

The Fourth Sunday in Lent • March 22, 2020ⁱ

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 9:1-7, 13-17, 34-39

“Deliver Us, Jesus, from Blindness”

Close your eyes. What do you see? Not a lot, probably. Afterimages at first, if you've been in a bright space. Then maybe tiny points of light as photons in your body bounce around and hit your retinas and make their way along the optic nerve. But otherwise? It's just dark. And it's a separate kind of dark than having your eyes open in a blacked-out room. While you still can't see what's out there, researchers have discovered that the brain works differently when your eyes are closed than when they're open.

It might seem like we're in some dark days right now. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic looming over every newscast, social media feed, and public interaction, it's tempting to shut your eyes and continue on with life as it was only a few weeks ago. But that'd be living a lie. This health crisis has brought to light just how interconnected we all are. We depend on others to keep our supermarkets stocked, to deliver food to our door when we need it, to teach our children, to keep the power on and garbage picked up as we must be socially distant from other people. As more states are enacting stay-at-home orders for their residents, people are hurting. But as one epidemiologist put it, the most helpful thing that we can do as a nation is to stay home, to avoid spreading this disease, hoping that in the end it will all seem like a big overreaction because nothing happened to you, your family, or other people that you know. That's the desired outcome. We can't shut our eyes. We can't afford to be blind to what's going on around us.

Jesus wasn't blind to the need around him – he saw it all. We hear accounts throughout the Gospels of Jesus showing compassion for those in need: the hungry, the disabled, the sick and dying. Jesus knew this is a broken world. That's why he came down into it. Today, we hear the Evangelist's report of how, one Sabbath day, Jesus sees a man who had been blind from birth. A beggar. The disciples want to use him as a case study for theological discussion. “Was it this man's own sinfulness that condemned him to a life of blindness, or his parents? Who is to blame?” But Jesus gives an unexpected answer: his blindness happened so that the works of God might be displayed in his life. And then the Lord uses his saliva to make a mud pack for the blind man's eyes, sending him to wash it off in the pool whose name means “sent.” The man does just that – and goes home seeing. Sight came to the one who was sent by the power of the One who sent him. Jesus sees our need, too.

Why is it that many of our fellow Americans have suddenly decided that they need ALL of the toilet paper? Didn't they use it before? And have people discovered that the thorough washing of your hands has magical properties? While it might have been centuries since that blind man washed his eyes in the pool of Siloam, human nature hasn't fundamentally changed. You and I still live in a broken world. The current pandemic has removed the veil of comfort with which we'd surrounded ourselves, it has largely stripped away that which we thought made us secure. The truth is that we're vulnerable. Death is part of our reality, no matter how much toilet paper or hand sanitizer you have. Might God be allowing this health crisis to continue in order to open the eyes of our world, that people might see the truth?

Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” (John 9:39) Jesus opens eyes. He has come into this world to turn the darkness before us into light, as Isaiah foretold. (Isaiah 42:16) You and I were spiritually blind from birth, no different than the Pharisees we hear of in today's Gospel. But Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12), gives light. Jesus is the one who uniquely reveals God to the world. He's the one who opens the eyes of the spiritually blind to see their real hope.

Here's the tough part, though: those who think they see are blinded. People can be so convinced of their own rightness and self-sufficiency that they'll fail to see the truth that's right in front of them. Look back to our Gospel text. The man who was born blind – who had yet to see Jesus with his new eyes – has now seen the limits of those people who thought they had life figured out. Some of the Pharisees refuse to acknowledge that Jesus must be sent by God, but the now-seeing man calls them out. How could Jesus, who has given them this amazing sign, not be sent by God? “[Those Pharisees] answered him, ‘You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?’ And they cast him out.” (John 9:34) In their indignation against this man, the Pharisees ironically acknowledge that the man was indeed born blind, and can now see... but they fail to see the One who gave the man sight. So they cut him off from the synagogue. And Jesus goes to find him.

Jesus has found you. He has turned the darkness before you into light. That doesn't mean you'll be spared from pain or rejection, from suffering and isolation. But you can see with new eyes in this time of Lent. You can look to Jesus to see your hope. Alongside the man who had been born blind, you can acknowledge your vulnerability and need, bowing down to worship before Jesus, saying "Lord, I believe." We live in the light.

As Paul writes in today's Epistle, you and I are now called to walk as children of light. (Ephesians 5:8) Especially in these dark days of pandemic, we can join Jesus on his mission, sharing real hope. While we wait and watch for God's mercy and relief from the crippling effects of COVID-19, be on the lookout. The Lord will continue to provide opportunities for His people to reflect the light of His love into the lives of our neighbors, that the works of God may be displayed. Check in on the people around you, or other members of our congregation, especially if you know they might need a helping hand. If you must stay home, text or call your relatives and friends you haven't spoken to in a while. Close your eyes and pray for them. Pray with them.

In the midst of everything that's going on, Jesus still finds his people. He is with you in your small groups, Bible studies, and missional communities meeting online. He is with you as you're caring for the people right around you or supporting the needs of others far away.

So together on this fourth Sunday in Lent, we pray, "Deliver us, Jesus, from blindness." May the Lord who is the light of the world always open our eyes, both to his love and to how we might share that love with the neighbor beside us.

Amen.

ⁱ Passage for memory:

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." – John 9:39