

Lent 4 Year A 2020
March 22, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A while back, I heard a story on the radio by a guy named Ryan Knighton. Ryan is an author and comedian, and at the age of 18, he began to go blind. The story he told on this radio program was about one of the times that he was traveling to do a show away from home. Ryan was in the habit of always calling his wife when he arrived at his hotel so that she would know he made it safely. Now, this was in the time before everyone carried their own cell phones, so Ryan had to look for the phone in his room. At this point, he had gone completely blind.

So, here Ryan was, alone in his hotel room. He started feeling along the walls with his hands, and along the furniture to create in his mind a map of his room. As he did this, he searched for the phone so he could call his wife. Starting at the door, he felt his way around the room. He found the bed, and the couch, and the coffee table. He located the bathroom, the desk, and then he came back to the door again. As far as he could tell, there was no phone in the room. He thought this was somewhat odd, but maybe this was one of those hotels that only had payphones back in the lobby. He was too tired to worry about finding his way back there again, so he decided not to worry about it. It was pretty late anyway. His wife was probably already sleeping, and he really just wanted to go to bed too. So, that's what Ryan did. But, in the middle of the night, Ryan woke up to the sound of a phone ringing. Clearly, this was quite a surprise since he couldn't find the phone earlier. But he got up out of bed and he followed the sound of the ringing. Eventually he found the phone. When he picked it up, his wife was frantic on the other end, worried about him, and upset that he never called. He told her his story, that he couldn't find the phone, and that everything was okay.

When the call was over, Ryan hung up the phone and felt the walls around him. It turns out that as Ryan was feeling his way around the hotel room before, he had missed the fact that there was a small alcove in the corner, and that's where the phone was located. On the map that Ryan had created in his mind, this area was undiscovered. As Ryan had come to understand it, this alcove with the phone in it simply didn't exist.

As Ryan concluded his story on the radio that day, he talked a little more generally about his experience of being blind. He said that when you're blind, you have to make assumptions about the world. You do your best to figure things out, to get a clear picture of the world around you. But when you're wrong about your world, you live in the mistakes.

And I think that this is a really important point, not only for those who are physically blind, but also for what has been called mental or spiritual blindness, or blindness to the truth.

Now, I don't like that we use the term blindness to talk about the shortcomings that we have in our understanding of ourselves, our world and our God, because I find that it degrades those who suffer from this physical disability. I want to be sure to say that physical blindness doesn't mean that you're sinful and it doesn't make you somehow less of a person. However, today's gospel story uses the parallel of physical and spiritual blindness, and so we will continue with this less-than-perfect language.

As Ryan said at the end of his story, "When you're blind, you have to make assumptions about the world. And when you're wrong, you live in the mistakes." The same can be true of our understanding of God and the world around us. So often we can be completely convinced that we know how the world works—or at least we know how some part of the world works. And yet, the truth is that we have completely missed the point, we have failed to see the reality that is

right in front of our faces, and our assumptions and opinions have led us completely astray. In this way, spiritual blindness leads us to a limited and distorted perspective on the world.

I think that in some ways, we're seeing this with the current COVID-19 outbreak. Had we all been a little more cautious at the beginning, had we been more willing to admit that we didn't know much about this virus, we might have been more willing to alter our daily routines sooner. Our so-called "blindness" or lack of knowledge around this disease means that people are still out in crowds on beaches while others sit completely isolated in their homes full of toilet paper and hand sanitizer. As we've made our assumptions, we've convinced ourselves that we know and understand this situation. It means that some people have decided to act as though they're invincible, while others act as though any human contact means likely death. Obviously these are two extremes, but we have all made assumptions about this disease, and based on how these assumptions influence our actions, we may find that we're living in our mistakes. Of course, it will take time before we know for sure.

Similarly, the Pharisees are another example of those who have made assumptions about the world and are living in their mistakes. They're right there with Jesus, and yet they are in complete disbelief of who he is and to what he has been called. As we read about Jesus in the Bible it seems completely obvious to *us* who he is, but these Pharisees just can't see it. Jesus is standing right in front of them, and yet they just don't understand.

But the truth is that we're no better than the Pharisees. We question God's involvement in our lives. You hear people talk about these "God moments"—moments when they clearly heard God speaking to them and telling them something—and I don't know about you, but I tend to be a bit skeptical. Or we hear of worship practices like speaking in tongues and snake handling, and we say, certainly God isn't *actually* working in those ways. We just can't see it. It doesn't make sense to us. But perhaps we're just a little too willing to chock up these and other experiences to chance and coincidence, or even worse, we decide that people are being intentionally misleading.

But what if these things are more divine than we are willing to believe? What if our inability to understand these things is just part of our own spiritual blindness? Like Ryan said, "When you're blind, you make assumptions about your world [and about how God works]. And when you're wrong, you live in your mistake."

These mistakes have big consequences. Our actions today will impact the spread or containment of the COVID-19 virus. There are portions of the church that will invoke God's name in many and various contexts—they will claim that God is on their side—and not on the side of the enemy. They will claim that God is "for" or "against" something, and therefore everyone else is condemned. They will claim to be doing God's will or working in the name of God, and commit terrible acts of hatred and violence. These people, just like us, are subject to a spiritual blindness that has led them to make assumptions about their world. They have wound up doing tragic things, making dreadful mistakes, while being *completely convinced* that they were right, when, in fact, they were stuck, living deep in their mistakes.

Unfortunately, this is something that we as a church and people of faith do all the time. We make assumptions about the world. We make assumptions about God. We assume that we know what God is up to and how God works. But God is God, and we're not. We cannot know everything that God is up to. And so we live in this world to the best of our ability, but the truth is that we're all spiritually blind. We live within that darkened hotel room. And in our darkness, we look at people who are different from us, and because they're different, we assume that they're of some lesser status than us. We assume they're not part of God's kingdom; they're not worthy of God's love. In our blindness, in the darkness of our minds, we make these assumptions

about the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the outcast, the refugee, and the other—in the same way that the Pharisees made assumptions about the man who was born blind, and his parents, and about Jesus. We have all made assumptions like this, and we are living in our mistakes.

But the good news is that Christ gives sight to the blind man. Christ comes to us today to bring light to our darkness. He comes to us to open our eyes to the world. Christ has come to correct our assumptions, to lead us out of our mistakes and sinfulness. The Word of the Lord comes to us like Ryan's phone call in the middle of the night, leading us to places and realities that we never knew existed.

As our eyes are opened, we begin to examine ourselves. We see our own deep need for mercy, we see our own deep need for God. And just like the formerly blind man in John's Gospel, we go running to Jesus.

When Jesus gives us sight to heal our blindness, he leads us to suspend judgment and really get to know *all* our neighbors throughout the world, so that we might *truly see them* as God's beloved creatures, as brothers and sisters in God's creation. And as we see our neighbors, we see not only our own deep need, but the deep need of those around us. We see those who are struggling. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are brought together, drawn to one another, into a church. And we are drawn not only into this church, but we are drawn together into the church around the world so that all our brothers and sisters can be formed into one body for mutual comfort and consolation by the Word of God.

Sometimes we as individuals, and even as a church are misguided. Sometimes we are lost in deep darkness. But we are also gathered by the Holy Spirit so that the church throughout the world becomes a place where all are following Jesus Christ, the light of the world, the light shining in our darkness. May Christ bring light to your darkness on this and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.