**Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A March 22, 2020 UPMP**

***(Pandemic sermon, recorded and edited for print)***

**Psalm 91 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

*(often called: “The Soldier’s Prayer” …read by request)*

1You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
    who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
2will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress;
    my God, in whom I trust.”
3For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
    and from the deadly pestilence;
4he will cover you with his pinions,
    and under his wings you will find refuge;
    his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
5You will not fear the terror of the night,
    or the arrow that flies by day,
6or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
    or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

7A thousand may fall at your side,
    ten thousand at your right hand,
    but it will not come near you.
8You will only look with your eyes
    and see the punishment of the wicked.

9Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
    the Most High your dwelling place,
10no evil shall befall you,
    no scourge come near your tent.

11For he will command his angels concerning you
    to guard you in all your ways.
12On their hands they will bear you up,
    so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
13You will tread on the lion and the adder,
    the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

14Those who love me, I will deliver;
    I will protect those who know my name.
15When they call to me, I will answer them;
    I will be with them in trouble,
    I will rescue them and honor them.
16With long life I will satisfy them,
    and show them my salvation.

**John 9 (NRSV)**

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, 7saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” 9Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” 10But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” 11He 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.” 12They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

13They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15Then 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.” 16Some 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. 17So 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.”

18The 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 19and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” 20His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21but 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.” 22His 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. 23Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

24So 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.” 25He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” 26They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” 27He 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?” 28Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” 30The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” 34They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

35Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” 36He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” 37Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” 38He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. 39Jesus 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.” 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” 41Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

SERMON: “Open My Eyes”

INTRO

As I preach, the words echo off the walls in an unfamiliar tone, different than usual. There are very few bodies here…very few hearts and minds present to absorb the words.

Now friends, we’re recording this sermon, but to be honest, I don’t assume a great many of our usual members will be watching. Still, I want to share with you some sense of normalcy—or what’s a better word: some sense of predictable rhythm. The rivers still flow, the birds still return in Spring migration (hear the robins out there? This year we have active Cardinals, there were two Swans over at Chambers Grove yesterday, oh and so many Eagles!) And with the same predictable rhythm we still roll our eyes at a late March snow, ever so anxious to have this winter (like other challenges in our present lives) over and done with. And likewise, the words of scripture and faith still echo off the walls at United Protestant Church in Morgan Park on Sunday at 10:30. Predictable.

Of course, most of our everyday lives are not predictable now. Not “normal”. But as Christians who engage our faith, nothing we ever do is “normal”—Jesus was not “normal” …and if you think this is a strange time full of constant unpredictable change, imagine being one of the early disciples travelling with Jesus on this journey toward Jerusalem as we share now during Lent. Who knows what is going to happen? Who knows how things will develop or play out, or what life circumstances are going to occur in the next chapter of this journey.

So…sit back for a moment and take a deep breath. Today we have chapter nine in the Gospel of John. We are reading and sharing it in the midst of a pandemic covering our whole world. Ok. That’s where we’re at. If you think life is throwing you a lot of curve balls right now, as Christians you are in very good company because throughout our history it has always been this way. God has a way of getting in and stirring up the pot—God has a way of poking the stick in the anthill and leaving what appears to be a frenzy, full of confusion… And You! and I! We’re not passive observers, even if you are stuck at home and bored out of your gourd, God is dynamic and working through you… so let’s roll!

*“All I know…”* the man says here in Chapter nine of the Gospel of John, *“…is that I was blind and now I can see… Was the man who cured me a sinner? I don’t know.”*

And from there we hear the Pharisees carrying on like so many talking heads on a news channel: *“No, we don’t know where he comes from…”* they say… *“we don’t know how he did it… I mean, we know by following the laws of Moses that he is not supposed to be working on the Sabbath day—and if he was a man of God then “healing” is considered working and it says in the laws of our Torah that…—Oh--and by the way, are you sure it was a miracle, are you sure this the same guy?”*

 -sigh…Whew.

