

Sermon: Being a Good Friend

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 35:4-7a; John 9:1-41**

We know that Isaiah preached in a different time and place and to a different audience, but his words sound so familiar. We can read Isaiah without mentioning Jesus, of course, but the Gospels see Jesus in Isaiah's writings, which they took to be a 'sign of the advent of the transforming presence of the Messiah.'¹

Isaiah's audience, all those living in exile or in captivity, longed to see a future of hope; they were waiting to hear some good news; they wanted the joy of liberation. And now Isaiah proclaimed words of God's deliverance. But could the people trust these words? Would the waters really break forth in the wilderness for them, as they did for the Israelites when Moses struck the rock with his staff?

Given their position, we can understand that they might have trust issues. But was their lack of trust with themselves or with God? Despite the warnings they were given, it would be human nature to place blame elsewhere, and God was an easy target, but responsibility for their circumstances lay with them.

What Isaiah proclaimed was that God had re-entered their world and was back among them as an avenging force against Babylon, summoning the people out of their resignation and despair. It was time for them to open their eyes and sing for joy.

As a nation, we've never had to live in exile or captivity. We've been lucky. A realtor would explain our luck as 'location, location, location.' For a long time, the nation was unassailable, and we prospered.

But as individuals, we may have intimate knowledge of the pain of separation from broken or lost relationships, or from disillusionment in our work or purpose; we may have known sudden illness or addiction, or job loss, or even prison; whatever it is that makes us cry out in sorrow. Where, we wonder, is God when bad things happen?

Faith communities can feel the metaphor of exile when they gather on Sundays while the rest of the community sleeps in or goes to watch the kids' soccer games. At those times, we can see how we are in the world but stand apart from it.

A bigger question might be, how and where is God reshaping and repairing the world? Do we trust God's presence among us enough to help with that work? Are we willing to be transformed and liberated as were the waters in the wilderness?

Then, if we believe that God is with us regardless, and if we trust that God will guide us, how do we respond to stories like the one we just heard from John's Gospel?

Isaiah used physical disabilities as metaphors for spiritual brokenness. The language Isaiah used made sense to his audience, being in exile themselves, as they were. The wonder of metaphorical blind eyes being opened by God would have made quite an impact.

But Jesus met a man blind from birth. It's not a metaphor; the man was physically blind, and yet, he had done no wrong.

So, happened? What do we hear in this story about blindness?

Until Jesus arrived, everyone assumed that either the man or his parents had sinned against God. We also heard that after Jesus restored the man's sight, no one would believe that, first, they were looking at the same man, and, secondly, that restoring sight was even possible, except for a man from God.

The Pharisees were upset because this healing had occurred on the Sabbath, and it was thus a sin and Jesus a sinner. Some other Pharisees were confused – how could a sinner perform such a sign? This Jesus character was messing with their world view.

On top of that, the Pharisees didn't believe that the man had ever been blind until his parents confirmed it, and they were afraid to get involved.

It turns out that the man's only friend was Jesus, whom he had only just met and who happened to be the first person he had ever laid eyes on. Was there no one else willing to help or even acknowledge what had happened to this man? Maybe he only needed Jesus to be there for him.

“Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with *vengeance*, with *terrible recompense*. He will come and *save you*” (Isaiah 35:4).

The disabilities in today's readings may once have isolated or stigmatized or marginalized people in some way, but they are no longer barriers to entry in the community today. We can thank God for eyeglasses and hearing aids, and for doctors, surgeons, and medications to help those in need of more extreme healing. The point is that stuff happens. God doesn't will disabilities or illness on anyone, and God is not vindictive or capricious.

Is everyone familiar with the Oxford Comma? For writers, it comes in handy sometimes. It's the difference between 'Eats shoots and leaves' and 'Eats, shoots, and leaves.' You wouldn't think so, but punctuation matters.

Our oldest New Testament manuscripts cared little for punctuation as we know it, because the original Greek they were written in made allowances for how the text was meant to be read.

Unsurprisingly, we can read parts of today's passage in a slightly different way, one that justifies the following phrase, and not the preceding one, simply by adjusting the English punctuation. The traditional punctuation of John 9:3-4 sounds like this:

Neither this man nor his parents sinned so that he was born blind, but in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.

That makes it seem as if the man was born blind so that Jesus could come by some day to heal him.

Adjusting the punctuation better represents what John was trying to say, like this:

Neither this man nor his parents sinned so that he was born blind. But in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.

Reading the text in this way, it's obvious that the man's blindness was not caused by sin. And he must be healed in daylight so that God's works can be made visible.

The man had been made whole by the Son of God and he had seen Jesus face-to-face. Then he worshipped God, and he celebrated. We must always give glory to God but some opportunities to glorify God are better than others.

Amen.

¹ Bartlett, David Lyon, Barbara Brown Taylor, Kimberly Bracken Long, and Jessica Miller Kelley. In *Feasting on the Word. A Thematic Resource for Preaching and Worship*, 65. Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.