

Our Gospel for this, the fourth Sunday in Lent, comes from the 9th Chapter of John and begins with the troublesome question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" We don't want to say this is a stupid question, since no question, honestly asked is stupid, but it is indeed troublesome. What makes it troublesome is the idea that misfortune is automatically blamed on sin. The flip side of that question would suggest that if you have been given great riches and luck and a family full of boys you would be sinless because God obviously favors you. Most of us can look at our lives and point to times of misfortune, illness, joblessness, despair and the like for ourselves and loved ones and not make the connection to sin any more than we think we are perfect when life is going well. It is not uncommon though to play the blame game. Whose fault is it, who can we point to? If we can find in fault a cause and effect, we can paint a clearer picture of action to avoid. That works, until it doesn't. Look at where we are now, we are a divided nation with some saying we are overreacting and others saying we aren't reacting enough. We are in uncharted territory for many, we are all struggling to see clearly and we need to focus on the need of our neighbor, not just ourselves.

As is common, Jesus doesn't want to answer why and instead says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." You can almost see the disciples scratching their heads in confusion - "uh, Jesus, Master, What in the heck does that mean?" While the disciples are trying to understand Jesus, Jesus has moved on, made some mud with spit and dirt and proceeds to wipe it on the blind man's eyes and then sends him to the pool of Siloam to wash. When the man comes back from washing his face and can see, Jesus is nowhere around and the man finds himself facing a bunch of people who are trying to tell his story for him. God's works are about to be witnessed and in case of the newly sighted man, experienced. They are all talking about him but not to him so he has to interrupt the conversation about himself and say, "Hey y'all, I am that guy. I was born blind and now I see and Jesus did it by putting mud on my eyes and now I can see. He didn't know who Jesus was but clearly was thankful for this newfound sight. Nobody else was celebrating with him though.

We are in strange times. Since December 2019 when we were made aware of a strain of Coronavirus in Wuhan China the world has been caught up in a storm of conflicting stories, confusion about how best to handle the virus and prevent its spread to whether it is as bad as everybody is telling us. It would seem that we aren't seeing clearly all the challenges and we certainly are not all seeing the same way. For us in the United States, this virus started in China, the other side of the world, not a threat to us, the most powerful country in the world - It is now in our own country. We are scrambling to socially distance ourselves, restricting movement and travel, closing schools, self-quarantining in cases of exposure all the while trying to keep our cool and not cause wide-spread panic. At the same time, people are panic buying all the local grocery stores out of toilet paper of all things. One might imagine a run on facial tissue with a

virus that affects the respiratory system but not so much. What is God calling us to do in this time? What is the message the Church is called to share? In a culture where the focus is on the individual, we are called to bring attention to the need for sacrifice of movement and freedom and resources for the sake of the other. It doesn't matter if we have a slight chance of experiencing mild cold symptoms. What does matter is the chance that we will contaminate our immune-suppressed or elderly neighbors and cause them harm. What does matter is that we will over buy items that will then be gone when parents with babies or the elderly can't find bottled water or toilet paper because some have hoarded more than they need. As Christians, caught up in the same chaos, we are called to be active advocates, compassionate neighbors and to look out for those who cannot look out for themselves. Jesus showed us how to do just that and we respond, as best we can, in the same way.

This is a story of a man who knows what happened to him, is grateful and willing to tell his story but no one likes the story he tells and they want him to tell it in a different way. He is quickly carried to the Pharisees who question him about who made him see. He explains how it was done and that he doesn't know where this guy went but he can see. They then ask witnesses and his parents, who hedge their answers for fear of being kicked out of the synagogue. The parents say, ask him yourself, he is old enough and they turn back to the newly sighted man and exclaim that Jesus is a sinner because he healed this guy on the Sabbath. The man, not at all interested in Jewish laws of Sabbath doesn't want to get pulled into their foolishness. They ask him again, how did Jesus do this. The guy then gets a little cheeky and says, you keep asking, do you want to become disciples? That doesn't go over well but the guy with fresh sight continues to school the Pharisees about healing and sinfulness. He keeps trying to tell his story. "He put dirt on my eyes, I washed, now I can see. I don't think he is a sinner, I don't much care if he is, my eyes can see for the first time in my life and I think God had something to do with it." He gets kicked out for daring to teach the teacher and runs into Jesus who introduces himself and closes out the story with a new follower and a parting shot to the Pharisees about being sighted sinners.

