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March 22, 2020- Lent 4A
Given at St. Mark's Church (Virtually online), Bridgewater, CT

1 Sam 16.1-13 ; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5.8-14; John 9.1-41
“Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.
Live as children of light...” †

There's no getting around the fact that these seem like dark times, filled with uncertainty... the risks posed by the virus causing COVID-19, the worry over being able to go to work, over getting a paycheck, over finding groceries... the discomfort of having to avoid other people, including friends, and limit doing these things we like... its contributing to anxiety all around and a cycle of sadness and fear. It all seems dark and we want to ask, 'why is this happening?'

When I read/ heard today's Gospel— especially that portion which depicts the disciples asking “Was it his sin, or the sins of his parents that caused this?” – I could help but think about our present situation. Its human nature to try to place blame on someone or something, like so many are doing, including our President, attempting to get easy answers to complicated situation.

The long passage we heard from the Fourth Gospel (John), the story of the healing of the blind man, points out that it is the Pharisees—those knowledgeable lawyers and leaders of the community—who are blind...for they don't see who Jesus really is... they don't get it. It was written for a particular community at the end of the 1st Century, one undergoing great social and personal turmoil. Those who believed Jesus was Messiah were being ostracized and thrown out of the synagogues. Their faith in Jesus made it impossible for them to remain in those communities. Hence, the inference that the parents of the blind man are afraid and that 'the Jews' are 'blind' and unknowing—they didn't see Jesus, they couldn't see any Light in their dark world.

The great story of King David's anointing by Samuel also depicts how often we humans don't see rightly: 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see, they look to appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart' (1 Sam). This passage always reminds me of one of my favorite children's stories, The Little Prince, by Antoine de Saint Exupery... after he has been tamed by the prince, the fox says: 'And here is my secret, a very simple secret: it is only with the heart that we can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye.'

A few years ago, I watched a documentary about a remarkable High School Choir in suburban Chicago, The Newtrier High Choir... it was composed of children of various backgrounds, and included special needs students. I remember hearing their beautiful harmony... and watching a beautiful young lady, the Valedictorian, singing and swaying next to stocky girl with Down's Syndrome... and the handsome star quarterback singing next a skinny boy who obviously was blind, named Mike... they all moved and sang in perfect harmony... smiling and feeling joy as they sang together. Later, the star quarterback was interviewed and was asked what it was

like to work and sing with ‘handicapped students,’ and he just laughed...
“Handicapped? They’re not handicapped! We’re the ones who are handicapped...
Mike has helped me to ‘see’ more clearly, to notice more things in the world... to see
what’s important in life... It’s made me realize that I’m the one who is so often
blind.”

‘What is essential is invisible to the eye’ ...

This is what Jesus emphasizes to his disciples, when they ask about the blind man.
‘Was it his sin, or the sin of his parents that caused him to be blind?’ Jesus is blunt:
“You’re missing the point; you’re asking the wrong question... You’re looking for
someone to blame! There is no cause and effect here... Don’t look to blame and seek
easy answers... Look instead for what God can do... look at what God is doing.”

It’s been a hard week for me, as I’m sure it has for all of you, and as I reflected on
these Scriptures, I realized how often I (we) see things unclearly. So often, like the
Pharisees, we’re blind. It’s even harder when it seems we are surrounded by
darkness, it’s almost impossible to see God at work. When we see things we don’t
like... when bad things happen to us, or to those we love... when life seems
overwhelming and hard. It’s then that we should remember that phrase: ‘what is
essential is invisible to the eye.’ It’s important we know that God is there, in that
moment with us!

St Paul assures us, we are children of light... Called to turn away from easy answers;
called to reject social determinations based on race, culture, social status, or
education; called to reject doom and gloom negative attitudes and stand-up to those
who promote darkness rather than light. ‘The Lord does not see as mortals see... on
the outward appearance.’ So let’s open our hearts during this time of hardship, and
try to see as God sees.

Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent, by tradition its known (in Latin) as *Laetare Sunday*...
laetare means “to rejoice,” and it’s the one Sunday of Lent when the Church tries to
set aside the rather mournful tone of Lent in order to encourage us to persevere
until Easter. And so, I’d like to offer you a prayer written by a Franciscan monk (Fr.
Richard Hendrick, OFM) called “Lockdown,” that speaks of our present day events
with hope and rejoicing:

Lockdown

Yes there is fear.

Yes there is isolation.

Yes there is panic buying.

Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

**They say that in the streets of Assisi
People are singing to each other
across the empty squares,
keeping their windows open
so that those who are alone
may hear the sounds of family around them.
They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland
Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.
Today a young woman I know
is busy spreading fliers with her number
through the neighbourhood
So that the elders may have someone to call on.**

**Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples
are preparing to welcome
and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary
All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting
All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way
All over the world people are waking up to a new reality
To how big we really are.
To how little control we really have.
To what really matters.
To Love.**

**So we pray and we remember that
Yes there is fear.
 But there does not have to be hate.
Yes there is isolation.
 But there does not have to be loneliness.
Yes there is panic buying.
 But there does not have to be meanness.
Yes there is sickness.
 But there does not have to be disease of the soul
Yes there is even death.
 But there can always be a rebirth of love.**

**Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.
Today, breathe.
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic
The birds are singing again**

**The sky is clearing,
Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love. Open the windows of your soul
And though you may not be able to touch across the empty square,
Sing. †**