

Wrong questions

How do we respond to chaos? I don't just mean the chaos going on in each of our homes or psyches after the first of who knows how many weeks of quarantine. (Although I suppose that could be part of my question as well.) But how do we respond to chaos as the opposite of God's order and goodness? How do we respond to the destructive forces around us? How do we respond when terrible things happen, either suddenly in a natural disaster, or gradually like a global pandemic? I think how we respond says a lot about us, and a lot about what we believe about the God of the universe, who in the beginning created order out of the chaos.

We see **one** answer to the question on display in our reading from John 9. When looking at a man who was born blind, Jesus' disciples ask him "who sinned, this man or his parents?" I'm sure this wasn't the first time this the man heard this question. Being blind, I'm sure his heightened sense of hearing brought the question to his ears pretty regularly.

The question itself seems innocuous enough: it is a question that is trying to make sense of a terrible situation. The problem, of course, is that in asking the question, the disciples have turned this human being into a theological thought experiment. It's like other questions people asked of Jesus that reduced people made in God's image to a question on a theological exam: should you heal someone on the sabbath? Why would you dine with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes? Why do your disciples feast while the rest of us fast? But time and time again, Jesus was prompting God's people to ask **different** questions.

He does so by defying the question itself. They asked, "who sinned?" He answers: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

Apparently there was, at the time, an ongoing debate between the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes about things like predestination and God's intervention in the broken world. Anyone working through that debate might end up trying to reconcile two things: on one hand, what we know about God's ability to intervene and control all things, and on the other the fact that the world around us seems to be utterly and totally broken, with suffering all around. Assigning blame, by diagnosing the sinner as the cause for suffering is one easy answer. It might be preferable to the other easy answer: that God simply picks and chooses people to suffer.

But I don't think we ought to read Jesus' reply in that manner: that God was the author of the blind man's affliction for the **sole purpose** of setting up this miracle. That makes God both author of the chaos and the order, playing both sides of the chess board. And that seems to me to be incompatible with the God of Scripture. To be clear, there are absolutely passages which show God allowing or even sending suffering in order to bring people to repentance or to punish people for sins. And yet, time and time again when Jesus encounters suffering, the move that He makes is not to start with a diagnosis and condemnation of their sin, but to see the person, see the need, and to bring healing.

The problem with the pharisees in this chapter is that they already have a paradigm. They already have a single unified theory under which God's actions are predictable. Jesus healing a blind man on the sabbath doesn't fit neatly within that system, (nor do his teachings or other miracles) and so the healing must **not** have been from God. Despite Nicodemus' claim that Jesus **must** have been from God in John 3, here Jesus is a sabbath breaker, and thus must not have been righteous after all. Later, they assert that the man must not have been blind from birth. And then that he was born entirely in sin. They were so committed to their own understanding of who God was, and how He works, that when Jesus' actions exposed the flaws in their paradigm, the only option was to dismiss him altogether.

This is why Jesus is so harsh on them.

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.

We need our perspectives to change. Samuel, grieving over Saul's failure, is sent to find the next king of Israel, and it seems so apparent to him that any number of Jesse's sons would make good kings: tall, handsome etc. And yet, God has to say to him "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

John wrote this gospel because he wanted the reader us to see. Light and darkness are central themes throughout, and he explicitly wrote that his whole goal was for us to understand that if we want to know what it means to truly live, we need to believe in Jesus

and receive life. And so it seems to me that when we encounter chaos the place to make sense of it is in (as a friend of mine often says): the Living Creator God - who is Love - personified in the historical Jesus Christ. The reasoning we get is reason itself - or as John refers to him, the logos, the word - that is God and was with God when the world was brought into being.

If we look back at Jesus' answer to the question of the blind man, we find that Jesus doesn't really offer a theological response as much as he offers himself. We see something similar in Psalm 23: a psalm that is familiar and frequently used as comfort. May it be that for us on a morning when we have to meet virtually since our entire world has become a long-term "valley of the shadow of death". But the comfort in this Psalm aren't that we all get to become shepherds and understand the journey ahead of us, but that we will be led. The rod and staff, tools to keep sheep in line and defend them, offer comfort. I won't reread the whole thing again, but it might behoove us to do our own contemplative reading of this psalm throughout the week and perhaps for many weeks to come, meditating on God's love for us.

It is easy to say this, it is hard to live it, or even to know how to live it out. There is no playbook for how to go through what our church has gone through, and what our world is going through. It is being written each day. Whether we like it or not, the only option we have right now is to look to God for direction. Church, as we know it, will not function as it always has, and whenever this crisis is over it probably won't return to exactly "the way things were." Accepting that fact will give us the freedom from the temptation to think that we know what God is going to do. And in that unknowing, we can't do anything other than wait on God and allow Him to lead us and guide us.

And who knows what that path might be!? He is the God whose plans involve barren women giving birth and streams in deserts. He is the God who sends His Son to defeat death by becoming weak and dying: the king whose glorification was not a palace or a throne room but on a hill outside of an occupied city on an instrument of public execution. God does things we don't expect at times we don't expect them, and they are better than we would have ever planned them.

But the process requires us to lean into our active listening. The shift isn't automatically. Certainly there is something appealing about the blind man's declaration "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." It is an honest testimony of God's goodness. May we do that. But better is when he then meets Jesus again and Jesus asks him: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" **36** He answered, "And who is he, sir? 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, I believe." And he worshiped him.

It will be good for us to wait and see what God might do. To be open to how our God, whose response to pain and suffering isn't to remain distant but to come alongside and suffer with us, might do the same now. But afterwards, may we respond to Him with a greater sense of faith, and hope, and love.

Clarissa Moll, a former member of our congregation whose husband Rob passed away tragically last year in a hiking accident, wrote this about her experience right now:

Coronavirus may be a threat to my sense of safety, but it wasn't the first, and it won't be the last. I don't understand how a world where fathers fall to their deaths and diseases course through communities can be a safe place to be. But I choose to believe this is so.

Because in the darkest hour I've ever experienced and in the days of grief that followed, Jesus has walked with me, his warm and gentle love dispelling my fears. It is not my vigilance but Jesus who keeps me safe. In this season of illness and panic, he is here too. Whatever comes, for those who know and love him, this world will still be a good place to live.

I do not know exactly **how** God will be present to us in the midst of all of this. But I know He is here. May we all be given eyes to see where God is working, in our lives, in the lives of others, in the life of the church. May we not be so insistent that we know what God's action looks like, that we miss where he **is** acting, or where he calls **us** to act. And as we find ourselves broken down and out of strength, as our endurance runs thin, and as chaos seems to be the prevailing power around us, may we know, more than anything, that God's answer to chaos and human suffering is Himself, made known to us in Jesus.