

**Year A: Lent 4a 1Sam 16:1-13; Ps 23; Eph 5:8-14; John 9:1-41
St. Barnabas, Florissant – March 22, 2020**

Focus Sentence: Where is our Pool of Siloam?

SERMON

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....

In the 45th Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, we read this: “I am the Lord, and there is no other. ...I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.” (Is 45:5, 7)

In a section of Robert Capon’s book, *The Romance of the Word: One Man’s Love Affair with Theology*, the brilliant author/priest/theologian/and epicure deals with some of the more common “isms” that make up poor theological thinking. One of them is called “occasionalism,” which Capon maintains is not really extinct, but is still flourishing – particularly among the pious.

“Occasionalism” is the theological doctrine that says that God alone is the real actor in all events. God stands as the Prime Cause behind everything. Things that happen in life do so because God makes them happen: from the hatching of eggs, to leaves falling, to noses being blown, to jetliners crashing, to Supreme Court decisions being handed down, on into who wins the Academy Awards this year.

In “occasionalism,” only God matters. We don’t. Human freedom and responsibility are meaningless. God authors all. For instance, in this way of thinking, Beethoven didn’t write the “Fifth Symphony” – God did – and Beethoven was just the front, the occasion, for the music. Put biblically, Pilate sentencing Jesus wasn’t really Pilate. Caiaphas interrogating Jesus wasn’t really Caiaphas. And Peter denying Jesus really wasn’t Peter. They were merely “fronts” for God.

PAUSE

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” the disciples ask Jesus as they walk along. Their “occasionalism” runneth over. How was God responsible for this crippling birth defect? *Who* had done *what* to provoke God to inflict this kind of damage to a newborn? Maybe the disciples had paid too much attention in synagogue school when Isaiah 45 was being read.

Because of what Episcopal priest/therapist John Sanford has called the “unflinching monotheism” of early Hebrew thought (early, meaning before Job), occasionalism flourished. God was the author of good or ill – according to one’s righteousness, or lack of it. The physician in this culture was held in low esteem. After all, who was a *doctor* to try to lessen the suffering that God was visiting upon a sinner?

We get a good look at such thinking in the Second Book of Chronicles. Here we read a story in which King Asa is suffering from painful feet, perhaps gout. In his anguish, the king consults the doctors – an action for which he was admonished by the chronicler: “In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe; yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians.” (16:12)

PAUSE

Instead of sounding a vote for “occasionalism,” Jesus tells the disciples that the “meaning” behind this birth defect is that God’s works might be revealed in him. And in probably the most accomplished example of melding story and interpretation together, John’s Jesus goes on to show the reader just what this “revealing the works of God” means. Anyone who comes to Jesus – who comes to the light without scorn – never leaves disappointed. Healing happens. The blind see. The lame walk. The deaf hear – whether or not they ever see a sunset, or run around the block, or hear the New York Philharmonic. In the Presence, healing occurs whether or not a cure ever takes place.

Those who come to Jesus experience salvation, John is telling us, and the sign and symbol of this salvation is healing, making whole. Away from the narrow focus on Jesus' atoning death on the cross, John makes the point we constantly need to hear: that Jesus *in his life* is the bringer of health and salvation – not just *the One who makes everything right in the "Great By-and-By."* To turn away from this Jesus, to reject him, or to ignore him and the love of Abba that he embodies, is sin – not simply wrong actions. The opposite of sin for John is *faith*, not moral purity.

The theological verdict? Sickness and disease and death belong to the fallen realm of evil from which Jesus has come to liberate the world. The Incarnation is a rescue operation – why else would Jesus have spent so much time healing people? Otherwise, Jesus by restoring health would have been *undoing* the will of the "occasionalistic" God, and so was rightly arrested and crucified.

PAUSE

So what is our part in the healing equation that the blind man points out? It isn't "having faith." Nowhere in the story does John say that the blind man had any sort of faith *in the beginning*. Whatever "faith" is present, only Jesus has it. But the blind man does possess this one quality. He is radically willing. He is completely open. He surrenders himself wholeheartedly to Jesus and his "homespun" saliva and mud remedy. And then, maybe most importantly, he follows the "orders" of Dr. Jesus: he goes to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Can you imagine the trouble it must have been for a *blind man* to find his way to the Pool of Siloam? But he does. He persists. He goes. Maybe that's why they say that the ones most often healed at Lourdes are the ones with the worn-out shoes.

PAUSE

Besides correcting contemporary poor theological thinking, today's story forces us to ask ourselves a question of monumental significance. Where is *our* Pool of Siloam? Where is it that God in Christ is calling us to go to wash away (if not our literal, then our figurative) blindness? Where do we need to go to be healed? Where is that sacred place in which, even for a few moments, we can step out of the blindness of addiction, or greed, or ambition, and splash our faces with the clear water of amazing grace?

Each of us must decide for herself or himself. But the one common denominator in all of these "Pools of Siloam" is that they must be places or persons or disciplines in which belief in Jesus is deepened. As Marcus Borg has pointed out in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, the phrase "believe in Jesus" has lost its oomph. Rather than simply meaning "believing things about Jesus" – the stories, the doctrines, and the catechisms – actually it means much more. The word "believe" in the original Greek and Latin at its root meant "to give one's heart to." The heart, therefore, is the deepest center of the self – the inner sanctum of *sight* or understanding. It is the abode of the unwritten law where the Spirit longs to dwell.

Believing in Jesus is giving one's heart to Jesus. It is opening the doors of our souls to the living Jesus, whom we then come to know as Lord, Savior, the Healer. In this Jesus, we can "see" ourselves and the world as sacrificially loved by the Divine Lover. No wonder early Church historians have reported that this story of the healing of the man born blind was etched on the walls of many of the catacombs of the first century. Down in the lightless recesses of these tombs, strangely, these Christians could still see. They claimed that the waters of baptism had washed away their blindness, offering sight that no darkness could ever overcome.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.