

Prayer of the Day

Bend your ear to our prayers, Lord Christ, and come among us. By your gracious life and death for us, bring light into the darkness of our hearts, and anoint us with your Spirit, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

¹The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.”

²Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’”

³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” ⁵He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.” ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, “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 on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” ¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” ¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”

¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Psalm: Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.

²**The LORD makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.**

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³You restore my soul, O LORD, and guide me along right pathways for your name's sake.

⁴Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14

⁸Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

Gospel: John 9:1-41

¹As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them,

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“He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Sermon

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ, the light of the world, amen.

This Gospel lesson concerning the man who was born blind is my absolute favorite Bible story! While it's my favorite, I have to admit it's always been a sort of love-hate relationship. My attraction with the man born blind began almost 40 years ago shortly after Melanie, our firstborn, was diagnosed with multiple genetic anomalies. For a long time, I struggled with "why us" syndrome. I asked over and over why our child had to suffer these disabilities. If you think our modern-day society has moved beyond asking who sinned, the child or the parents, you've never had a child born with serious birth issues. Our doctors kept asking over and over if PJ had been a smoker, a drinker, or a drug abuser before or during the pregnancy. It was clear they were trying to find someone or something to blame.

That's when I first remember discovering our Gospel text for today. In the midst of my search for meaning and answers to why our child had been singled out to be different from other children, God's Words from the story of the man born blind seemed to leap from the Bible and offered a solid rationale. For a while this story satisfied my questions not only the blind man's situation, and Melanie's condition, but also a more general or universal answer to why the innocent suffer. In the words of Jesus himself, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. (John 9:3) At first these words offered comfort and eased our guilt that we might have done something wrong causing our baby's problems. However, the more I thought about it, the more dissatisfied I became with this answer. I mean, what kind of God creates (or at least allows) innocent suffering just so that God's works can be revealed? What kind of God does that? Having been raised in the second half of the 20th century, I grew up knowing about the horrible pain and suffering of two great World Wars, the mass murders in the Soviet Union and the killing fields of Cambodia, not to mention mass starvation in so many countries below the Equator. How can a God of love permit such pain and suffering? Is it all just so we can see God's good side? Are we nothing more than pawns in God's cosmic game of "See How Great I AM?"

As you can see, my relationship with these verses from John's Gospel hasn't always been amicable. The questions raised by this story kept me engaged with God over the years. As I kept searching and asking, God kept calling me to follow closer and deeper. In many ways this story is responsible for why I finally gave in to God's call. I thought maybe I could find what I was looking for in deeper studies of scripture. Of course, the best place to do that is in a seminary, so that's where I found myself in 2005, at Trinity Lutheran Seminary. In my quest over the years, one thing I've discovered is that God will answer your prayers and

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questions, probably not on your timetable, but in His divine time. If someone gives you all the answers, you're not likely to believe them, or at least in my case, not likely to trust them. I think God knew that about me. Instead of simply supplying me the answers to my questions, God made me discover them for myself. At the seminary, I first had to learn Biblical Greek in order to be able to translate the Bible stories myself. It wasn't until the final semester of my senior year at Trinity when Dr Claton Croy offered his very popular course on the Gospel of Saint John. During Dr Croy's class we were required to pick a Gospel story and write an in-depth paper drawing out the meaning of the text. Of course, I picked the story of the man who was born blind. As I translated the story, I realized the scholars and theologians who translated the New Revised Standard Version had made a crucial assumption. In the Greek, Jesus does not say, "***this man was born blind*** so that God's works might be revealed..." In the Greek what Jesus actually says is, "***this happened*** so that God's works might be revealed." It might seem like a small distinction, but it makes a really big difference! Obviously, the translators of the NRSV Bible assumed the "this" in the Greek text referred to the fact that the man had been born blind. It's far more likely the "this" refers to the fact that Jesus and the disciples came upon the man on the way to where ever they were going on that particular day. As in so many other places in John's Gospel, Jesus answers a quite different question than the one posed to him. Jesus was not answering the question of why this man was born blind. He was answering the question, "What are we going to do about the problem of pain and suffering in this world?" To that question Jesus answers, we're going to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and bring salvation to all who believe.

