

## WILL GOD PROVIDE?

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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John 9:1-41

Our text this morning is part of a wonderful story, the story of the man born blind from the ninth chapter of John's gospel. It's been called "a one-act play in six scenes," and it's one of the great narratives of the Bible. It's full of irony; things are not always what they seem, particularly in matters of sin and faith and the knowledge of God. For our purposes today, I am going to read just the first twelve verses of the chapter, but I encourage you to read the entire story on your own. It takes up the whole 41 verses of chapter 9. Listen, now, for the word of God in Scripture.

*<sup>1</sup>As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup>We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." <sup>6</sup>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, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.*

*<sup>8</sup>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?" <sup>9</sup>Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." <sup>10</sup>But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" <sup>11</sup>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." <sup>12</sup>They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."*

May God add understanding to this reading from the Holy Word.

In these confusing and fast-moving days of pandemic and extreme social distancing, many of us are wondering what we may have done as a species to bring about this calamity. And, I suppose, for us religiously-minded folks, it may naturally follow to ask whether God had a hand in any of it—trying perhaps to get our attention in order to chasten our hubris about the power of our science and the strength of our financial markets, so that we might correct our ways.

People have mused about such things since long before there was a Coronavirus. In today's lesson, for example, Jesus's disciples casually assume that illness and ill fortune are occasioned by sin; "Rabbi, who sinned," they ask, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Much the same question is unpacked by the Old Testament book of Job.

Even though we moderns generally reject the idea that illness and misfortune are simply the wages of sin, there is something in all of us that is nevertheless attracted to the notion of “just deserts.” Part of us longs to hear a causal connection between what I do and what happens to me, simply because it implies that I can closely control my fortune with my behavior. If bad things generally happen to “bad” people, I can avoid them by being “good.”

I recall a church committee meeting I attended some years ago. A member of the committee arrived late with a grim look on his face and explained that a common acquaintance had just been diagnosed with lung cancer. There was silence, followed by someone hesitantly asking the question that was on all our minds, “Did he smoke?” When the answer was yes, a palpable sense of relief rose around the table. His behavior, we could believe, had obviously led to his illness, and if I do not do what he did, I will be OK. It is not so simple, of course, but we are tempted to want it to be truer than it is.

Jesus denies the causal connection—“Neither this man nor his parents sinned”—but he does affirm that the man’s blindness and healing can still have meaning and purpose: “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” In my work as a pastor, I have often counseled people facing loss or tragedy to try to avoid asking the “why?” question and, rather, to struggle to ask the “how?” question. Asking why a death has come too early or why suffering has suddenly enveloped a good life are questions that usually lead nowhere. Asking how—how one might find a way through the pain to a strong and vibrant life in spite of it all—is a question with answers. As Helen Keller once observed: “I thank God for my handicaps. For through them I have found myself, my work, and my God.”

But does nevertheless God intend, or direct, the evils that befall us? For Jews and Christians alike, the experience of evil, both personally and collectively, has long raised two large theological questions. First, how can God’s goodness and sovereignty be defended in light of the reality of evil? Second, does the reality of evil negate human faith in God’s covenant faithfulness?

Toward the start of the Old Testament, the patriarch Abraham obeyed God’s command and took Isaac, his “only son,” the bearer of God’s promises to Abraham to make of him “a great nation,” to a mountain in Moriah to sacrifice him. As you may recall, an angel intervened, and a ram was miraculously provided for the sacrifice. “So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will provide.’”, Genesis explains.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, God promised Israel that if it kept God’s commandments, “I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”<sup>2</sup> Not even the devastating experience of exile seemed to shake Israel’s belief that in God’s own time and way, “the Lord will provide.”