John… the writers of John, were not fans of the Pharisees. I’m projecting these conclusions from my own, but most likely because they wrote from a place of isolation because they, too, were “driven out” by the Pharisees, many years later, for the same reason given in the Gospel today that made the healed man’s parents so nervous: *for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.*

And if you think it is hard being isolated now, try it without phone lines or internet access or reliable sources of income or markets that welcome you or take out and delivery… we can live far better in isolation now than ever in our history.

But to begin, let’s be fair--“Fair to the Pharisees” we’ll call this part: See, the Pharisees are entrusted (as we’ve shared before) to keep the tradition and the culture of the Jewish people alive, and to do so, they are entrusted with keeping the laws given to them by God through Moses… …and to hear about some dusty homeless fellow performing miracles (if they really are miracles, we recall they wonder) and proclaiming that they’re done in the name of God—but not following the rules God gave the people in the Law…. They had every reason to be skeptical.

…in their current time and place, the Jews can’t afford a false prophet.

So in their fear, the cling to what they know… they are people of Moses. They are in a time of suffering, they were promised a Messiah that would make all things right.

What else do they know?

See, it was considered, at the time, that any physical ailment that could not be explained through their present day medical understanding must then have its origins in the spiritual realm. Be it “possession by demons” or “judgment from God for sins”

Anyone blind, or paralyzed, any child born with illness, miscarriage, disease, anyone with seizures, allergies, anyone with mental illness… It is either God or Demons that are the root of their suffering.

How many people do we know or love in our lives—or how many of ourselves for that matter—would have been considered “possessed” or “cursed”….

“Who sinned that this man was born blind?” the Pharisees ask.

…And Jesus, for all the illumination and shifting of paradigms he does with faith, doesn’t pull a Galileo and leap centuries of scientific understanding on them, he names the current understanding—*his current understanding*:

“This man was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” You could call it “God has power over sin” or “power over demons” or you could call it the more metaphorical “light over darkness” so common in John…

I call it “an uncomfortable passage” in scripture. And we wince at that understanding… we think “no way… God wouldn’t bring a soul into a life of hardship, pain and struggle simply to be an object lesson for a later time…”

Ah, but we know…

Through the years, we gained a understanding over the mysteries of blindness from birth. And we gained a cultural literacy of acceptance. We now call it a “disability” and we work to provide resources for that person. We no longer think of a blind person as an “other”, and there is no “shame”… as truly, any of us, with any disability, mental or physical, should not feel any shame… before God… or especially before those who live with us in the name of God.

Because we know better… “we were blind, but now we see.” Now, truly, in ways the writers of John could not: “God’s work is revealed in them.”

Or do we? I recall a conversation years ago with a member of a different church. She had two sons. One became ill with an intestinal issue and was hospitalized… she shared this at church during Joys and Concerns and from the church, the casseroles came to the doorstep. Her other son became mentally ill and was hospitalized… she shared this as well at the church… no casseroles.

A stigma still persists.

But the arch of our scientific and cultural literacy, however slowly, bends toward acceptance. Be it our medical understanding of physical and mental illness, our ecological understanding of environmental interconnectedness, our cultural understanding of shared common ancestry, our infinitesimal nature in relation to the universe.

We learn these things through our lives from textbooks and teachers, from conversations, news outlets… and stories! Oh what amazing wisdom we can glean from stories!

Our world expands, and we find a way to fit more and diverse aspects of our life into unity and interconnectedness.

--Friends, watch and witness as strangers bond during this time. People who do not know each other are increasingly looking out for one another. Truly, we’re still growing up as people of God, and God’s hope for us continues to be increasingly revealed through our lives and actions.

In the meantime, I go back to the man in today’s passage: “All I know is that I can see.” Just like: “All I know is that I was hungry and I was given food, I couldn’t get to the store but someone brought me what I needed, I didn’t know what to do with my children at home but resources were shared… I thought I was alone, but people reached out to connect with me.”

How many ways God continues to help us to see! What a good and holy miracle.

I mean, How would you react to vision? After being born blind… to having new sight…all things new… Wow.

