

Here are some SIGNS OF THE TIMES

IN A NON-SMOKING AREA: "If we see smoke, we will assume you are on fire and will take appropriate action."

ON A MATERNITY ROOM DOOR: "Push, push, push!"

AT A CAR DEALERSHIP: "The best way to get back on your feet – miss a car payment!"

OUTSIDE A MUFFLER SHOP: "No appointment necessary – we hear you coming!"

There are 7 'signs' or miracles in John's gospel. Here they are – pay attention – there will be a test! The water turned wine at the wedding of Cana (Jn 2), the healing of the son of a royal official, also at Cana (Jn 4:46-54), the cure at a Sabbath Feast where the person washes in the Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5), the miracle of the loaves (Jn 6), the walking on water (Jn 6:16-21), the man born blind (Jn 9) and the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11). GOT THAT?!

So this healing of the man born blind is the 6th of the 7 signs. Like everything in John's gospel, this story of the blind man is loaded with symbols and layers. This passage is something of a commentary on a claim Jesus made in the previous chapter of this gospel: "I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark. He will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). Through His healing of the man born blind, Jesus made good on His claim. For his part, the man not only received his physical sight; Jesus also opened his spiritual eyes as it were, for the man came to believe in Jesus as 'Son of Man' (v. 34) and 'Lord' (v. 36). Ironically, the Pharisees, who had eyes to see, and the added insights offered by the law, the prophets and the writings, did not see Jesus for who He was. Nor did they believe.

Another perception that was changed or corrected in this narrative was the long-held notion that sickness or blindness was a consequence of sin. We still struggle with this. For example, when something bad happens to people, we look for some reason WHY.

This passage, remember, is one of the three great stories used every year for the preparation of the elect, those who will be baptized at Easter, the other 2 being the Woman at the well, and the raising of Lazarus WHY? Why has the Church used these three stories – all unique to John's gospel – for preparation for baptism? Because they are loaded with baptismal imagery – for those who are to be baptized – and as reminders for the rest of us who already are.

OK, now you have to work to get out of here today. I have questions! What's the most famous time in the Bible when we read about God playing around with mud or clay? GENESIS – and Adam and Eve! And a NEW CREATION comes about! That's baptism. The man is told to wash in THE POOL OF SILOAM, and we are told Siloam means the ONE SENT. Next question: Who is the one sent? JESUS – the One sent from God. What pool of the ONE SENT do we wash in? THE BAPTISMAL POOL! The man becomes enlightened by being 'anointed.' What is going to happen to our Elect as part of their Baptism at the Easter Vigil? THEY WILL BE ANOINTED WITH CHRISM! As the blind man receives his sight, he is enlightened. Lent is called the period of Purification and ENLIGHTENMENT! How are we enlightened? When we can recognize the darkness in our hearts and the true source of all light, Christ. So we celebrate SCRUTINIES with these elect, which also serve as scrutinies, or examinations for the rest of us, to look at the darkness in our own hearts so that we might be fully and more deeply enlightened by Christ. And where does the man end up at the end of the story? He says "I do believe LORD." He has declared the same faith that was declared for us or by us at our own

baptisms. We, for our part, are called each day to renew our faith in the ONE who can bring light into every darkness.

OK, I know that was bit heady, but here is why enlightenment matters, and so my second point. This gospel tells us a lot about how we should see tragedy, and it's a lot different than a lot of religious folks tend to do so. I hear bad theology, or what a friend of mine calls 'stinkin' thinkin' about tragedies all the time. Someone gets diagnosed with cancer and the first thing they say is "What did I do to deserve this?" Someone we love dies suddenly or tragically and we leave the Church. WHY? Because we BLAME GOD because sickness occurs or accidents happen. Do we think this is not part of life? Or that it should only happen to others? Bad people perhaps? But never good? Or, my parents get divorced and I ask "What did I do wrong that my parents got divorced?" Someplace is hit by an earthquake or a tsunami – why? Because they are not a Christian nation? Stinkin' thinkin'! A state senator in Alabama, when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, said that the hurricane hit where it did because Mississippi and Louisiana had legalized gambling. The senator said that God sent the hurricane to punish those states for their sin. We somehow feel we need to explain sadness and tragedy with sin. If God is good and righteous, then if there is bad, then the bad must be punishment for our wickedness. Right? WRONG!