Similarly, Jesus reassured his followers that God’s purposes in the creation are always benign: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” Jesus asked. “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs on your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:8, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 26:11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 10:29-31

Both of these notions from the Old and New Testaments are captured in the concept of Providence (with a capital P). The dictionary defines Providence as “God, especially when conceived as omnisciently directing the universe and the affairs of humankind with wise benevolence.” Classical Christian theology sometimes draws a distinction between general and special Providence. General Providence affirms, in the words of John Calvin, that God “watches over the order of nature by himself.” In other words, the sun shines and the wind blows because the Creator makes it so. Special Providence, on the other hand, affirms that “God so attends to the regulation of individual events, and they all so proceed from his set plan, that nothing can take place by chance.” That conviction is reflected in the answer of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563—one of the great creeds of the Reformation—to the question concerning the meaning of the first line of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” It means that “whatever evil [God] sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good, for he is able to do it, being almighty God, and is determined to do it, being a faithful Father.”

Nonetheless, the horrors of the twentieth century have made it difficult, if not impossible, for many to affirm that all events proceed from God’s set plan. Do the unimaginable slaughter in the trenches of the First World War, the genocide of six million Jews in the Holocaust, the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda—or the prospect of untold numbers dead from today’s Coronavirus—mean that Christians must relinquish the Bible’s claim that “the Lord will provide”?

The story of Jesus’ healing of the man born blind in John 9 may help us think through some of these perplexing questions. It may provide some clues for a contemporary Christian understanding of Providence. First, John 9 may suggest that a contemporary doctrine of Providence should be chastened, more modest, and less grandiose than its classical predecessors. John 9 does not say that *all* events reveal God’s works, only that in this specific individual, this particular man, God’s work—God’s Providence—is revealed. Neither this story nor any other story should be used to explain the Holocaust—or what we are facing today.

Second, just as Jesus never explains why this individual was born blind, so a contemporary doctrine of Providence might hew more closely to the language of confession than that of explanation. Jesus’ disciples do not know the distinction theologians sometimes draw between natural and moral evil, but they assume that this natural evil—the man’s blindness—must in some way be due to (and therefore explained by) someone’s sin, either that of the man himself or that of his parents. Jesus, however, rejects all attempts to explain this man’s blindness by means of the category of sin. The man’s healing serves a different purpose than that of explanation: “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him,” says Jesus. A contemporary doctrine of Providence—one that takes its clues from this story—might eschew grand theories that try to explain all events, and focus instead on what particular events reveal about God.

I have been struck over these past several weeks by how our changed circumstances and enforced isolation are so often bringing out the best in people. The crowds I encountered at Sam’s Club were orderly and mutually respectful. The folks I cross paths with on the trails are careful to maintain their six feet of distance, but

generally pause to inquire sincerely about how I'm doing. I posted online the other day a picture of my sister Sue, an ICU nurse up in Boston, dressed like a spacewalker in her protective gear. Hundreds of people responded with thanks and encouragement and prayers for her health. Could it be that through this physical separation, God has led us to come together in new ways, to hold one another more gently?

Third, God's presence and activity in the healing of the blind man cannot be explained because it is not something we can observe directly. Rubbing mud on someone's eyes does not cure blindness; the action does not explain what Jesus has done. The divine role is not so much perceived as it is revealed, and it is revealed only to those who are given the gift of faith. The irony in John's story, of course, is that the blind man receives his sight, but everyone else in the story loses theirs—not their physical vision, but their capacity to believe and understand what they have witnessed. Without exception, neighbors, Pharisees, and parents are unable to see in this event that "God does provide." Not even the man who has been healed understands what has happened to him. Only after Jesus seeks him out and calls him to faith in the Son of Man, does he truly "see." Only after he first believes does he worship the one who is truly from God (v. 38) and who has healed far more than his blindness.

Our Christian conviction that "God will provide" doesn't help us to explain rationally the course of human events, whether we're talking about why a particular friend got sick and died or why the whole world, it seems, is to be shaken by this pandemic. Rather, Providence is a confession (by those who are given the eyes of faith) that God works in, around, through those things that oppose God, to accomplish God's purposes.

I am persuaded that one of the ways we will get through this difficult time is by asking how we can be faithful to kind of life God wants for us—full, abundant, eternal life—despite all the inconveniences and losses and, perhaps, even deaths. God gives us inner strength to persevere, compassion with which to look upon another, and intelligence by which to adapt our behavior in service to the most vulnerable along us. Let us employ these gifts for the good of all, remaining ever alert to signs of our ever-faithful God at work among us.

All to God's glory and honor and praise. Amen.