

*What Have We Done to Deserve This?* (John 9.1-12)  
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This sermon is going to begin and end with one of my favorite stories. But it isn't an easy story to tell. It's a mixed-up story. It's a story that doesn't know what to make of all the bitter and the sweet in life. It's a story of a minister who lost hope, but it doesn't end there. It ends here, in the present moment, however uneasily, with a question for each of us. As I said, it isn't an easy story to tell.

Rebecca knew that things were getting worse. She was sleeping fewer hours at night and her depression was deepening. Unable to lie in bed with her dark thoughts, she would rise and pace the hallways of the parsonage, tears streaming down her cheeks. She was losing it, she knew that she was losing it, but she couldn't keep a hold on things somehow. Too much had been broken in her life and there seemed to be no mending it anymore. Her marriage had fallen apart, her pregnancy had ended, and she found herself in the middle of life, in the middle of the night, all alone. She felt like she was sinking. Night after night she was up walking through the house, wiping her damp cheeks and feeling that sick emptiness in her stomach. The pain was becoming unbearable.

Although she was a beloved minister, Rebecca had no one with whom to share this suffering. She had kept it to herself and now she seemed to have no recourse. Maybe she should have reached out sooner, but it was too late. It was too late and the pain would not stop. Finally, on one of those endless nights, with tears predictably running from her red eyes, Rebecca had reached her limit. She got herself dressed, slipped out the door, and padded quietly down the hillside toward Lake Union. She would wade into the cold

dark water, she thought. She would drift out into it and then she would simply stop fighting and let the depths take her. It was the darkest night of her life.<sup>1</sup>

I said it was not an easy story. Even as I typed it out it made me feel a bit sick. Because I have known people who have suffered, I have known people who have been clinically depressed, and I have known people who have taken their own lives, including two of the men in my family. So I would like to be very careful with this story and say that I do not take it in the least bit lightly. But what Rebecca's story does, I think, is remind us how much suffering is all around. It may remind us of the darkest nights that we have had. It may remind us of the deep sadness that touches every person if they live and love long enough. It may remind us that, on any given day, or on any dark night, someone somewhere is hurting more than they have been able to say. It's almost enough to debilitate us, this knowledge that the wounded are all around, but that isn't the point of Rebecca's story. Well, it isn't the end point. It is the starting point. Strangely enough, it is also the starting point of this morning's lectionary reading, a text where the rabbi Jesus and his disciples begin with a discussion of suffering.

According to John Chapter 9, as Jesus and his disciples were traveling, they came upon a man who had been blind from birth. To be sure, the man's physical ailment was very different from the emotional anguish that Rebecca was experiencing. Even so, the man born blind had likely suffered emotionally as well as physically. Not only did he lack his sight, a sense that would deprive him of the untold richness of the visual world, but he would have been treated as something of an outcast. Indeed, even in this day and age people with physical disabilities are treated differently. Their lives are constant

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<sup>1</sup> See Rebecca Parker, "On This Shining Night," in *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, ed. Robert Hardies (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2006), 109-111.

battles for the kinds of access and recognition that the rest of us take for granted, and it was no easier for them in the ancient world. So we might as well place this man born blind in the same category as so many of the other characters Jesus came across: lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and other various outsiders. The man born blind would surely have suffered for it, and it is with this recognition in mind that Jesus' friends ask him a question when they first meet the man.

"Rabbi," the disciples ask, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" It's a stunning question, even an offensive one to the modern ears of liberal theology and political correctness. But it betrays a sentiment that might still be in play just beneath the surface in each of our lives, no matter how clever we think we are or refined we have come to be. The disciples are asking, in essence, the question of causality. They want to know the reason for the man's blindness. What has he done to deserve this? Perhaps his parents did something. What did they do that he should deserve this? Though the question undoubtedly sounds strange to us, it actually reflects a fairly common line of reasoning in first-century Judaism. The disciples, working within the cultural context of their day, are simply trying to understand why this man is suffering. It's a question you can still hear in any hospital in town today, and I remember from my years as a chaplain how often suffering people gave themselves over to wildly speculative thoughts as to a cause. I remember how often they asked, "What have I done to deserve this?" In truth, there was a biological answer, but even had the rabbi Jesus known the medical root of the blind man's problem it wouldn't have answered his friends' question. Because their concern was more religious. Perhaps it was a variation on that age-old and still operative question about why bad things happen to good people.

Why was this man born blind? Why should he suffer? Why was Rebecca subject to such deep depression? What did she do? Why have the dark nights of grief come to each of us? And what could the meaning of these things possibly be?

