

Sunday worship for 22nd March 2020

Dear friends, welcome to a new way of worship in these strange and somewhat trying times. In order to allow those who feel the need to self-isolate to still take part in an act of worship each Sunday, a short service will be printed and posted during the week at your request, hopefully reaching you in time for you to use it at your leisure on Sunday. I would suggest that you read the prayers (and the Lord's prayer) aloud as this will offer a greater sense of participation in the service.

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As we prepare to worship, let us read the Psalm set for this Sunday and use it as a preface to our prayer.

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Prayer:

Lord God, how well we know these words! How often we hear them read, or we recognise snippets of them in other things we read. We have spoken them and heard them read at times when our hearts have been filled with grief, and at other times when our hearts have been filled with joy. Help us, we pray, to hear these words afresh as you seek to strengthen our faith and remind us that you are with us in all life's events. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Hymn 11 – Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!

Holy, holy, holy
Lord, God Almighty
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee
Holy, holy, holy
Merciful and mighty
God in three persons blessed Trinity.

Holy, holy, holy
Though the darkness hide Thee
Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee
Perfect in power, in love, and purity

Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God Almighty
All Thy works shall praise Thy name
in earth and sky and sea
Holy, holy, holy
Merciful and mighty
God in three persons blessed Trinity

Prayers of confession:

We offer to you O Lord, the lover of our souls, our prayers of confession. Hear us as we offer to you the things we would change; offer to you the things we want to stop doing.

Silent contemplation

Jesus meets us in grace, reminding us that, if we confess our sins to you, O God, we are forgiven. In gratitude for this grace and forgiveness, we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn 103 (tune: HYFRYDOL) – God is love

God is Love: let heav'n adore him;
God is Love: let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before him,
and exalt him with one voice.
He who laid the earth's foundation,
he who spread the heav'ns above,
he who breathes through all creation,
he is Love, eternal Love.

God is Love: and he enfoldeth
all the world in one embrace;
with unfailing grasp he holdeth
every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
under sorrow's iron rod,
then they find that self-same aching
deep within the heart of God.

God is Love: and though with blindness
sin afflicts the souls of all,
God's eternal loving-kindness

holds and guides us when we fall.
Sin and death and hell shall never
o'er us final triumph gain;
God is Love, so Love for ever
o'er the universe must reign.

Scripture readings and reflection

Ephesians 5:8-14 (NRSV)

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

John 9 (NRSV)

A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

As he walked 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?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

The Pharisees Investigate the Healing

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes.

Then I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

Spiritual Blindness

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were

blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Reflection (by Melinda Quivik, workingpreacher.org)

This story, filled with strange conflicted sayings, involves a healer who gives a blind man sight and then disappears. He leaves behind questions that the other characters struggle to answer by asking the wrong question. Everyone in the scene—the religious leaders, the parents of the now-sighted man, and the man himself—speak without connecting with each other.

When the religious leaders ask for the fifth time a question using the word “how”—“How did he open your eyes?”—we see that they are fixated on method rather than going to the deeper question: Who is this healer? (Actually, it may be that the “how” questions are meant to obfuscate what they really want to know in order to trip Jesus up.) The formerly blind man answers, in what ends up being one of those rare places in Scripture that is actually comic, whether the religious leaders want to know what Jesus did because they want to become his disciples. We know they are not interested in becoming his followers. They want to trap a threatening rabbi (teacher) and healer who confronts them with their unmerciful rules, like not being allowed to do a holy work on the Sabbath.

The religious leaders even turn against the now-sighted man with disgust that he, a sinner, would deign to tell them how to think about Jesus. You can almost smell the vainglory dripping off these affronted religious types. We know them in our own time. They often get caught offending in just the way they accuse others of sinning.

Jesus' absence for most of the story gives the ignorant and threatened people time to try to find someone who will blame Jesus rather than giving him credit for a good gift. When he reappears, he perfectly depicts in double meaning the point of his healing: “I came into this world ... so that those who do not see may see” (John 9:39).