Likewise, for all the rigor of the scientific method, I picture the look on the face when it finally dawns on the researcher that a new scientific discovery or a new understanding about the world as we know it is upon them: “wow!”

I think of all of the recent conversations about discovery of the origin of the universe, or nature of black holes…I never understand the concepts, but I love to hear the wonder in the scientists as they try to explain it. Science is beautiful because the desire to discover meets the wonder of discovery.

But where would science be without wonder? It is like religion without wonder.

I think that’s what makes me so uncomfortable when I share conversations with people of a more staunchly conservative and tightly structured faith. Those that claim to know with absolute certainty the “right from wrong” or “who is going to heaven and who is going to hell” --I hear rules, I hear laws, I hear proclamations, I hear threats and arguments…but I don’t hear the Holy Spirit… I don’t hear…wonder.

“All I know is that I was blind, but now I see.”

That’s what God invites for us these Sunday mornings… that’s why words of scripture and faith bounce off these walls… so that we may have wonder… God invites us…to be in awe.

Friends, I don’t know the rules and principles that can define with a scientific accuracy or clinical logic all the facts about God and heaven, or the ministry of Jesus, or the resurrection—All I know is the wonder and love I feel when I engage it. I want to say “Spare me the details, life with God, and walking with Jesus, has made my life more beautiful.

I want to invite you to share that beauty… that awe…that wonder.

Have you ever attempted to recreate a wonderful moment in your life by recreating the setting in which it happened? Be it a moment of feeling the presence of God, a moment of great clarity or sense of direction, a moment when you fell in love? Oh, we try to recreate it by making the same space, setting, etc. But what happens? Never quite the same, is it?

There are some things that we cannot control… some things we cannot hold in our hand—things we can’t cling to with a tight fist. Interestingly, these are the same things Jesus uses as metaphors: light, water…

What happens if you try to grasp tightly to faith? You cant. God is too dynamic for any of us to control.

That’s what I invite you into, during this week of our Lenten journey. I invite you to give your rigorous ability to reason… a rest for this week… and let wonder take the lead role.

There are so many things you are interested in, so many ways God is trying to spark wonder in you. So many ways that God is trying to open your eyes to see everything around you a little more clearly… and with a little more love.

Look around you… there in your home—in the space you have created day by day. Look out the window to the change in seasons, what God creates day by day. Look around and welcome it.

We’ll be back to some sort of “normalcy” later in life. But one predictable thing that has always happened and that continues to happen is that God is opening your eyes, and opening your heart, so that you may bear witness and wonder to all that love, all around you.

Peace be with you, Friends.

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HYMN AFTER SERMON

Now, following our normal rhythm, you want to sing, don’t ya? Well then, sing! We love accompaniment, but we don’t need it.

*“Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou has for me, place in my hand the wonderful key that shall unlock and set me free”*

*OR*

*“Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”*

*OR*

*“Oh holy God when I in awesome wonder consider all the works thy hand has made—How great thou art!”*

Yes! Hum those songs as you go about your day, while you, say, make your lunch or do the dishes or…wherever you’re at. Songs are prayers. Time spent praying is always good.

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JOYS AND CONCERNS

By Way of Joys and Concerns, here are the “check-in’s” we’ve received via email or internet—and I invite you to continue to share them, so that we may stay connected.

*Zach says he is doing fine. He’s at home with his dogs and only goes to the grocery store. His prayers are with everyone! He says: My prayers are with everyone in the congregation!*

*Karen says: Still getting my 10,000 plus steps in daily. Loving the sunshine. Started writing a recount of events and recollections in my life for my kids, grandkids, etc. Going to make kraut today with the help of daughter Linda.*

*Paula says: Lots of family time, and eating a lot. Hoping not to gain more weight, but ya never know. Just trying to stay safe, God Bless.*

*Laura says: not a whole lot has changed here. I already work from home and only really go out occasionally, mainly for groceries or church. TJ Max is closed, but are still paying DJ, so it’s good so far.*