Every time I return to this story, I learn new things about Jesus, God, and salvation. I realize, for example, that not all pain and suffering is attributable to an individual sin or sinner. While it is true in many cases that our sin has caused much suffering, it can't be universalized to every situation. When we try to do that, we make the victim out to be the cause of their own suffering. When we place the blame on God, we begin a battle with God that does not bring honor and glory to either Jesus or God. I have many thoughts on why pain and suffering are so prevalent in our world, but there isn't the time nor the space in this sermon to deal with that issue. Today, I'm much more interested in the second part of what Jesus tells his disciples. Jesus conclusion to coming upon this man born blind was that "this happened so that God's works might be revealed." My question for us today is this: what exactly are "God's works?"

The first and maybe most obvious answer to this question is Jesus' mission in the world; to bring sight to the blind, including those born that way... When John the Baptist asks if Jesus is really the Messiah, Jesus' answer included that the

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blind receive their sight. Jesus is the light of the world and as such brings sight to the blind. His light brings more than just physical sight. For those who believe in him, who trust his words, who place their hope on his shoulders, Jesus also gives spiritual sight and salvation. Back in Chapter 6 of John's Gospel, Jesus explains what the works of God are to the crowds of people that followed him after he had fed more than 5000 of them from five loaves of bread and two fish. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." ²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." (John 6:27-29)

In John's Gospel, Jesus came into the world as the light and his presence forced a decision on all people. Will you come to the light or will you run from the light? In the world of John's Gospel, light is good and darkness is sin. In John's Gospel, trusting in Jesus is good, not believing Jesus is God's Son, the Son of Man, or The Messiah, is sin. Taken quite literally, the work God does is to bring about trust, faith, and belief in Jesus Christ as God's Son, the Messiah. As the saying goes, "faith come from hearing the Word of God." Even a man born blind can hear Jesus calling. In our Gospel this formerly blind man goes from unknowing, to hearing, to thinking Jesus was a prophet. After his expulsion from the synagogue, Jesus, the Good Shepherd seeks this lost man and calls him into his sheepfold. Now the real scales fall from the man's eyes and he sees clearly who Jesus really is. Jesus reveals himself to be none other than the Son of Man who came into the world sent from God. When the formerly blind man hears Jesus voice, he responds with his confession of faith and falls to his knees to worship Jesus the Christ.

At the same time all other social support structures fall apart. The religious establishment kicks the man to the street. His parents, his family, fail to defend him and tell the Pharisees he can speak for himself. Even his neighbors can't even recognize him without his disability. They aren't even sure it's really him. Today, we're facing a crisis that threatens our societal structures in this COVID-19 virus. We can wallow in self-pity, asking God why us, why now, or we can go about doing the works of God. May you choose the latter. May you choose to stay socially connected even while we are physically distancing from one another. We can all continue to read, study, and tell each other the great Bible stories we've loved from our youth. (Even those stories we might have a love-hate relationship with...) In telling and retelling those stories we're bringing the faith and trust in Jesus Christ into our hearer's ears. From there the Holy Spirit takes over and God's works can be accomplished. May you be a instrument through which God's works are done today. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession for March 22, 2020

Turning our hearts to God who is gracious and merciful, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need...

God of insight, open the hearts of the church and the world to all who testify to your deeds of power. Raise up voices in your church that are often silenced or overlooked due to age, gender expression, race, or economic status. Give us courage to testify to the miracle of faith you have given to each one of us. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of insight, empower us to care for the land and all living things that dwell in it and beneath it. Provide rich soil for crops to grow. Bring rain to lands suffering drought. Protect hills and shorelines from damage caused by erosion. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of insight, bring peace to all people and nations. Anoint leaders who seek goodness, righteousness, and truth on behalf of all. Frustrate the efforts of those who would seek to cause violence or terror. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of insight, you care for our needs even before we ask. Come quickly to all who seek prayer this day (*especially*). Accomplish healing through the work of doctors, nurses, physical therapists, nutritionists, and all who tend to human bodies. Bring a swift end to the Corona Virus crisis as you comfort those who suffer. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of insight, help this assembly lift up the unique gifts of each person who enters, no matter their physical capacity, cognitive ability, or sensory need. Help us to be creative and brave in making our facilities and our ministries accessible to all. Give us the grace to see beyond other people's differing abilities. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

God of insight, you call out to those who are asleep and awaken them to new life with you. We give thanks for your saints especially for the life of your servant Chet Wirrig. Bring peace and comfort to all his family and friends who mourn his passing. Join us together with them as your children in this world and the next. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

According to your steadfast love, O God, hear these and all our prayers as we commend them to you; through Christ our Lord.

Amen.