Sermon for Lent 4, March 22, 2020 Text: John 9

His world was small and dark, the man born blind. Just a tiny plot of ground where he sat every day. Inside the gates of the city, he sat there, with a bowl to collect money, maybe some food to eat and a mat to sit on. He sat there with the others who suffered, the others who were dependent upon the mercy of strangers and neighbors for their existence.

Day after day.

And then one day, a group of men walked by.

Immediately, they leapt to a conclusion.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

All this time with Jesus, and the disciples got it wrong from the start.

But they wouldn’t have been alone in wondering who was to blame. They wouldn’t have been the only ones to walk by and judge the people who were forced to beg for food, beg for money, just so they could survive. Because when someone is suffering, someone must have caused it, and they can be blamed.

And when we have someone to blame, someone to judge, then the world is tidy and orderly again. Even if that someone continues to suffer.

The question, “who sinned,” is just the first of a series of wrong questions. Pretty much every question the Pharisees ask is wrong. They shift from judging the man born blind to judging Jesus, and they miss the point entirely.

And because all this takes place on the Sabbath, they find more reason to judge what Jesus has done. Clearly, he didn’t respect the Sabbath, and that meant he wasn’t from God.

Because the Pharisees were focused on asking the wrong questions, judging the man who had been healed, and vilifying Jesus, they missed out on the fact that God’s glory had been made manifest through the healing of the man.

The Pharisees could have rejoiced, they could have said, “Now that God has made you whole, we’re going to celebrate with you. We’re going to thank God for this blessing and rejoice as you start a new life.”

Instead, they took away his opportunity to go to the temple and offer up his thanks to God, and they gave him a different kind of isolation.

We haven’t lost the tendency to ask that wrong question: “who sinned?” We haven’t lost our rush to judgement. It only takes a few minutes of watching the news to see that. People are pointing fingers at everyone else. Who’s to blame for this? Who didn’t do what they were supposed to do, who made bad choices? Who can we blame?

There will be a time, one day, when it will be appropriate to make a thorough assessment of the beginnings of the virus, how it spread so far, so fast.

But blame and judgment shouldn’t be the goal of the conversation then, and it shouldn’t be a part of the conversation as we make our way through these challenging times.

Instead, we should be asking the same questions that the Pharisees should have asked:

Where is God present in all this?

How has God’s glory been made manifest?

How can this be an opportunity to serve God?

Always, but especially right now, we need to be looking for signs of how God is at work, bringing light into the darkness of the world. We need to be looking to see how God’s love is made manifest. We need to be looking for the signs that God is, as the Psalmist reminds us, leading us beside still waters, restoring our souls, accompanying us as we walk through the valley of the shadow, and making our cup overflow.

That day, the world changed for the man born blind. There are some who are saying that the world has changed for us, that it’s vain to hope that we’ll go back to the way things were just a couple weeks ago, a couple months ago. And that can be a scary thought. I know it’s kept me up at night, taken root in my thoughts during the day.

And maybe, even though the man born blind had a hard life, maybe he would have been scared about what his life was going to be like after being healed. Maybe he went to sleep that first night, wondering what the next day would bring, worrying about what he would do, how he would make a living. Especially with the difficulties that the Pharisees added to his life.

But he had the comfort of God’s love, something he experienced in a powerful and personal way, to rely upon through his uncertainty about his future.

Uncertainty is an uncomfortable place for us to be. But it is temporary. Through this time of uncertainty, and into whatever our next version of normal life is, we have God’s love to rely upon.

Regardless of what’s to come, regardless of how long we dwell in the valley of the shadow, regardless of how long we are unable to gather together, nothing can change the promise that we are part of the Body of Christ, called to be witnesses to the extravagant love of our God, in word and deed.

Confident of God’s love, we can focus our energies on things that bring wholeness and healing to the world, learning what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves in a rapidly changing world.

May you find signs of God’s love being made manifest, and may those signs be a reminder for you that, with God, all things are possible.