

## Scriptures

### Psalms 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

**He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.**

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.**

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.**

### Ephesians 5:8-14

<sup>8</sup> For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— <sup>9</sup> for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. <sup>10</sup> Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; <sup>13</sup> but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, <sup>14</sup> for everything that becomes visible is light.

Therefore it says,  
“Sleeper, awake!  
Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”

### John 9:1-41

<sup>9</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.”

<sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup> Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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."

<sup>18</sup> 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 <sup>19</sup> and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" <sup>20</sup> His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; <sup>21</sup> 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." <sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. <sup>23</sup> Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

<sup>24</sup> 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." <sup>25</sup> He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." <sup>26</sup> They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" <sup>27</sup> 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?" <sup>28</sup> Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup> We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

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

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" <sup>36</sup> He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." <sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." <sup>38</sup> He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

<sup>39</sup> 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." <sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" <sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

**Sermon: Where is God?**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

Human beings are curious creatures indeed. We are at the same time searching for a meaning behind every little thing, while remaining resistant to meaning when we find it.

Take this blind man as an example. Being blind is a significant hardship, especially two thousand years ago. Because he wasn't able to see, this man wasn't able to work, but instead, had to sit on the street and beg for money to survive.

No doubt, as beggars everywhere, he was shunned: told to keep quiet, to go away and bother people somewhere else, likely also abused and robbed from time to time.

Imagine him going to the market – the hustle and bustle of crowds of people – noisy and chaotic, trying to buy a piece of fruit with his gleanings. Would the owner of the market stall give him the half rotten mango, knowing the blind man couldn't tell the difference until it was too late? Would he be honest with giving change, or take advantage of the other man's blindness?

Certainly this man with no income or status would have no chance of marrying, of having someone to share his life. He would never know the gentle caress of a wife, or the rough tumbling energy of a son on his lap.

This blind man lived on the margins of society – not a fully functioning member, not a valued patron – at best a tolerated dependant. It's a tragedy, and it seems so unfair. Who sinned, the people ask, why is this man the way he is?

If he had become blind through an accident, or through some kind of illness, then at least there could be blame assigned. 'How foolish to run with scissors,' they could say, or 'if only his parents had made him eat more carrots!' But, this man was born blind; there seems to be no reason or meaning behind it and so the people are confused and unsure how to comprehend or explain this phenomenon. 'Who sinned?' they ask.

Of course, we who inhabit the twenty-first century are not nearly so superstitious. We've identified conditions such as anophthalmos and microphthalmos in which children are born with incompletely formed eyes. Perhaps the man was born with uveal coloboma, which affects the optic nerve, or a retinal dystrophy. Of course, putting an impressive sounding latin label on a condition still doesn't explain anything. We are left with the name, but still no deeper meaning – no understanding or answer to the question of 'why?'

We live in an age where we are taught that we inhabit a universe that just happened: first there was nothing, then nothing exploded into everything; later on life began as a random accident of energy and proteins, and your life has no greater meaning or import than what you can imagine for yourself. We live in a modern world that accepts the idea that we are random events in a cold, impersonal universe and that therefore any quest for a deeper meaning is, in fact, meaningless. We would never ask such a pedestrian question like 'who sinned to cause this situation?'

Or would we? Deep within most people is still the idea that what goes around comes around; eventually we will all reap what we sow, we'll sleep in the bed we've made. More often than not this applies to those who we would consider bad people. Cheaters never prosper, we say, and those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

Our justice system exemplifies this way of thinking. There are plenty of ways to administer justice: restorative justice seeks to restore the perpetrator and victim to a proper relationship; healing and reconciliation is the goal. Procedural justice ensures fair play between member of society, distributive justice aims to promote peace through equitable distribution of the resources of communities.

We embrace punitive or retributive justice – we focus on punishment for transgressors. Our idea of justice is that if people do bad things, then bad things ought to happen to them. Of course, we don't put the same energy into ensuring that good people are rewarded – we don't seek out the peacemakers and healers for special treatment - so we end up with a lopsided kind of fear-based punishment-centered control system, but at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that bad things will happen to bad people. Knowing that we will eventually make bad things happen to bad people also allows us to accept the fact that, in the short term, good things can happen to those bad people. We'll just make the bad thing that happens bad enough to overcome those good things. The cosmic balance that we imagine is thus satisfied, and we have given meaning and order to life.

But we still have a problem when bad things happen to good people. As much as we intellectually accept that viruses can infect anyone, and a hurricane does not discriminate when it sweeps through an area, we still cry out ‘why?’ Why did this thing happen? Why did I lose my job? Why did that tree fall on my car? Why did my wife die?

Two thousand years ago, the townfolk assumed that for something bad to have befallen this man who was born blind, someone must have done something bad to cause it. Bad things happen to bad people - somebody must have sinned – who was it?

These days we reverse our reasoning. Instead of thinking that there is something wrong with us, we instead begin with the idea that there is something wrong with God. The argument is this: ‘If God is all powerful, he cannot be all good. And if he’s all good, then he cannot be all powerful.’ The basic reasoning is that a good God would not allow evil to exist, so the existence of evil either proves that God is not good, or that he is not strong enough to exert his goodness over the universe.

How does God allow evil? What is evil anyway? If evil is a force in the universe that actively opposes God, and if God created the universe, then did God create evil? These are very big questions that need a great deal of time to investigate; time we do not have this morning, so I will say two things before moving on to the more relevant question which is the main focus of this sermon.

First we must define evil. In much the same way that darkness is the absence of light, and cold is the absence of heat, evil is the absence of goodness; it is the absence of God. Evil is not a created thing – it is an absence, a void.

