

March 4, 2018
3rd Sunday of Lent

God is Good—All the Time
John 9:1-12 the man born blind

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We^[a] must work the works of him who sent me^[b] while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷ saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

The Pharisees Investigate the Healing

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who

confessed Jesus^[c] to be the Messiah^[d] would be put out of the synagogue.

²³ Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"

²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses." ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰ The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴ They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"^[e] ³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir?"^[f] Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸ He said, "Lord,^[g] I believe." And he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Ever heard someone say something really bad when you are facing a loss?

You lose a loved one, and someone says,

"I am sure the Lord had a **reason** for this",

"I guess God just wanted her in **heaven** more than he wanted her here."

Ever been facing illness or tragedy, and someone with good intentions says,

"Well, everything happens for a reason, right?"

But the worst thing—the thing that has hurt my heart the most is when something bad happens, and a Christians says,

"Who sinned, , **you or your family**....what did you do to cause this?"

Some of these people mean well, but

their *idea of God* was just like that of the people who saw the man born blind, and asked “**Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**”

When people say these things, they usually mean no harm.

They simply want to believe in a *divine plan*,

BUT, behind these remarks *is a God* who punishes people for bad things, and rewards us for good behavior.

When you really think about it, that’s not exactly the loving God we see in Jesus!

So, what if we stepped back, and asked what would *Jesus say—to our tragedies?* is our loving God really just a judge, giving us what we deserve?

Rabbis in Jesus’ day did teach a *correlation* between sin and tragedy. Most people believed that then.

But people today have *similar* beliefs.

Remember 9/11 and how some Christians suggested that the tragedy was punishment for New York’s sinfulness?

I think this kind of belief is actually quite prevalent among Christians today.

If you think you’re *immune*, just ask yourself, have you ever wondered ‘*Dear God, what did I do to deserve this?*’

Or when looking at someone else’s suffering, have you ever said—they simply *don’t deserve* that.

Or worse, yes, I’ve seen their life, and this is what happens to people like that!

Why do we believe this way?

Well, most of us have been taught that there is a connection between sin and sorrow.

We teach our kids about the *consequences* of their bad choices.

Do something bad, and bad will happen.

It makes sense—it’s true. Many choices have long lasting consequences.

The problem comes when we *apply it to God*.

We tend to believe these things because we want to be in *control*, and if we have an *explanation* for everything that happens, then we feel more in control of our lives.

If God is doing it to us, we can understand that, even if we can’t accept it.

But Jesus did **not believe** this.

This is why he healed and taught and fed everyone—even the worst sinners!
Especially the outsiders!

Jesus proclaimed that **God is good—all the time**.

Not capricious, selfish, punishing, or angry.

Jesus revealed a God who is **always** for our good.

And **rejected** the idea that tragedies are caused by our sin.

Or that ‘*we get what we deserve*’.

Listen to Jesus in Luke 13:1-5: *At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were **worse sinners** than all other **Galileans**? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were **worse offenders** than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."*

What does Jesus say about the man born blind?

*"**Neither** this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."*

Then Jesus heals the man, and tells the angry Pharisees
that **THEY** are truly blind!

Jesus says in Matthew 5:45:

*God makes the **sun** rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends **rain** on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

In other words, **life is just a mess**.

I really believe this.

Good and bad things happen to everyone,
and we don't have a God who just gives us what we deserve—**thank goodness!**

But what do **you really believe**?

That God gives us what we deserve? Or,

That God is good. All the Time?

Now some people might say, if we don't get what we deserve,
 where is the **justice** in life?
 If good and bad happen to all people, how is that right? Or fair?
 Well, it's not.
 Life is not fair. (another one of my mantras!)

BUT, there are gifts we receive as Christians.
 St. Augustine called this the good that ***only the good know***.

This good is also known in the Bible as the ***fruit of the Spirit***, found in Galatians 5:22: *love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, faithfulness, and self-control.*

This is the justice we see a glimpse of, here on earth.
 Those who follow Jesus, can know God's joy, and peace,
even in the middle of suffering.
 That's pretty amazing.

All because:
God is Good—All the Time.
 And All the Time. God is Good.

Can we believe this? Can we trust this?
 Can we have ***faith*** in it? Even when we don't ***understand*** it?

You know, in ***Galatians 2:19-20*** Paul says this: *...I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

In Greek, that faith IN the Son of God, can also read faith OF the Son of God.
 And actually both meanings are important:

We live by faith ***IN Jesus***, we also live by the faith ***OF Jesus***—
Jesus has faith for us when we don't have the strength to have faith.
 This is part of God's goodness. All the time.