Giving sight to a blind man, repeated references to light—these images are also found in the other readings for this day so that the preacher might be drawn to the role of vision in how we live. In the Epistle (Ephesians 5:8-14), light exposes what is done in secret, making visible what was not visible, bringing out the fruits of what is “good and right and true.” We need light to illumine our way, because we cannot see with our eyes in the dark. This is true for all people, all races, and for most creatures (exceptions are some

fantastical beings that live in the deepest, darkest parts of the oceans).

Abiding “in darkness”—as the Epistle contrasts that place with being “in the Lord”—has to do with orientation, perspective, and goals. Consider what you learn from a visit to an underground mine, for instance, when the guide turns off the lights for a brief moment.

- You are oriented only to yourself—the clammy humidity on your skin that occurs far underground, hearing or feeling the beat of your heart.
- You can no longer see anyone else in the group.
- You alone are important; there is no larger picture.
- You are focused on the moment, on temporal safety.

(OK this may be a little dramatic, but if you've been in a mine without light, you know I'm telling the truth!)

On the other hand, when you are living “in the Lord,” the scope enlarges.

- You can see other people.
- Community becomes possible.
- You step with confidence into the unknown.
- You comprehend the landscape, the big picture.

These are conditions for an orientation that can lead to “what is pleasing to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10).

When Jesus returns to the story at the end, he pulls out from God's word the deeper meaning of having vision. He enlarges the meaning of the light that God gives so that it becomes a kind of interior seeing. Having vision becomes a way to connect with others.

The healed man doesn't get caught up in the obfuscating questions of the religious leaders like whether Jesus is a sinner. The healed man says what he knows to be the flat truth: he healed me. And he is gutsy. He sounds exasperated at the religious leaders when they want to hear it again and he says, “I have told you already, and you would not listen.” His vision has brought him a clarity that we might all admire. Vision brings wisdom.

This story has all the people you can find in any religious or secular group:

- the self-righteous powerful,
- the rubber-necking neighbours,

- the ones who want to turn a blind eye, and
- the ones who try to avoid getting involved.

The only one who truly receives light is the blind man. He's the only one who is healed. He's the only one who names Jesus appropriately.

The story of the blind man's healing in John can be recounted in three parts:

1. Jesus comes and heals the man born blind.
2. Everybody is in a dither trying to figure out what happened.
3. Jesus comes again to the healed man when he is kicked out of the community.

This movement of events mirrors our world in every age:

1. Jesus came.
2. We wonder what happened and argue about it.
3. Jesus comes to us ... again and again ... with healing.

Jesus, the light of the world, is a mystery, except that while the whole world around the blind man is confused, the blind man is quietly abandoned by everyone but Jesus.

Finally, notice Jesus' most telling action. Jesus comes to the man in his blindness and gives him vision. He does not quiz the blind man about anything. Only later, when Jesus returns, does he use the word "believe." His healing makes no conditions.

Prayers of intercession:

Loving God, we pray for those who live in darkness. We pray for those who hurt themselves and others as they move through this world without seeing your presence. We pray for the times when we were only aware of ourselves and blind to you. Give to each of us an awareness of other people that speaks of your light and your love.

We offer our prayer for those whom we know who are finding life difficult at the moment, especially those whose social lives have been curtailed by the threat of Coronavirus. We pray for those who are ill, and ask for your healing and your loving presence with them and all who love them. We pray for the lonely, and we pray for those who grieve.

In Jesus' name, amen.

We offer our prayers together with the prayer Jesus taught his disciples as we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Hymn 342 – All hail the power of Jesus' name

All hail the power of Jesus' name!
Let angels prostrate fall.
Bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown him Lord of all.
Bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown him Lord of all!

O seed of Israel's chosen race
now ransomed from the fall,
hail him who saves you by his grace,
and crown him Lord of all.
Hail him who saves you by his grace,
and crown him Lord of all!

Let every tongue and every tribe
responsive to his call,
to him all majesty ascribe,
and crown him Lord of all.
To him all majesty ascribe,
and crown him Lord of all!

Oh, that with all the sacred throng
we at his feet may fall!
We'll join the everlasting song
and crown him Lord of all.
We'll join the everlasting song
and crown him Lord of all.

Benediction:

May the light and love of the ever-present God be with each of us, this day and all days.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.