Secondly, we are created beings; created in God’s image – beings with a mind and with a will. Using our wills we can, and do, choose to push God away. We shove God out of his own creation, and in his absence sin and evil abounds: murders and domestic abuse, drunk drivers, power hungry politicians, huge companies that suck the resources out of communities and concentrate wealth in the hands of a few.

Overly processed foods cause hormonal changes in us, the toxins in our environment cause cancers, clear cutting removes the earth’s protective barriers leaving us vulnerable to soil erosion and flooding, plastics in the ocean are causing a mass marine extinction, radiation from the still leaking Fukushima plant has sterilized a large portion of the Pacific Ocean, greenhouse gasses are rapidly making the planet unlivable for many species.

Our own free will has paved the way for bad things to happen. We individually sin and cause pain to each other, and our corporate sins have infected creation itself. It truly is a fallen world. We want to ask God ‘why would you allow such evil things to happen?’ but that masks the real issue. Evil occurs because God gives us choice, and we often choose evil; we choose to exclude God and then blame God for not fixing things. In our sophomoric arrogance we look down on the simple townfolk who asked ‘who sinned?’ but it appears that they were more prescient than we are.

Declaring that God cannot be good because he does not conform to our personal preferences or ideas of what should or should not be allowed to happen in the universe is to declare that we are the ultimate standard of morality, not God! While many could take this position, I would be hesitant to claim that my reasoning represents moral perfection; this seems like a posture of extreme arrogance and pride. Pride, of course, is a state of self-absorption in which there is no room for God, and if evil is the absence of God’s goodness then pride would be the epitome of evil, and we’re back to the start again.

All this is to say that if I were to go blind it may be my fault for running with scissors, or it may be the fault of some CEO in a far away land putting melamine in milk products, or it may just be a randomly acquired infection. I can choose to blame God and say that a good God would never allow this to happen to such a fantastic person as myself – but that will do nothing but make me bitter.

I told you earlier there was a more relevant question to be asking than is God good or is God all-powerful. The question is this: where is God in all this? In my suffering, where is God?

In the scripture this morning the blind man was failed by his community, his religious community, and his family. After his healing the community do not even recognize the man anymore – they aren't sure that is it him. He has lived in their midst all his life; his neighbours have interacted with him, perhaps helped him cross the street or draw water from the well; they have worshipped with him in the synagogue. How is it that they not recognize him after he is healed? Is it because, to them, the only marker of his identity was his blindness? It would appear that his disability was the only thing they ever recognized in him – they never actually saw the man. The fact that they aren't able to recognize him means that he was never really part of the community in the first place.

But Jesus saw him. This is the very first line of the reading. Not only did Jesus see, he stopped. He must have asked about the man – it's unlikely that the first things the people would ask of Jesus would be about the blind man whom nobody noticed – Jesus must have pointed him out. Not only did Jesus pay attention to him, he healed him in a scene that is reminiscent of God making the first man out of the mud.

The religious authorities also fail the man. They are not concerned about him or his sight; their concern is about a possible threat to their hegemony and their hold on power as being the dispensers of grace. They are as unaware of the presence of God in their midst as they were about the blind man before his eyes were opened. Their concern is for their public image and position.

The man's family also back away from him, concerned for their own safety and social standing more than their child's welfare. They do not seem to celebrate with him or be joyful over his healing. Their fear overwhelms their joy and they abandon their son to the authorities.

Both the family and the Pharisees are concerned with trying to protect their privilege. Not so with Jesus. Nowhere do we read of Jesus trying to defend himself against the charges of the Pharisees, nor does Jesus distance himself from the man he healed. Instead, Jesus sought out the man when he heard that the rest had shunned him; he approached him personally and offered him salvation.

We may rail against a God who we think is not good, or who is not powerful – a God who allows suffering – yet it is this God who truly sees the man when all else do not. It is this God who seeks out this man when all else reject him.

This is the pattern of God. To negate evil or suffering would necessitate negating free will. love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. It is not the presence of evil, but the negation of these qualities of love and joy that would truly make the universe meaningless. So rather than doing away with all suffering and making us purposeless robots, God instead has decided to make himself present amid the suffering.

The incarnate Jesus voluntarily chose to experience suffering as one of us. He suffered hunger, thirst, rejection, betrayal, humiliation, torture, and death. Jesus is not some far away deity, but fully human and fully acquainted with our heartbreaking experiences. When we suffer, so does Christ.

Perhaps you are familiar with a story told by Elie Wiesel, who died recently, about three people being hanged in a concentration camp during the second world war. One of the three was a child. When the horrible deed was done, the chairs kicked out and the three were hanged, one man asked 'where is God now?' The answer, according to Elie, is that God was right there, hanging from the gallows.

God was there in the trenches of world war one, in the camps of world war two. God was there in the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda, the towers of 9/11, and the Westminster bridge a few days ago. God is there, suffering alongside the crying child, the exhausted mother, the woman undergoing cancer treatment and the man dying alone at home. God is present.

The life and death of Christ are more than the revelation of God's judgement on our world of violence. In Jesus Christ God takes the sin, the hatred, and the violence of the world into his own being and extinguishes them there. The crucified Christ embodies the love of God in our violent world, conquering the hatred that inspires violence and the spirit of revenge that prompts counter-violence. The historical passion of Christ reveals the eternal passion of God.

The Jesus who suffered for us, also suffers with us. This does not remove our suffering, but it assures us that even our suffering can be redeemed. God does not forsake us, indeed, his covenant promise hold true that he will be with us, to the very end of the age.

I'd like to close with a line from a hymn by Timothy Rees, titled God is love.

God is Love: and he enfoldeth  
all the world in one embrace;  
with unfailing grasp he holdeth  
every child of every race.

And when human hearts are breaking  
Under sorrow's iron rod,  
Then we find that same self-aching  
Deep within the heart of God.

Amen.