Whose fault is it? This man, or his parents,…that he was born blind?” That’s the question asked of Jesus when they saw the blind beggar on the side of the road. They assumed, as did many people in their day—and in ours—that disaster is related to deserving, that personal suffering is related in some way to personal sin, that curse always hinges on a cause.

Of course, sometimes we do bring suffering down on our own heads. When we poison our bodies with excessive drink, dangerous drugs, unhealthy foods, or irregular sleep, we shouldn’t be surprised when our health suffers. It is another thing entirely to blame God for inflicting the suffering upon us, when our own fingerprints are all over the cause of our poor health. If we poison our environment with chemicals and toxins, (or allow it to occur by our inattention) we should not say that God is punishing us when those toxins invade our lives, and the lives of those who come after us. If we spend a lifetime trading
away relationships and friendships, investing in material wealth and personal conquest instead, we will likely end up spending our last days miserable and alone. But … is this God’s doing, or ours? Sometimes we are imprisoned in a solitary confinement cell of our own making. Some suffering can be explained by looking at the sinful acts we commit against others, or against ourselves.

So how can we be sure we are interpreting cause and effect accurately? Only God can judge with perfect knowledge, and perfect love; (which is why only God is qualified to be a judge in the first place.) This is even more the case when we are scratching our heads trying to make sense of natural disasters; why did the mudslide in Washington State take so many lives, why did two Boston firefighters die doing their work? Why did the tornado flattened that house, but spare the neighbor’s; why the shark attack a certain swimmer, and not the person swimming right beside him.
So in the case of the man born blind, as told by John in the Gospel today, Jesus deflects the question of the disciples, and points instead to the possibility of what God can do, no matter who is to blame for a person’s misfortune. Isn’t that just like Christ, to see this man for what he could still become, rather than just seeing him as he was? And by the way, isn’t that good news for every one of us too?

John tells the story in an intriguing way, full of unfolding drama and irony. It is a story about healing, demonstrating the light-giving power of Jesus, who had come to be the Light of the World. The blind man is given eyesight, but even more important, he gradually receives insight as well. Listen as his understanding of Jesus develops: at first he simply knows Jesus as “the man they call Jesus”, then later he called him “a prophet”, still later he says Jesus is “a man sent from God”, and finally, he called Jesus “Lord” and worshipped him. From sight to insight….
But John also shows people on an opposite path, moving from light into shadow, toward total darkness. (It is as if John shows us Route 95 from the air…, with traffic moving in opposite directions on either side of the median. The Pharisees, who were students, protectors, and interpreters of God’s word for the people, slip further and further into darkness as they interrogate the man who had been healed. They move from *curiosity* to *internal debate* about his authority, from *criticism* to *ostracism* of the healed man because he refuses to deny Jesus. By the end of the chapter, Jesus summarizes the point, “I have come into the world, so that the blind will see, and those who see will become blind”.

To which the Pharisees ask Jesus, “What? *Are we blind too*?” In the beginning chapter, John’s Gospel said, Jesus brought light into the world, but some of those who should have recognized the light, and celebrated it, remained plunged in darkness, rejecting the Light Jesus brought; clinging to their darkness with eyes tightly clenched shut.

Interesting, the same Light that gives sight, also blinds. (Like the sun that melts butter, but hardens the mud slide in Washington State.)
The crowd that day was amazed that a blind man could be healed. There had never been such a miracle. As difficult as that healing was, it simply required the man to have enough faith to obey Jesus.

When Jesus asked him to go and wash his face in the pool of Siloam. He could have refused to go to a pool so far away. He could have been insulted that Jesus, a stranger, applied spit and mud to his eyes in the first place. (He wasn’t even begging for eyesight, just a handout.) When the pressure came from the authorities, he could have simply turned on Jesus to save his own skin. But he did none of these things. He was captivated by one simple and compelling fact: once he was blind, and now he could see. Who was Jesus to take that initiative, to offer such unasked for and unexpected healing?

In this fourth week of Lent, that is precisely our question, who is Jesus, indeed? For the blind man, Jesus became the Light of his eyes, and ultimately the light of his soul.
For the Pharisees, Jesus was the *uneducated* preacher performing *unnecessary* acts of healing on the Sabbath. “Why not wait until the next day,” they reasoned, “since the man had been blind all these years already?” Jesus threatened their position among the people as the representatives of God’s Law and Way…. So they shut their eyes…

When the Pharisees clenched their eyes shut to block out the Light, they were left with a blindness that even Jesus could not heal.

Who is Jesus for *us*… what blindness does he heal?