

*“Opening Eyes to Reveal the Glory of God”*

Based on John 9 and Psalm 23

Delivered on March 23, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

This reading from John is quite literally about being able to see God. How do we see or perceive God? What image do we have of our maker, our creator? In the text today, we see this challenge because the Apostles have one particular view of God at the start of this story.

They asked Jesus, “who sinned – this man or his parents – that he was born blind?” From this question we see that they have this view of God as one who dishes out physical disabilities based on our sins. It’s a view that God is going to strike us with some unfortunate calamity, based on how much or how severe we sin.

There’s something actually beautiful about this view of God along with the things that are troubling. The beauty of this view is that it recognizes the intimate relationship God has with us. It is troubling to see pain, hardship, disease and disability in our world, but it is comforting that the God who created all things knows you by name. God knows you and loves you.

But the apostles’ view is one not necessarily about God’s love, and certainly not about God’s mercy, but rather a view of punishment needed to keep an order, arranged in a way that they can understand. It is easier to understand when something bad happens when you can say, ‘It happened because of this. It happened because of my sins, because of his sins, because of her sins, because of someone else’s sins. The culture’s sin.’ Then we know why this has happened and we can understand it.

I think many of us have had these feelings over the last couple of weeks, as we’ve seen the spread of the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19, and as we’ve seen it now here in our community in Atlantic County. It is normal to want to know why this has happened, what caused this to happen and the reason for this suffering. Why have 266,000 people that we know of, been infected, and why have 11, 184 died?

Notice what Jesus says when he is asked this by the disciples: “Neither this man sinned, nor his parents. But, in order that the works of God should be displayed in him, it is necessary for us to work the works of the One who sent me while it is day.’

It’s normal to ask why, but what Jesus presents here goes beyond our questioning and is a call to action. Jesus tells the disciples not to focus on the sins of the man or his parents. The point is not whether pain, hardship, disease and disability are the result of sin, but how we might see God, see God’s glory, in the middle of life’s challenges. That is revealed in how we respond to them. What we do.

Jesus sees a man born blind and heals him. Yes, He is the one who is the Word made flesh and, in this story, Jesus repeats the story of Adam when He forms the mud and anoints the eyes of the blind man, giving him new eyes to see. This is a picture of the creator making a new creation. Yes, this is a miracle and we are tempted to dismiss it as something only Jesus can do, but notice the text says, “It is necessary for us to work the works.”

Jesus is including you in the works of God in this world and no, you may not have the power to make mud and heal sight, but you do have the power to respond positively as we face a crisis like the one we are in. We may not be able to open the eyes of our neighbors physically, but you are able, by how you live in this world, to help others see the light of Jesus in you – by how you live, by how you shop and by how we all stay in community even when we cannot be a community in the ways we are accustomed to.

Now before I go any further, I want to take a moment to make a translation detour, because some of you may not have used the copy of the text we provided and you may be reading from a King James Bible. So, if this is so, you may be confused because your bible says, “I must work the works,” as the words, which Jesus spoke. Well, there’s a reason for that. The King James was translated based on one Greek manuscript put together from the oldest copies known to one of my favorite reformers, Erasmus of Rotterdam, known as the Textus Receptus. While this was an incredible piece of scholarship in his day, since then we have found more evidence and even older manuscripts, and more and even older outside texts that quote this passage, all of which show the original text was more likely to have read “us” and not “I.”

But regardless of whether Jesus said “I” or “us,” what we still see here is a call to action, because Jesus is always the link between heaven and earth. He is our God and our brother. He is the Word made flesh. He is fully divine and fully human. In Jesus, all that we are called to be is fulfilled. In Jesus, we see our true humanity – a humanity that is not concerned with money, power, sex and all the trappings of this world, but a person who lives by love to treat others as better than himself, putting the needs of others first. That is our true humanity. That is how we reflect God’s image.

The faith of the Christian religion is this: that God who created all things entered into creation to share in our humanity, to live in solidarity with us, to experience the limitations we experience and die for us on the cross. Jesus took on all that this world had in its arsenal to defeat Him. He took sin and death to the cross. The power of the world was sin and death, wielded by the Roman Empire, the culture of human desires, and misguided religious authorities, putting human will in the place of God’s. They gave all they had to try to destroy Jesus, to destroy God’s reign. All of that was put on the cross and defeated, because on the third day, Jesus rose again for you and for me, so that we might have life.

In this, we see the love of God poured out for us. We receive the love of God in us and that love pours out into the world through us, in service to others to make all things new and be a part of God’s reconciliation. This is how we are called to see God – not in our own ideas and not in ourselves, but in Jesus. The Pharisees were divided. There were some who were inclined to see God at work in Jesus. But the ones who do not are the ones who are vocal, who are critical, and what we see is that they put their trust in themselves and not God.

They are blind because they think that they can see. At the end of the text, Jesus tells them that if they were blind, they would not be in their sin, but because they say, “we see,” their sin remains. We are like the blind Pharisees when we make excuses for our sin and try to justify ourselves, rather than just laying it out there to say, “God, I need you.” It is only when we confess this need, that we are released to be who God has called us to be and trust in God in these difficult times.

It's hard to stay at home. I was at the grocery store on Friday to make sure that we had enough so that we don't have to go back. It was a strange sight to see. It reminded me of the time of after 9-11 when you could feel the fear in the air, and it reminded me at the same time of a snowstorm, when apart from the people flocking to prepare, things are just quiet and people are in hiding, traffic is minimal.

These are unusual times for us, but how we operate in those stores says a lot about the God we serve and the love we have. How we look out for our neighbors in this time, including how we call and check in on people, says a lot about the God we serve. This reveals God through us to others.

As we go through these uncertain times, I want to draw us back to that familiar Psalm 23. Though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil. For you are with me. God is with you. As hard as this can be, as frightening as this can be. God is with you. And what's more, in the presence of our enemies – right now our enemy is a virus – God anoints us and fills our cup. Our cup overflows. This is God's love. Let's have this cup overflow toward others. Let's not think in terms of hoarding and protecting what is ours, our own, but think of it in terms of sharing – all while keeping our social distance so we don't share this virus.

I saw a quote from JRR Tolkein's Fellowship of the Ring, which has Frodo, the one who is charged with taking the ring of power to its destruction because he is most resistant to the power it offered. He said, "I wish it need not have happened in my time." And in response, Gandalf the Wizard guiding him responds: "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Friends, the Lord is truly with you. The Lord longs to give us sight to see our need for Him, that we would respond by doing His works in this world and reflect the Glory of our God. How do we see God? I want you to see God as with you. Amen.