



Sermon for Lent 4, 2020
Meeting and Loving Others in a Time We Didn't Expect

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)

[Psalm 23](#)

[Ephesians 5:8-14](#)

[John 9:1-41](#)

As we reflect on God's word, let us begin with prayer.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this day and this night, and give your angels charge over those who rise and those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest and strength to the weary, bless and hold the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

This prayer, adapted from one of the closing prayers for Evening Prayer and Compline, seems particularly important for us to pray, repeatedly, in the days and weeks ahead. We pray today for all who have died and are dying from the coronavirus infection, across the world – people in China, Italy, Spain, Iran, England, the United States, and many other countries. We pray for their families. We pray for careworkers and health professionals.

Dear friends, we are doing what we must in these days, in our hope to slow the pace and spread of infection. But it is taxing. It is harder for us to still ourselves than it is to jump into action. It is harder to quiet our activity and withdraw from others out of care for them than it is to come together in common cause. World War II was the last great nationwide mobilization – but it called people to clear actions. This is different, as we seek to fight a battle against a microscopic adversary.

And so, we can begin to feel weary of the anxiety – especially when we can't put our pent up energy into big actions and solutions.

Please, friends, be gentle with yourselves and with each other. Trust in the resilience that God has given you, the strength for today that is God's gift like your daily bread.

As we experience this heightened hum of anxiety, let us remember all who live with this kind of intense concern and even more intense fear – refugees across the world, from Syria, from nations in upheaval in Central America, from Afghanistan, from South Sudan. Let us remember those across the globe who beg and who must rely on the kindnesses and mercies of others for their daily bread.

Today, we have remarkable, beautiful scriptures to guide us and anchor us. We hear of Samuel going to choose the next king of Israel to replace Saul – and how God spoke to Samuel to wait for the unlikeliest of all the sons of Jesse, the youngest and smallest, David. We hear one of the Psalms that David himself may have written which is most familiar to us, the 23rd Psalm. We hear that wonderful passage from Ephesians that reminds us that, though we were once in

darkness, because of Christ Jesus we are now children of light. And then, we hear this amazing story of healing and believing from the Gospel of John.

Imagine being blind from birth. Imagine not having one of your senses, for your entire lifetime. Imagine not having one of your limbs, for your entire lifetime. What would life have been like for you? How would it have been different? How would YOU have been different?

This man in the Gospel, this man born blind, had been forced to beg for some bit of livelihood for most of his life. I remember the beggars that approached my wife and me in Morocco, and the people with extraordinary disabilities and disfigurements that I saw in China. There are still many, many places in the world where poverty is the immediate companion of any disability.

And there is a tendency in human nature to try to find people responsible for their condition. Somebody MUST be responsible – maybe the person herself, or her parents; maybe the person's neighborhood, or his culture.

We get ourselves into a little tailspin, telling ourselves stories to answer that nagging question, "Why is there suffering?" And we hope that our stories we tell ourselves can help us feel a bit more distant from suffering, to protect us from seeing that we are every bit as vulnerable as anyone else. "No, it's that man's sin that caused it." "It was the way his parents lived that caused it – you know how they are."

And the same questions plague people who ARE suffering. "Why? What did I do to earn this? What did someone else do, that caused this?" The silence in response to these questions can seem deafening.

Because these are not the questions. God does not visit suffering on people as some form of judgment or retribution. As it says in the Gospel of Matthew, God sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

The disciples see a suffering man – a man they learn was born blind. And, in an act of distancing themselves from care, empathy, and recognition of their own fragile humanity, they escape to a debate about who was to blame for his blindness. Was he born blind because of something he did, somehow, in the womb? Or did his parents do something that resulted in him being blind?

The disciples viewed blindness as more than a disability. They viewed it as a punishment, a marking of unworthiness to live a "normal" life. I have known people who think this way. There was a young woman at my college, decades ago, who was partially blind – and her parents told her it was God's punishment and that she should confess. For what, none of us could even imagine.