What will this all mean as we follow Jesus to the cross? The voluntary or enforced quarantine has made us stop our usual rat-race routine and gather at home with our families. Pastors are trying to be faithful in this season where we usually ramp up our worship to include midweek worship and dinner, a Holy Week marathon with or without an Easter Vigil leading up to a riotously joyous Eastertide yet, instead we are trying to imagine Lent without worship, maybe even without Holy Week worship. How do we maintain community, lift up the lonely and sick when we are not allowed to sit by their bedsides or gather in their living rooms, go without communing our people when we are not in each other's presence and gather at the cross on Good Friday. How do we create connection with people who don't have computers or the newest cell phone. How do we serve in these circumstances? The works of God will show up in unexpected places and in unexpected ways from unexpected people. Maybe we will

notice them because we are forced to slow down. God's people have ministered and pointed to the Works of God during plague and war and times of uncertainty for thousands of years and we will continue to reach out to each other in new ways. We will bear witness to God's presence in whatever way it appears. Maybe we will learn that we are connected to all of God's children, all over the world. When they suffer, we suffer and when we suffer, they suffer. We pray for each other over the miles and oceans and we are suddenly aware that the experiences of our global siblings is our experience. I want to share some of a story from the epicenter of the coronavirus from a post in Wuhan on March 8, 48 days into the city's quarantine

from Rebecca Franks: here is just SOME of the good we have been experiencing because of the lockdown: ...for SEVEN weeks, we've been home together with very little outside influences or distraction, forced to reconnect with one another, learn how to communicate better, give each other space, slow down our pace, and be a stronger family than ever before. We've learned how to accept help from others. During this time, we've HAD to rely on others to show us how to get food and other things we need. People here are so good, and they want to help. It's satisfying to accept the help. Shopping is so much easier now. It comes straight to our complex, and we just pick it up. Simple.

Right now I hear birds outside my window (on the 25th floor). I used to think there weren't really birds in Wuhan, because you rarely saw them and never heard them. I now know they were just muted and crowded out by the traffic and people. All day long now I hear birds singing. It stops me in my tracks to hear the sound of their wings.

Spring in Wuhan is absolutely stunning. God has been giving us glimpses of the beauty to come with near-perfect weather. Because of lockdown, we get to watch spring slowly unfold right in front of us with no work, traffic, pollution, or other distractions. I have pulled up my chair and am ready for the creator's show.

Maybe the works of God are a change of pace and routine for billions of people who might miss something unless forced to slow down. Maybe it is the realization that we are interdependent and interconnected and there are far more important things than what someone's poll #'s are. There are millions who are suffering and many who have died. We will have to bury our dead and nurse our sick and hold those who grieve. Maybe this time will change us for the better. What will we tell our children and new friends who learn about Christ because of our story? I pray we remember the lessons learned. They are still unfolding before us. I pray we celebrate our connection because it will become vitally important to our survival. I pray we will see Christ in the face of our neighbor, whether down the street or across the world and I pray we will find creative new ways to be God's people together - One holy people, a royal priesthood, united in our humanity and compassion for each other - That, my friends, is the work of God!

Amen

Open Our eyes, Lord
We want to see Jesus
to reach out and touch him and
say that we love him

Open our ears Lord
and help us to listen
open our eyes, Lord
we want to see Jesus

open our eyes, Lord
we want to see Jesus