



THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
MARCH 22, 2020
“WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO SEE?”

JOHN 9: 1-41

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was.

Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

“How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.”

But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided.

Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

The man replied, “He is a prophet.”



Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.”

The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

SERMON

I wonder: how are you doing?



It wasn't until Friday that I began to get my feet under me. For most of the week, my mind was foggy, my energy low, my focus was, well, unfocused, and it felt like I was slogging through swampland.

Longtime CLC member, Joe Imhoff, reminds us that during Martin Luther's lifetime, he and his family were confronted with the Black Death plague.

And Luther wrote: "I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God...."

How do we, as people of faith, see our way through our own plague, covid-19?

I purposely use the phrase "see our way through" because our gospel focuses on the juxtaposition of blindness and sight.

The origin of the verb to see can mean to look, behold, observe, perceive, understand, experience, inspect. Perhaps the oldest meaning of the verb to see is "to behold in the imagination or in a dream."

At such a time as this, soul imagines into our situation and generates thoughts, feelings, story lines, and fearful fantasies.

For what is looking back at each of us is our own mortality.

Death is a boundary that presses upon us. And so, we experience what our soul imagines when faced with death.

Depth psychology helps us understand some of the ways we refuse to see this boundary.

Some remain in denial. "It's all okay."



Like the California lawmaker who urges us to eat out at our favorite restaurant because we can be sure to get a good seat. Okay....

Some minimize. "It's not that bad," even as cases of infection increase daily and in all 50 states.

Some see God as providing special protection to believers. Like the Louisiana pastor offering "anointed handkerchiefs" with the purported ability of healing people of multiple diseases.

There is a big difference between falling into fear and falling into stupidity....

The healing of the man born blind is not about physical health or God performing miracles. The truth is that we are all born blind to spiritual reality.

Being healed of our blindness is about being able to see the kingdom of God in the midst of us in this moment, in this time, in this pandemic. It is about being able to perceive as much reality as we are able to take in. It is about observing what we call psychological truth. It is about the experience of caring for those who are in crisis because of this larger crisis. It is about beholding what is life-giving....

Again, Luther reminds us that in the midst of life, we are always in the midst of death.

Or, as Erik Erikson states, "only those who know how to die, know how to live."

Dying is the great transformation Jesus references again and again, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

"Take up your cross and follow me."

"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it."

To have spiritual sight is to know what it means to die before we physically die....

Certainly, what needs to die is the illusion that we are in control of our lives.



In this viral tsunami, our lives as we have known them grind to a halt. We cannot, by an act of will, by an impetus of ego, or thrust of personal power overcome forces that are larger than we are.

Our small lives are shattering, putting us face-to-face with much larger forces that we may have been able to escape by the very act of keeping our lives small.

Faith, in a time like this, certainly means being able to surrender to the reality in front of us. Life is bigger than we are, as is God who is in the midst of all this.

Perhaps it is good to remind ourselves that the notion of a gracious and loving God arose in a time when countless children died in childbirth, when we removed human limbs with a hacksaw and without anesthesia, when the average lifespan was thirty, and when diseases killed millions....

Facing the boundary of mortality raises the question: what is essential?

I looked around my home office as I wrote this sermon and saw books I will never have time to read, records I will never have time to play, boxes stored away in an attic space that I haven't gone through in years. I think of friends I have not contacted in years, the projects I have not had time to pursue, and the ideas still running around in my head. And, as I approach seventy, the limited number of years ahead of me.

What is essential? What can you and I not live without? How much junk, crap, clutter, and mess swamp our lives?

Is this a time of grace allowing us to get down to the essence of our lives?

What needs to die?

Surely, we have no time anymore for hatred, greed, lust for power, fearful judgment of others, blaming others, and immaturity.

At one time, it may have been possible to sit in a pew and remain a warmonger, a racist, a homophobe, or a man's man. At one time, Christians could narcissistically think theirs was the only path to God. At one time, Christians could act as if God put America first.



The world has no time for such childishness anymore. The world's suffering is too great. To sin is to refuse to grow and grow up.

Or do we need a greater calamity to teach us that we are all connected? That what happens to one happens to all of us?

The image that God has given us is of the God/man, Jesus, nailed to a cross. A God/man who suffers. Showing us that great love, that transformation on the highest level, comes through great suffering.

And we are experiencing great suffering. Will we allow it to transform us?

As Richard Rohr reminds us: there are only two paths by which we come to God: the path of great love and the path of great suffering. Both finally come down to great suffering because if we love anything greatly, we will eventually suffer for it.

Will we see this or will we remain blind?

In these times, I am reminded that the word suffering has to do with carrying a weight. That the more we see, the more we suffer. That there is a soulful burden in keeping one's eyes open and becoming aware. It has been said that faith is the decision to keep one's eyes open....

Briefly, let me put forth a fourfold spiritual pattern for keeping your eyes open in this pandemic.

First, spend each day opening your eyes to the divine presence. God's first language is silence. Everything else is a footnote.

Sit in silence.

Read any one of the four gospels or Paul's letter to the romans as a starting point. Pray for one another. Let your imagination lead you to the people you hold before God. If you picked up a copy of my Lenten recommendations, go to one of the resources for spiritual nourishment.

Pay attention to your dreams. God often speaks through the dream in times of crisis. You may want to place a pad of paper on your nightstand or use your phone to record your dream upon awakening.



Second, take care of yourself. Eat well, sleep, wash your hands, establish a routine that supports healthy living. Remember the advice we all get when we fly: put your oxygen mask on first before you place a mask on anyone else. You can't assist someone else if you're not taking care of yourself.

Breathe. Breathe deeply. It will center you. Breath and spirit are the same word in Hebrew. So imagine God entering your soul with each inhalation and anxiety leaving with each exhalation.

Pay attention to your inner process. Watch what passes through your mind in these anxious times. Let go again and again and again.

Third, be kind, supportive, loving to those closest to you. We all will get edgy, irritable and ouchy. Frankly, we're not used to so much closeness every day. Accept one's another's flaws and foibles. And make up quickly.

Connect. Give someone a call, email, text, but stay in touch. You can text or call me or the church office. Patty is in every day from 9-12.

Loneliness and isolation can be terrible burdens. Reach out. Let others know you are thinking of them.

Even so, there is a big difference between being alone and being lonely, as one Carmelite sister points out. She suggests that "being alone is very full. It heightens my awareness, attunes me to what I'm hearing and what I'm seeing. What I'm feeling with loneliness is pain. It's an emptiness."

Without fear of loneliness, there can be a solitude that leads to deep intimacy with God.

And then, fourth, serve others in the human community. We have an abundance of gift cards, generously provided by the teachers of the shale school system, element church, and CLC. Tell those in need to come to our office.

Without a doubt, God will provide opportunities for each of us to care for the stranger, the outcast, the needy, the poor. We are bound to each other in such a way that no one may ignore another in distress. We are obliged as servants of the one who came to serve to help others as we ourselves would like to be helped.



We are in a time of transition in the worldwide human community. Keep your eyes open. Resist the blind guides. Join with those who will contribute to new cooperative communities where all are seen and all cared for.

SERMON SONG

GOD I'M MISSING YOU BY RODNEY CROWELL