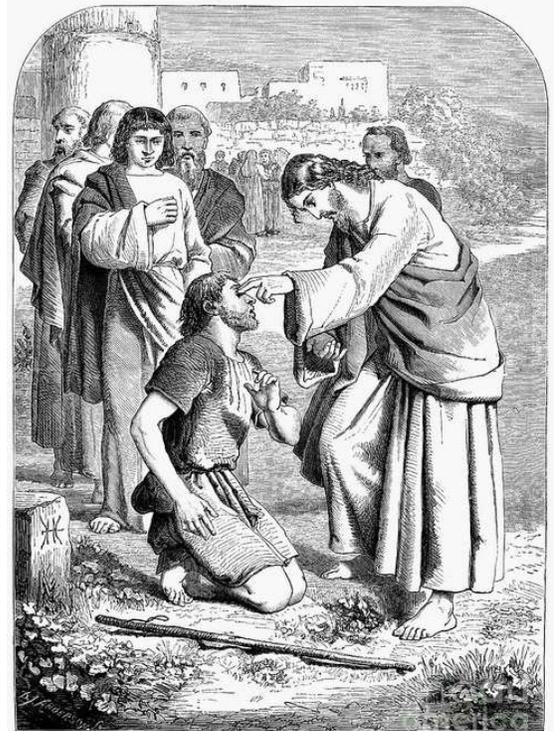
Jesus responds to the disciples with a very different perspective.¹ This man's blindness isn't because of some sin. His blindness becomes an opportunity for God's work in him to be revealed. Instead of pointing to some prior cause that explains it all away and puts life back into tidy categories and boxes for the disciples, Jesus looks what opens up in this man's life as an opportunity, now and in the future. In essence, Jesus' response says to his disciples that

- 1) There is much more to this man than his disability or deficit;
- 2) This man's disability is also a gateway that opens new windows to God – for him, but also for all who encounter him.

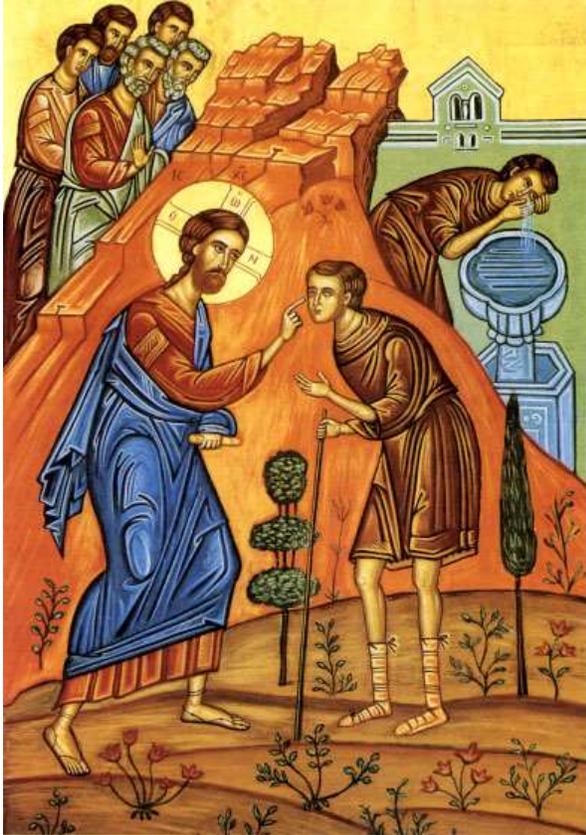
Just in this statement alone, Jesus changes the man's life story, and the man's identity begins to change. And then, Jesus touches him, spreads mud on his eyes (not something we would currently do!), tells him to wash off, and the man can see – and his entire identity changes dramatically. He is no longer the blind guy sitting on the edge of the road near the city gate. He is the guy that can see.

So, then... What happens when your identity changes, when the labels and categories by which you've been known no longer work? How do you adjust? How do others adjust?

This is the new, immediate challenge for the man who now can see. His identity is new, different, unexpected. But not just his identity – also his family's identity changes. And, so does the identity of every person who has otherwise categorized and pigeon-holed him all of his life.



¹ Granger Historical Picture Archive, James Granger, late 19th century, granger.com



And, let's push this just a bit further. Everything changes when God acts. It's not just the man's identity, but God's identity, that is now uncertain. What happens when something happens that seems like a gracious act of God but does not line up with what I have believed about God, and people, and the world, up to this point?² What happens when our experience of God doesn't match our prior categories and conceptions for God? What happens when God doesn't play politely inside our sandbox that we set up for God to stay inside?

