

Psalm 23

Dominus regit me

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though 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.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

John 9:1-41

⁹As he 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, "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.

(In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.)

Every day of the past two or three weeks has gotten slowly more stressful. My clergy friends are counting the days. Coronavirus Day 12, or is it 15? Where do we begin counting? December of last year when the virus was first identified? January 20, with the first American diagnosed? Feb 11, when the virus got its name – COVID-19. February 29 with travel restrictions? March 11 when the bishop suspended worship? March 13 with the declaration of National Emergency? Somewhere in there along the way, we went from mildly concerned, to moderately stressed, to deeply worried.

We have new phrases in our vocabulary: social distancing; self-isolation; and shelter in place. Colleges have moved to online learning. Seniors across the country are mourning the loss of proms, sports tournaments, and graduations, all postponed or cancelled.

We’re living in a chronic state of uncertainty and anxiety. There are layoffs, closing businesses, and a plummeting stock market. Daily news is filled with reports counting cases, hospitalizations, and now deaths. And after all this bad news, officials tell us to go home and isolate ourselves, which only adds to our suffering. I miss shaking your hands on Sunday morning and high-fiving your kids. I’m lonely. I miss my friends. A virtual hug is a sorry substitute for the real thing.

People are also trying to figure out how and why this happened. Could we have seen this coming? Who’s responsible? Why don’t hospitals have enough gloves, masks, and ventilators? It’s logical to think there’s a reason or a mistake somewhere. Who is it who sinned?

“Rabbi, who sinned?” It’s the question Jesus’ disciples ask him when they came upon a blind man as they walked along. The question stands out, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Traditional Jewish thought of the time was that illness and sin were related. Illness was God’s punishment for sin. And people could be punished for the sins of the generation that came before them. If people couldn’t figure it out, they

concluded that a person could sin in the womb. If someone was born with a congenital defect, it could be because of something they'd done before they were born. After all, the Biblical twins Jacob and Essau first fought over their birthright in their mother's womb. This is how the disciples were thinking and reasoning when they asked Jesus their pivotal question. Who sinned? Who caused this evil?

Jesus doesn't engage their thinking. He changes it. He changes the foundations and the basis upon which they ask the question in the first place. He throws everything into illogical disarray by responding, "Neither this man nor his parents." None of them sinned and caused this tragedy. The situation was what it was. But it was also an opportunity. The darkness and pain of the blind man provided a place in which God's mighty works could easily be seen. Jesus, the light of the world, brought light and healing where there had been darkness and despair.

Jesus, in his humility, does nothing fancy. God doesn't need the special, God uses the ordinary. In an echo of God's creation of Adam and Even in Genesis, Jesus begins with the earth at his feet. He spits into the soil, and kneads the ground into mud which he smears on the man's eyes. I can so easily imagine myself into the story as the blind man. I imagine hearing Jesus spit, and feeling his cloak brush against me as he bends down to the ground. I imagine the sounds of him scratching and kneading in the dirt. And finally, the surprising feeling of his fingers pressing the mud into my eyes, and smearing it over my skin, eyelashes, and eyebrows. Finally the blind man is sent to wash himself clean. A lifetime of living in perpetual darkness, stumbling over every rock and crevice in the soil. All washed away. When he returned he could see.

We are like the blind man. The world feels rather dark now. We need healing and we're having to wait. We can't see what will happen tomorrow. We're scared for our health or the health of those we love. People we know are being laid off and small businesses are being closed. When will toilet paper be stocked for sale again? We stumble through each day, reading and watching the news trying to find some solid ground. We are physically separated, waiting for the time when we might be able to touch each other once again. Many people are wondering, "How did this happen to us? What could we have done differently?"

I've heard some people suggest that God did this as punishment, or as a trial. Could God be punishing us for the way we've abused His creation? Or for our selfishness, greed, and lack of care for each other. Have we sinned?

Well, yes. There are plenty of things we've done wrong in the world, as a society and as individuals. There's lots of sin to go around. People are both good and bad. But God is good. Always and eternally good. And the God we worship is a God of grace, who dishes out forgiveness in abundance to those who truly repent and try to amend their lives.

Jesus would have us focus on God's grace and power, not on the responsibility for sin. And be careful with the theology of these words, which I have also heard. "Everything happens for a reason." I don't believe that Coronavirus happened for a reason. Hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, and sickness are part of what it is to live a human life. Things happen in life that are really frightening, and it's alright to be afraid. Even Jesus was afraid the night before he was crucified. He wept tears of blood.

In today's scriptures, when our life is dark Jesus tells us that he is the light of the world. Jesus is the good shepherd. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us to comfort us. The Church has weathered plagues before. The 1918 Spanish Flu. Russian Flu. The Bubonic Plague. Leprosy. The Justinian Plague.

Jesus didn't say that God makes evil things happen for good reasons. Jesus said that in these times, God's works would be revealed in him. In this time when we can't gather to encounter Christ in the sacrament, encounter Christ in the world. Look at the world illumined by the light of Christ. Encounter Christ at tables in your own homes when you see that ordinary things are holy things: bread, wine, water. See Christ weeping in the garden in the faces of the sick or the scared or the homeless. Let Christ open your eyes to see his face in the faces of doctors, nurses, scientists, and healers. Wait for Christ, Long for Christ, Search for Christ. He is always with us. We may be walking in the valley of the shadow of death, but we do not walk alone. Jesus is with us. Emmanuel. And he will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

Amen.