreaks and avalanches)

In this passage from John, the evangelist means for us to see this healing story as one of those moments when God's ways - God's Truth - and the world's ways collide. "I am the light of the world," Jesus says as part of his response to the disciples' original question. Which should remind us of John's prologue: "What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it." John is prodding our hearts and our minds towards God's new creation, the time when God will make *all* things new. Just as Jesus is doing with the man born-but-no-longer blind.

In the first few verses of the book of Genesis, God is faced with chaos. God doesn't bother characterizing or analyzing the chaos; God just does something with it. God creates light, and from there, a whole new Creation comes into being. Jesus, in healing this blind man and all the other people whom he heals, is doing the works of the One who has sent him while it is light, that is, while Jesus is still an indwelling part of Creation. Soon, it will be night, and with the coming darkness there will be another chaos when Jesus is crucified and buried. Then, Wright notes, the world will seem to plunge back into that primordial darkness. After the chaos that ensues with Good Friday and Holy Saturday, God, in Jesus, will usher in a new Creation with the rising of the Easter Son.

New creations are always a little strange and unknown, a little different. Perhaps that's why Jesus' disciples have trouble recognizing the resurrected Jesus, just as in today's story when the people, who have known the man-born-blind all his life, have trouble recognizing and understanding that this now-sighted man is the very same person. Can new creation happen? Can leopards change their spots? Jesus' answer in healing this man – God's answer in Jesus – is a resounding "Yes!" New Creation does happen. Healing and redemption happen. Transformation happens. New, resurrected life happens.

In light of today's lesson and in considering our role as co-creators with God, how do we let Jesus touch us and heal *our* blindness, perhaps especially that blindness of which we are not even aware? What assumptions do *we* need to change about God or Creation in order to see God at work in the world about us? How is God calling us to help bring about healing, wholeness, light and transformation for Creation? How might our stewardship of Creation shine light into the world so that *others* may see? What will you or I do differently, not just this Lent, but for the rest of our lives, to make a difference to 'this fragile earth, our island home?' "For the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true," Paul writes in today's reading from Ephesians. May we bear much fruit in Creation, and so prove to be Jesus' disciples. +