

## Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 22, 2020

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How can we protect ourselves? That's what everyone wants to know right now. And how providential that today's Gospel lesson (John 9:1-41) is all about such anxiety. When Jesus and his disciples see a man blind from birth, the disciples ask whether this hardship was caused by sin of the man's parents or his own sin. Forgive my cynicism, but I don't think they were really worried about the blind man. They hoped knowing the cause of his hardship would help them to avoid such a fate. We have all the same impulses right now. When we hear of a new COVID-19 case, we press to learn how it was contracted. We hope to learn of a clear trail that can be avoided: stay off cruise ships (not that any are sailing, right now), don't visit rest homes, don't shake hands, and now: STAY HOME!

As Christians, we are called to take all precautionary steps we can in the face of this pandemic, not just for our own sake, but also for the sake of others. That's why our bishop has asked us all to cease livestreaming from our worship spaces. But for our spiritual health today, we need to really, really hear how Jesus handles the disciples' question? He doesn't answer it. He doesn't offer a clear way to avoid harm or hardship in this earthly life. Instead, he redirects them and us to lasting truth that was real then, is real now and will be real long after we are done on this earth. He tells the disciples to focus on how "God's works might be revealed" in the midst of the blind man's challenge. *WHATEVER* hardship, calamity, grief or suffering is at hand, God is also at hand, with infinite creative power for good.

Some are asking why the pandemic is happening. They want to know if God has planned it for some purpose. This question imagines God as a master puppeteer, enacting a prepared script. What a small and useless image of God! Have you ever tried to lead a meeting starting with a single clear idea of how it should play out? It's painful. Others rightly want to weigh in and help shape the outcome. A master puppeteer God would be in perpetual frustration. What a way to spend eternity!!

The God revealed in the Bible and through Jesus is very, very different. The first chapters of Genesis show divine love so powerful that it could not be contained; it overflowed into the goodness of all creation. And then, the true depth of God's love was shown. Possessed by the generosity love entails, God shared the power to make choices with humankind. We say that God is all-knowing. But knowing where that generosity would lead and experiencing it had to be two very different things. The temptation to start all over again had to be strong. Instead, we see God joining our every travail in the person of Jesus, pledging to be at work in us and through us to perfect creation.

And how was this manifest for the blind man and the disciples? Perhaps you will say, "He received his sight!" But he received something much more powerful and enduring. He received compassion. Jesus noticed him, cared about him, and responded to his needs even though he had to buck the prevailing system to do it on the Sabbath. The man's sight might not last the fullness of his years on this earth. Jesus' compassion is forever.

Last week we celebrated the Feast of St. Patrick. He has long been an inspiration to me, and not just because my last name is Kelly. Patrick lived in barbarous times. At 16, he was drug by raiders from a comfortable family in Britain and enslaved in Ireland. His conditions as a shepherd in remote hillsides were brutal. Hunger and nakedness were his only companions. There were no special shopping hours at a range of grocery stores. Though he hadn't been pious before, he turned to prayer as his only option, praying from waking until sleep. After 6 years, a series of remarkable visions led Patrick to freedom and back to his home. This is the sort of happy ending we are apt to seek: eye sight received; slave freed; patient cured. But God is always at the ready to accomplish so much more in the face of brutality or hardship than we can imagine.

After Patrick returned home, visions continued. Gradually, he could no longer ignore a clear call for him to become a messenger of the Gospel to Ireland. In his own telling: "I heard authoritative words which I could hear but not understand, until at the end of the speech it became clear: 'the one who gave his life for you, he it is who speaks in you'; and I awoke full of joy." (*Confession of Patrick*, ¶24) Patrick answered that call, and God's work through him in Ireland was transformative. During Patrick's roughly 30 years of ministry in Ireland, the slave trade nearly ceased and intertribal warfare diminished. His humble and decent witness to the power of Jesus' compassion changed the nation.

So the question of the day for us is not, "How can we protect ourselves?" It is "How can we be agents of God's compassion?" I am humbled and inspired by all the ways in which you are asking and answering that question. Volunteers are calling to see if church members have needs or know of anyone in need. Those who can are offering to help with funds or errands. And volunteers are still appearing to keep the doors of Neighbors 4 Neighbors open! Over 580 families received food and compassion from the St. Margaret's team last week. We are committed to keeping this ministry going unless it becomes impossible.

Will another nation be changed? Time will tell.