

March 22, 2020 4th Sunday in Lent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus for this date, "Now I See," posted on 3-15-20]

Grace and peace, deep peace, to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

"I miss you, friends."

That's what my youngest daughter's kindergarten teacher keeps telling the 5 and 6 year olds each time she communicates with them on their online portal.

Besides the math and phonics, she reads them books about pausing and being mindful, about how hard it is to be patient.

She tells this gangly group, a group that appears to have lost more teeth than they have, "I miss you, friends. I miss you."

Somehow this beloved teacher is claiming her own emotions and she's giving them permission to have their own feelings: to grieve their routines, their fellowship.

So, in that spirit, let me say: I miss you, friends. We miss you.

I'm grateful we have technology to connect in this way.

I'm thankful for those who have ventured out to lead worship today:

Some of the ULCHers: Mark Nelson, Ben Larson.

One of their bandmate Paul Odenbach is here in spirit and so very busy doctoring at the hospital.

I'm thankful for the musical talents of our choral scholar Haruka,

and for our staff: Zach Busch, Nick Tangen, and Pastor Barbara.

We miss you, friends.

Until the world was turned upside down...it's hard to remember last week, isn't it?

...until then we had planned this to be Lutheran Campus Ministry Sunday, LCM Sunday.

Lutheran Campus Ministry-Twin Cities, with their faithful pastor Kate Reuer-Welton, is one of our closest partners in ministry.

We had expected this morning to receive a sermon crafted by a U of M student, Mara Bowman.

We'll see if this is possible in the coming weeks.

And, we'll keep our support strong for this vital ministry.

We miss you, friends.

Our **experiences** of these days are so varied, and often it's hard to see beyond ourselves:

Our members in many care facilities and nursing homes are isolated,
unable to receive visitors, let alone go to the dining room.

For most of them, the technology that we depend on is not possible.

Others are working from home, or are *at* home, maybe Zooming into virtual meetings,
worried about the economy and jobs,
perhaps juggling new demands,
trying to avoid being sucked into the constant news-stream,
feeling a distinct change of pace and the isolation and quiet that comes with it.

Still others are going to work on highways that are surprisingly empty, perhaps uncertain about this,
doing essential work, faithful work: I'm thinking especially of medical personnel and caregivers, folks like
Nancy, Kristen, David, Kit, Claire, John, Leena, Ann, Val, Abby, and plenty of others.

Some are on the front line of making decisions for government or businesses or communities,
others are supporting these systems, trying to make it work.

University students and their faculty are trying to keep learning, doing things that are new and different,
sometimes stressful.

My house is like that of many younger families...it's, honestly, a little nuts:

kids and parents trying to home school, plenty of devices,
parents trying to keep it together as we work, talk on the phone, write emails and hold meetings,
more fighting than I'd like ... and some really beautiful moments, too.

Our neighbors who are homeless are struggling mightily, often not getting much news,
dealing with mental health and other illnesses, facing addictions,
rarely having a place to use the facilities or warm their hands on a cold spring day.

And our friends who are immigrants face xenophobia and prejudice,
and looming uncertainties as jobs are reduced and benefits aren't always available.
It's hard to know who is safe or where to turn.

Today as we worship, I'm mindful that our community is all of us,

all these different experiences—and more, all living by grace, grace enough.

Our Gospel this morning is the story of the man who is born unable to see.

Really, though, It's the story of his community.

What actually happened is pretty straightforward.

In some tellings there is a refrain with a cadence of its own.

“He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.”

Did you notice the intimacy of that moment? Spit and mud, this sacramental paste on his eyes?

It's strange to hear in these days of handwashing and social distancing.

Did you notice the questions of blame?

We're so quick to blame, especially right now...blame for the virus, blame for the slow response, blame for the economic fallout.

"Who sinned?" they ask? "Was it his parents?"

Lines like that have been used for centuries and are so painful.

Jesus' response is helpful, for all matter of things: he's clear, blindness is not a punishment for sin, that's not how God operates.

Rather, in all things, God's work is revealed. Can I get an Amen?

Did you notice how the community wants to focus in on the man, the "designated patient"?

To them, he is no more than his blindness,

that's how superficial his identity, his experience, seems to them.

There's no effort to acknowledge the healing and what this might feel like.

This man is a pawn in their power struggle with Jesus, the better to discredit,

since the healing took place on the Sabbath,

since it rocks the status quo and the established institutions.

Did you notice how the community's fear drives them?

Why else silence this man?

Why else do people forget compassion? Empathy? Forget human dignity?

Fear rarely brings out our best selves.

And many of us, when we're honest, know a thing or two about fear these days.

If the man and his folks aren't to blame,

if it's not a punishment that causes this sickness or disability or suffering,

then the world may feel even more uncertain, even more destabilized than we want to admit.

Then maybe our "illusion of control" is falling apart.

We know what these fears can do to us, to our behavior!

Did you notice how the man seems to be the only one who can really see Jesus for who he is?

Dear friends, these weeks are demanding our all, every bit of good courage, every ounce of trust.

We could turn away, pretend not to see the pain and the fear that is around and within in.

We could make ourselves hard.

We could let panic or despair win.

Or... with this man, we can lean into God's grace, we can let Jesus and his vision guide us.

Debie Thomas, a Biblical commentator to whom I often turn, offers questions that are helpful for these days.

She says: "Will we be flexible in the ways we extend love across distances, or will we hunker down in fear and suspicion?"

How can we BE church in new ways? How can we be connected, interdependent, grounded?

"Will we have eyes to see God in our neighbors, regardless of whether they are sick or healthy, insured or uninsured, citizen or foreigner, protected or vulnerable?"

"Will we be brave enough to look our own vulnerability—our own mortality—in the eye, and trust that God is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death?"

Dear ones, sent ones, our God, the creator of the universe, the shepherd of our souls, will not let us go.

Nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Nothing.

We miss you, friends. We miss you.

And in this time, we covet the network of prayer and God's never-failing grace that holds our resting and inspires our acting.

Let us pray: Be thou our vision, O God, in these days of ventures of which we cannot see the ending. Open us to your grace, to your love, to your tender care, to the needs that are around us. Soften our hearts. Widen our trust. Strengthen our solidarity. Make us your people again. Amen.