The real problem, in the end, is not the man's physical blindness from birth. It is our own blindness, our own inability and our own refusal to see. The real problem is what we think we know that prevents us from seeing or from being willing to see what is right in front of our noses – the evidence of God at work.

Some of you may remember an old concept from business, called "The Johari Window." This concept was developed by two psychologists who worked with organizations and teams to help people understand themselves and others a bit better. I particularly like the version that has us think about what we know and what we don't know.

Imagine a window with four panes. Through the top right pane, we see the things we know that we know. These are talents, abilities, and knowledge in which we have strong mastery. Through the top left pane are also things we know, but we don't really grasp or realize that we know them – but others can see that we know them. This might be called a "happy blindness," where we are capable in ways we don't see or recognize. Now, along the bottom of the window, things get foggier. Through the bottom right pane, we can see things we know that we don't know. These are things we recognize we have no knowledge or ability in. We might call this a "humble blindness" or a "realistic blindness," where we admit our lack. It is the final, lower left pane that is the least clear and what we might call our "thorough blindness" – where we cannot see, and so we do not know what we do not know. This is the domain of our deepest ignorance. Unfortunately, it can also become the place of our deepest stubbornness, where we not only cannot see but we WILL NOT see – we refuse to see where we are ignorant.

² Image from St. Elias Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral, Ottawa. steliascathedral.com

	Unknown	Known
Known	Blind Quadrant <i>I don't know what I know</i> Hidden to self, but known to others	Open Quadrant <i>I know what I know</i> Evident to all
Unknown	Unknown Quadrant <i>I don't know what I don't know.</i> Hidden to all including self.	Hidden Quadrant <i>I know what I don't know</i> Hidden from others but known to self.

<https://arcosnz.wordpress.com/2016/05/18/how-to-know-what-we-dont-know-we-dont-know-the-johari-window/>

This seems to be where the Pharisees in today's Gospel were mucking around. Suddenly, the world did not make as much predictable sense to them. The man for whom they had a clear category – a man born blind, a man (for them) born thoroughly in sin – was not longer that same man. How could this be? They themselves could not possibly have been wrong. So, either the man was lying or the One who healed him did so by an evil spirit. Because, they already knew what they knew about God – and nothing new could possibly be added to that. What we think we know, and what we not only do not know but stubbornly will not know – this willful arrogance is the royal gateway for sin. It is a thorough blindness that refuses the light that is dawning all around, that is opening the possibility of seeing new things, because we are too busy saying, like the Pharisees did, "We know. WE know." Never acknowledging that there might be something we don't know.

What happens, friends, when your worldview, your identity, your ideas about God get confronted, reshaped, given a new twist by something you never expected?

This is the moment we face now.

In such a moment as this, I am afraid there are many who wish to remain blind, and stubbornly work to re-categorize anyone whose testimony offers a different vision of reality than what they have worked so hard to construct.

In contrast to the self-blinding "We know" assertions of the Pharisees, the man born blind keeps asking to see and to believe. And he keeps going back to his core experience of Jesus.

When the world around us seems to be crazy, when people's ideas seem to drift toward categorizing and pigeon-holing everyone and everything, what does it mean to really believe, to really see?

- To really believe yourself? To trust the life-giving, life-changing experience of God that you have had?
- To really believe others? To let go of what you have thought and let others become what God is allowing them to become?
- To really believe God? To allow God to be God, to allow God to move in the world in surprising ways?

Is it really possible, are we willing to believe that God truly will spread a table for us, and for others, in the presence of enemies? That God will truly walk with us, and others, through the valley of the shadow of death?

Night may be coming, friends. There are challenges ahead that we can only begin to glimpse. But even now, and even then, we hold what Jesus promised – “as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, in this world still, present in us and in each person. As followers of Jesus who have received and embraced his presence in our lives, we can dare to say this with Jesus: “as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Not I, but Christ in me. We are children of the Light. And, as we seek Christ in others, we can hear Christ moving in each person, saying the same: “as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Let it be so. Let this precious Light, this sight-giving Light, shine in the darkness. Shine friends. This time is for Light to shine forth. Let Christ shine forth in you, clear away your blindness, help you to see and believe and give of yourself.