This is an amazing truth my friends—That Jesus lives ***IN US***.
 That's what helps me say in all things—God is good, all the time.

So what about verses like this:

Romans 8:28 says, *for we know that all things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

Well, can't this be true too?

Somehow our Loving God does work everything together for good!

Does this mean that everything tragic *IS good*?

NO, it means that God can take even the most *broken* pieces of our lives, and create the most beautiful *mosaic*.

I just returned from a week in Baltimore at a church conference called *NEXT church*, with other PCUSA pastors and leaders.

The theme was living in the wilderness, *the Desert in bloom*.

We talked about how the modern church is walking through a *desert*, *wilderness time* right now,

and it *appears that things are dying*—that church as we know it might be dying.

But what we learn in scripture, and through our Loving God,

is that even what APPEARS to be dead, or IS dead, it can be resurrected.

In fact, being in the desert is actually GREAT NEWS because Jesus is in the resurrection business! From death to new life!

Not just bringing back what was dead to the same life---

But to *NEW LIFE*!

That's what Easter is all about, right?

Jesus said in John 12:24:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

In other words, we have to let some things, especially some old familiar ways, *die—in order to bear new fruit*.

Kind of like how good branches are pruned to bear more fruit!

Think of what that pruned crepe myrtle looks like in our courtyard now, And how beautiful it's going to be soon!

At our conference, one speaker said, *The church as we know it, is dying!*

Thanks be to God!

Because we can *expect new life, just around the corner!*

This finding God in the desert, or the wilderness, or the tragedies of life....

It's a truth. We can find God in those times and places!

But, do you believe this?

That we can ***look at some of our trials*** in our lives,
not as pure suffering...but perhaps as an ***opportunity***....
to see God's goodness?
What if we did this?

Did you know that the Chinese symbols for "***crisis***" is identical
to that for the word "***opportunity***."

Literally translated they say "Crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind."
Dennis Waitley in *Seeds of Opportunity*. Christianity Today, Vol. 35, no. 1.

My devotional *Streams in the Desert* had this wisdom:
There are two ways of ***moving out of a trial***.
One is simply to try to get rid of it....
the other is to recognize the trial as a challenge...
and to accept it as an opportunity of receiving
a greater measure of God's ***grace***. (*Streams In the Desert*, pg. 342).

Isn't this what happened to the ***blind man***?
For him, his blindness, and his healing were an opportunity
to receive God's grace!

Not everyone in the story sees it that way.
Not everyone will see trials as opportunities.

In this story, after Jesus heals the man born blind
The neighbors don't see it as a miracle, they argue about his identity!
And the Pharisees, who keep asking him how it happened,
they don't see it as a miracle...they argue about whether it should have happened
on the Sabbath, or whether Jesus is a sinner!

The whole story is kind of funny and ridiculous,
because everyone else is ***more blind than the man born blind***, who now can see!

Finally, Jesus finds the healed man again, and asks him,
"Do you believe in the Son of Man?"
"Who is he?"
"It is I," Jesus says.

And the healed man proclaims, "***Lord, I believe.***"

His blindness, was an ***opportunity*** to receive God's grace!

You know, this makes me think of our church office administrator, Stephanie Jennings. She is walking bravely through cancer, just as Betty did, just as Patti did, just as many of you have walked through similar serious illness. And she is a ***light shining in the darkness*** for others in her suffering, she is an ***inspiration***, all because she ***sees God in the midst*** of it. She believes in God's goodness—all the time. What if we all believed that?

Isn't it true that sometimes we don't understand God's ***grace, joy, or peace***, Until we are in the ***pain***, and we need it?

Our scripture for my conference was our Old Testament reading today:

Isaiah 35.

Listen again to those amazing words of grace, about new life, springing up in the desert:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

...
³ *Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

⁴ *Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!"*

⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

Whatever we are facing, whether a tragedy of this messy life,
Or the results of our own sin and poor decisions,
Whatever desert we are walking through right now...

God can bring new life.

The ***Amazing Grace*** is that what has died....can have new life!
Can I hear an Amen?

And today as we leave this place and sing the famous hymn,
May these words echo in our hearts!

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

Amazing Grace.

That's what we need today. And everyday.
The grace to know that God redeems our sin, and our tragedy,
And even though we were blind,
Now we see.

Hear the ***Good News*** of the Gospel:
God is Good—All the Time.
And to that, all God's people said, Amen.

