

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Lent 4
March 22, 2020

Jesus For Times Like These
John 9:1-41

First off – I pray that you are all well and staying safe. I believe the next few weeks and maybe months will be hard on us but again keep the faith, center yourself in Christ and know that Jesus is here and everywhere.

We are in uncharted territory this week. I am writing and thinking about contingency plans for our congregation and checking health departments' websites. Will we hold worship services in person or find alternate ways to bring people into repentance, forgiveness, praise, solidarity, lament, generosity, and encounters with the word of God? Will we be able to visit shut-ins, open our doors to the hungry and homeless, pay our janitorial workers, provide space for group meetings, and give my own family the attention they need?

The logistical demands are intense. Some of you might be panicking too much. Others might think you know more than the public-health experts. My seminary didn't offer courses about this kind of crisis management. The last thing I want to do is to err in my judgment and end up making all of this harder, lonelier, riskier, and deadlier for people who don't deserve any of this.

Right now, take a breath and remember that the works of God can indeed become manifest in the midst of all this suffering, fear, and inability to know what next week will bring.

I can't tell you exactly what that will be like for us from this point forward, since it depends on the particular conditions where you are. But I do know that I am going to have to preach this week and every week afterward. If not from a pulpit, probably in countless emails. Hopefully that preaching, with the help of Lutheran theologians will give me an opportunity to remind everyone what the church is doing here in the first place.

Our text for today is from John chapter 9, verses 1-41. (long). If we were together in our sanctuary, I would have allowed you to remain sitting. If you have not read it yet, do it now.

Jesus was Charismatic and controversial throughout his ministry. The Jesus we meet in the Gospels has a way of rewiring people's assumptions about how things are. What made him a polarizing figure was this: those assumptions support the norms we rely on to make it through life and to make sense of things as we go.

We're at our worst when we imitate Jesus' pattern in order to elevate Christianity by diminishing or misrepresenting other belief systems. (Just consider how Christian teachers have wielded the Gospel of John's grossly problematic depictions of "the Jews.")

Instead, we're at our best when we imitate the pattern to eradicate injustices, extend love, and express compassion. Then we put ourselves on the side of healing -- promoting human flourishing and healthy societies.

Who sinned, Jesus? This question is at the heart of the Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday in Lent. Was the man of John 9 born blind because of his own sin or his parents'? Whom can we blame? How can we explain this misfortune? Stupid question. Built on faulty premises.

Jesus doesn't want to talk about *why*. What's important to know is that "the works of God" are about to become manifest to all. And not only publicly *manifest*. In the case of the man himself, they will be *experienced*.

Christian faith is of course well suited to bear witness to "the works of God" in dismal circumstances. And those "works" aren't always about healing and happiness.

From the New Testament's perspective, at least, the church should expect to deliver testimony in dismal circumstances. United to an incarnate and suffering God, we're essentially engineered to do that. Plus, it can be easier for others to see the light when we

too dwell in the deepening shadows: Jesus promised Paradise to one of the lowlifes crucified alongside him while their executioners jeered them.

If Rodney Stark's famous thesis is correct, Christians' behavior during the Plague of Galen (165-180 CE) and the Plague of Cyprian (250-262 CE) strengthened the vitality of the church's witness. Christians' seemingly irrational determination not to abandon their diseased family members and neighbors made them appear uncommonly virtuous (and increased their own survival rates!). Please note: This is not an argument for exposing yourself or your community to greater threat of illness in the current setting. It's to say that times of risk and isolation call for active advocacy, compassion, and allegiance to one another. Otherwise, why call yourself *Christian*?

Christians historically have stepped up to alleviate poverty and suffering because those are the things Jesus spoke most clearly about. To say nothing of the fact that those are the places and faces where we encounter Jesus himself.

And when we find ourselves helpless to stop the hardship or be agents of healing, we simply bear witness. Like the man in John 9, we just refuse to stop embodying confidently what we believe to be true: That Jesus is Lord.

Finally, as we look toward the future as we walk nearer to the cross through the valley of the shadow of death during this surreal Lent, let's prepare ourselves for the tasks to come. Surely, we will experience some goodness and mercy along the way and even more on the other side.

Nevertheless, when the pandemic dust has settled, the traumas will remain. The virus will have claimed the vulnerable. Economic fallout will certainly punish the financially vulnerable for a long time.

As soon as we bury our dead our norms will rise again, dragging us into fights about which politicians to blame, who will have to pay to make up for all the lost capital, and finding out who bought up all the Purell and the toilet paper at the local store.

When all is said and done, this crisis might assist in eradicating poisonous theologies about prosperity and success. Or it could make them multiply.

We might have a chance to knock down our bigoted theologies of American (or Western) exceptionalism, too. Or we could see them reinforced.

All of that remains to be seen. All I know is, we will need Christians who can help us see, in any season, where the works of God are being made manifest. That starts now, as we devise new and creative ways to demonstrate love and compassion in public, alongside the old ways.

You were called for this: to bear witness to our experience of the works of God in times like these. Please don't stop. And thank you for doing so, especially now.