When faced with such deep questions, Jesus offers a telling answer. He avoids the matter of causality altogether. Well, actually he answers it directly and then moves into a much more mysterious place. When the disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?” he answers them, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” Our English translations follow this with a semicolon, but we might just pause to imagine what happened there. I can picture Jesus looking at his friends as if to say, “What is wrong with you? Do you really think that this is some sort of cruel punishment? Have you possibly imagined that God could do this? After all that I’ve taught you, can you still be this confused?” Of course, none of these sentiments are recorded in the gospel narrative. All we have is Jesus’ very clear rejection of the question of causality. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” he said. And then he follows by saying something strange about how God’s works might still be revealed in the man born blind. “We must work the works of [the one] who sent me while it is day,” the rabbi offered, “[for] night is coming...” Afterwards, the story tells us that Jesus spat on the ground, made mud, spread it over the blind man’s eyes, and told him to go wash himself in the pool of Siloam (an ancient word meaning “sent”). According to the Book of John, “[the man] went and washed and came back able to see.”

Now at this point we may wonder if this isn’t one of the stranger stories in the gospels. At first blush it sounds that way, though the gospels are full of very strange stories. (Indeed, the story of the raising of Lazarus is waiting for us just next Sunday.) In the

liberal Christian tradition, we tend to read these ancient healing stories more figuratively than literally. That is the way I interpret the story, meaning that the man born blind may well have remained physically blind after his encounter with the rabbi but emerged from it with a different sort of spiritual sight. Perhaps he heard Jesus' rejection of the idea that he or his parents had sinned and began to look at himself a bit differently for the first time. Perhaps he was moved by the fact that the rabbi stopped to speak with him and even to touch him, spreading the cool mud over his damaged eyes. Perhaps something else happened that isn't recorded here. He heard Jesus whisper a teaching about how the poor and the peacemakers and the outcasts will be blessed. Whatever happened, the old author of John would have us know that, in spite of all his suffering, there was a healing of sorts for this man. And when he tried to explain it to other people they had difficulty understanding. Maybe he should have begun by telling them that it wasn't really an easy story.

Rebecca was beyond telling her story to anyone as she made her way down the hill. By her own description it was an unusually clear night in the Pacific Northwest. There weren't many clouds and the stars were out, not that she was really looking. She had her eyes trained on the relatively smooth surface of the lake, its ripples barely coming into view as she neared the shore in the darkness. It was a crazy thing that she was going to do, she must have known it. But she was somehow blinded to the craziness by all of her suffering and she was worn from asking what she had done to deserve it, what she might do to make amends, or even how she could make it through another night. She had come to the edge of losing hope, an edge that was signified by the lakeside. And she was almost there now, feet moving in a steady rhythm, tears streaming down her face, shallow

breaths increasing, one after the other, on this, the night when she would finally give up the fight and sink once and for all, when a curious thing happened.

As she walked across the long stretch of grass toward the final rise, beyond which lay the dark water, she saw a line of shadowy objects. It was a barrier of some kind, she thought, one last obstacle in her way. Only as she neared the shore, she could see that the objects were moving. In fact, they weren't objects at all. They were people. As she slowed her walk and squinted in the dim light, she could make them out hunching over their instruments. And there, in the dead middle of the night, Rebecca walked into a gathering of the Seattle Astronomy Club. It was easily the strangest coincidence of her life, a meeting that she had no words for but would later describe as a moment of grace. She wrote of it, "To make my way to my own death, I had to get past an enthusiast in tennis shoes. He assumed I had come to look at the stars. 'Here,' he said, and began to explain the star cluster his telescope was focused on. I had to brush the tears from my eyes to look through his telescope. There it was! A red-orange spiral galaxy. Then he focused it on Jupiter, and I peered through to see the giant, glowing planet. I could not bring myself to continue my journey. In a world where people get up in the middle of the night to look at the stars, I could not end my life."<sup>2</sup> And so she didn't. Instead of pushing off into oblivion, Rebecca stood by the side of the water, looked up, and began to ask herself the question with which she had left the house in the first place. Only this time she wasn't asking out of despair, she was asking out of a surprising sense of gratitude, "What have I done to deserve this?"

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<sup>2</sup> *Blessing the World*, 110.

It was a long way back to life for Rebecca after that, longer than the simple walk up the hill to the parsonage. Some nights were still fairly dark and she required a lot of help recovering from her emotional wounds. Like I said, it isn't an easy story. But perhaps that is the reason it is a story worth telling. Because there is no one among us whose life is an easy story, no one who is immune from the suffering of the world or the tears that it brings. But there is also no one among us who does not live under the same canopy of stars, no one who isn't given the glistening world as a gift, free to be taken by anyone who can see it. Some nights are just clearer than others. I can't help but think that Jesus knew this when he avoided the question of causality. There is no reason for the suffering. And I can't help but wonder if his mysterious comment about how the divine can be known even through such experiences isn't reflected somehow in Rebecca's story of the lakeside, the glimpse of grace that she caught through her tears as she looked up into the starlit sky.

Friends, our good news is not that we will live lives free of bitterness or devoid of suffering. Our good news is that there is still beauty to be found, there is still wonder to behold, and there is still the possibility of healing, even on the darkest night.

May it be so with us.