It just so happens that Hurricane Katrina took out only 8 casinos and several HUNDRED churches! Either God has a lousy aim, or ALL OF THOSE CHURCHES WERE EVIL, or that senator needs to revise his stinkin' thinkin'!

In today's gospel, Jesus will have no part in that kind of simplistic and bad theology, which attempts to establish a direct correlation between sin and a person's circumstances in life. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," says Jesus.

This is what explains the big hubbub in that town when the blind man was healed. There is a huge debate! The people who had passed by the poor man every day now say they can't recognize him. This can't be the same man who was blind, they reason. If his tragic circumstances were the result of his (or his parents') sin, then he can't now have changed circumstances without there being a reversal of the moral order of the universe.

So they bring the once-blind man to the religious officials, the custodians of moral and theological order (that is, people like ME – priest-types!) for a ruling on their debate about sin. The Pharisees conclude that not only the man and his parents probably sinned but so has Jesus, otherwise Jesus would not have healed a person on the blessed Sabbath day.

But for Jesus, sickness and disability are not symptoms of sin, not symbols of God's displeasure, not retribution for immoral conduct. But in adopting such a view, He rejects the familiar human habit of blaming the victim. This was utterly revolutionary. There is a terrible irony in the joining of sin and sickness, especially in first century Palestine. Excessive taxation could leave the poor physically malnourished or disabled. But since the system could not blame excessive taxation, it blamed sick people themselves by claiming that their sins had led to their illnesses. And the cure for sinful sickness was, ultimately, in the Temple. And that meant more fees to the priests and for the sacrifices, in a perfect circle of victimization. This is why when Jesus healed, He usually declared their sins forgiven. Jesus challenged not the medical monopoly of the doctors but the religious monopoly of the priests. All this was extremely subversive, and ultimately helped lead to Jesus' death. (adapted from John Dominic Crossan, as cited in Nathan D. Mitchell, EUCHARIST AS SACRAMENT OF INITIATION, p. 84-86)

Third, this story is an invitation for us to realize why the Church calls Lent a JOYFUL season as we ponder our sin. Doesn't that seem a bit weird? Not if we look at it from a theological perspective. But what's so blasted happy about looking at sin?! Or giving up chocolate or wine or beer?! The fact is that we do these things with the understanding that Christ has done something decisive and wonderful about our sins and has come to heal us of them. Our giving up is our puny little response to His immense act of love on the cross.

It is so much easier to play God and self-righteously point to the sin in others, to sit around having detached conversations about just who sinned and who didn't sin, than to see the sin in ourselves. It's so easy to condemn homosexuals and people who have abortions and conveniently forget that we have viewed pornography or cheated on our tests or on our spouse or our taxes or pulled a really dirty deal that has made us a lot of money. As Charles Peguy said: "Man is neither angel nor beast, but if he tries to play the angel, he ends up being the beast." When we start pointing out the faults of others, we become moralizing mean old church ladies! We become beasts! The truth is that we are ALL sinners – and when we stand in the pure light of God, not one of us can afford one second to look at the sins of anyone else. Martin Luther said that we ought to confess our sins and throw a mantle of charity over the sins of others. Good advice.

So during Lent our time is best spent, not theorizing about sin, not by zealously rooting out the sins of others, but rather in humbly confessing our own sin – the way we callously drive past those asking for money on our way to church to worship a God who reached out in mercy to those in need, the way we can always see the sin of others more clearly than our own, the way we get confused into thinking that Jesus is among us as a judge and jury rather than as a savior and healer. Lent ought to be a time not so much for prophetic, searing honesty about sin, but rather for modesty and for celebration of a God who comes to us in love, despite our sin. And that makes for a JOYFUL season of Lent! Amen. (This last point adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, April-June 2011, p. 7)