

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT A**John 9:2****“Rabbi, Who Sinned, This Man or...?”**

The Bible tells us that there is nothing new under the sun, so it is also now. In the 14th century bubonic plague killed an estimated 200 million people. One hundred years ago the Spanish Flu killed tens of millions of people in the world. Until the middle of the last century polio was the daily fear for many families. Only during my lifetime have we brought smallpox under control. We have been living large lately when it comes to dealing with disease and eliminating epidemics.

That is, until now. We are in unprecedented times. We are going through uncharted territory, dealing with an unfamiliar disease of uncertain origin with an unknown treatment. What most scares us in life is the unknown. What we do know is that during these difficult days we will see the hypocrisy of our society. For example, don't go to church, that's too dangerous, but feel free to gather at your local marijuana distributor, they are still open to sell weed. But we also will see the heroism of our people, especially our healthcare workers as they put their lives at risk to serve the sick on the front lines of this battlefield. We will experience the selfishness of panic purchases, but also experience the generosity of gracious goodwill. We will witness the depths of our sinful depravity, but also feel the goodness of our God's grace.

Do we perhaps need this wake-up call? If we are not facing the end of the world, could it be a preview of things to come, a reminder that this rebellious world is passing away? Are we watching as our idols, our false gods, are being knocked down one by one. Our sports stars are sidelined. Our entertainers are falling ill. Our politicians are struggling for answers. Were we too fat and sassy with elevated IRAs, inflated 401ks and exalted portfolios? Have we identified ourselves by the jobs we go to rather than by the family we finally come home to? Even now, are we putting our faith in medical science to rescue us? Are we turning to the government to guide us? It is time for us to refocus our priorities, to reconnect with our families and to recommit ourselves to living as the baptized people of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In this passage from John 9, Jesus and His disciples come across a man whom they know is blind from birth. A curious question leads to a teachable moment. “Rabbi” (meaning “teacher”), “who sinned?” If the question had concluded there, the answer would be simple. “Everybody, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” But the question continues, “this

man or his parents.” Again, had this been all, the answer would have been easy. “Yes, each one of them have sinned.” But then comes the kicker, “that he was born blind.” The disciples display a common concern that we hear from Job’s friends way back when, that what we see as suffering must be punishment from God for a particular sin that we have committed. This is not just an ancient opinion, for we share the same sentiment. If I have a toothache, maybe it is because I said a bad, mean or angry word.

But God does not deal with us in such a particular cause and effect way. To be sure, we can bring problems and pain upon ourselves by our own dumb and bad behavior. We cannot put ourselves into harm’s way in our lives demanding that God protect us from ourselves and then blaming Him for the consequences we experience. If I go out in front of the parsonage to play tennis on Hwy 159, I have no one to blame if I get run over by a truck. So also at this time, in the midst of a pandemic, it is important that we use our sanctified common sense, that we observe good hygiene, that we stay away from others when we are sick, and that we practice safe social distancing.

But the blindness of this man had nothing to do with his or his parents’ behavior. It was the result of life in a sinful world where human rebellion has stained the perfection of God’s creation. But God, in His grace and mercy, uses even such trouble to display the goodness of His glory. Through His Son living in our human flesh, Jesus the Christ, God makes use of this man’s blindness so that God’s grace might shine forth in and through this man’s life. Jesus gives this man his sight to serve God’s glory and for this man’s good.

As the man in this passage has no physical vision, so also our sin robs us of our spiritual sight. This blind beggar’s physical need is a symbol of all our spiritual needs. But Jesus heals our spiritual blindness and gives us the sight we need to see Him as our Savior. We receive that spiritual sight when we are washed in the cleansing water of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

I watched the president’s noontime press conference yesterday. The number shows that 10% of those tested have COVID-19. The mortality rate, that is, the percentage of those who die with this disease, is 2.5%. That is certainly bad and sad for the loved ones of those included in that last number. But we have a greater problem with a much higher mortality rate that is ignored every day. It is a plague of the soul and a disease of the spirit that strikes us all. No amount of hand-washing, mask-

wearing, wipe-using and social distancing can prevent the spread of this illness. The death toll is 100%. That pandemic is our sin, the wages of which is death. There is a cure for this virus, though. It is not a pill, a shot or surgery. The cure is the perfect life, innocent death and victorious resurrection of God's own Son, Jesus Christ. He is the hero of this plague story. He is the defeater of this disease.

One health suggestion that I have heard, good for us all at all times, is to stay hydrated. As with more common flus, it is important for us to drink plenty of water. In the face of this pandemic of sin, death and the power of the devil, we need to stay hydrated in the water of our Holy Baptism. It is there that the Father's good word claims us as His own, where Christ's saving name becomes our own, and where the Spirit's holy presence fills our lives. We are children of the Triune God, created, saved and sanctified. Cleansed by the precious blood of Christ shed for us on the cross we now live in faith, not fear; in hope, not horror, and with trust, not terror.

Now we are to live that baptized life in the vocations which God has given us. We care for our families and cling to them in love. We look out for the welfare of our neighbors. We do our jobs as best we can under the conditions that are safe. We take proper precautions so that we do not risk the health and safety of those around us.

While we work hard not to share germs and spread disease, we also see this crisis as an opportunity and we recognize that this time is an opening, a chance to share Christ as Savior and to spread God's word to those sin-sickened souls around us who need to know God's gifts of life and salvation in Jesus through His forgiveness of our sins.

As always, living our baptized lives united to Christ in His death and resurrection, we await and ultimately will face death. We do so with the Spirit's sure and certain hope of a heavenly home and the resurrection to eternal life. When the time of final judgment comes and that ultimate question is asked, "Who sinned, this person?" Jesus will look at us and say, "not this one, for this one is My forgiven child." In Jesus' name. AMEN