

Sisters and brothers in Christ, members of Grace Lutheran Church and Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Champaign, and all of you who are joining us from other places and other communities of faith this morning: Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a lot to talk about in the readings for today, more than we have time for. If you are a member of Grace and can join us this Thursday evening for On the Way by Zoom, we may have a chance to have a closer look at these rich Lenten texts. Caitlyn touched on the first reading in her children's sermon. I'm going to focus our attention on a couple of things from our Gospel reading this morning, and one from the Psalm, and attempt to connect them to the extraordinary circumstances we find ourselves in these days.

The first thing I want us to notice from our Gospel reading today is the opening question: who sinned? The disciples are a product of their culture, just as we are products of ours. There must be a reason for a man to be born blind, and the only two possibilities in the thinking in that time and place were that his parents had done something for which he was being punished, or he himself was somehow deserved this bad thing happening to him. And if you're wondering how an unborn baby could do something that would deserve such a punishment, well, they had a way of explaining it. The upshot, though, is that this way of thinking about such misfortune allowed people to distance themselves from it. If blindness was this guy's fault, or his family's, then not only did he deserve it, but it meant that those who weren't blind were morally superior, and could feel good about themselves at his expense. Jesus undermines this whole perverse strategy: this man's condition is not connected with either of those two options. Jesus insists that he has nothing to do with the sin of this man or his parents. What Jesus says next, though, can seem equally problematic: "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." What does he mean by that? Does he mean that God knew that Jesus was going to need a prop to help him show off his divine power, so he cause this guy to be blind his whole life just for this moment? I hope not. And I don't think so. God's work in the world is love. We heard that two weeks ago in Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. If that's the case, then causing someone to be blind doesn't strike me as a work of God. So I think that what Jesus means here is that misfortune and suffering provide an opportunity not for scorn and self-righteousness but for love in the form of help and care.

And I think that this is helpful to hear as we struggle to cope with this viral pandemic. There are plenty of people who are quick to assign blame for the origin of this virus, who insist on calling it the Chinese virus. It's a strategy for scapegoating other people to distance ourselves and make us feel better about ourselves. There has been a notable uptick in anti-Asian discrimination and even attacks in recent weeks because of this connection. I have to think that Jesus would see this as wrong-headed, and wrong-hearted. This is not an occasion for lashing out and stoking racial and nationalist animosity. It is rather an opportunity to bring the world together in a single purpose, an opportunity for caring for others and for the common good, which are often obscured by our personal, individualistic agendas. Continuing to push our private agendas in the face of this opportunity for communal and global action is surely like the willful blindness of the Pharisees in the face of Jesus' care for the man born blind.

So let's not be like the Pharisees in this way. But, and this is my second, somewhat tangential point, let's do take the lead of the Pharisees in another way. The Pharisees were very good at social distancing. They were obsessive about how they prepared their food, and how they washed their dishes and their hands. And they kept themselves apart from others who did not have

the same scruples. We heard last week in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well that the Judeans did not share things – like buckets or cups – with Samaritans. The Pharisees went the next step and kept themselves apart from many of their fellow Judeans. Now I'm not advocating this for the long term, but for right now, we could all due to be just a little Pharisaic when it comes to purifying ourselves and keeping away from others until this virus is brought under control. "Do as the Pharisees teach," Jesus told his disciples at one point.¹ I'm being a little bit playful here and taking that quote out of context, but the point still stands. Now is the time to be temporary Pharisees when it comes to cleanliness and social distancing.

The third and final thing I want to lift up from our readings this morning is that confident verse four from the 23rd Psalm: "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." Did that strike you too this morning? "The valley of the shadow of death" is a Hebrew way of saying "dark times." (The words "darkness" and "death" come from the same root in Hebrew.) Another way of translating this could be, "even though I live in the darkest times, I fear no evil." These are certainly dark days that we are living in, and evil is all around us. But it is also within us. The late Soviet dissident writer, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously observed that "the line separating good and evil runs through the heart of every human being." His experience of dark days in Soviet labor camps showed him how we all participate in the collective evil that oppresses us, and how that makes fighting evil so difficult. I would submit that the impulse to hoard food and supplies is one example of the evil within us. I have that impulse. I expect you do too – even though we know, rationally, that if we could all refrain from such behavior we could avoid emptying the shelves of our local grocery stores and help out our neighbors. In this of all places there is plenty of food to go around. Psalm 23 states confidently that even in the darkest of times we should not fear evil. This does not mean that we shouldn't have the proper appreciation for the danger that is all about us. This does not mean that we can pray away the coronavirus, as some misguided religious charlatans are suggesting. That is "tempting the Lord your God," as Jesus told the devil during his dark days in the wilderness. The word fear in the Bible is used both for being afraid of danger and of respecting the ultimate power of God. In Matthew chapter 10 (v. 28) Jesus tells his disciples not to fear those who can only kill the body, but be confident that God is the one who has the ultimate power over all the forces of evil within and without. Fearing no evil means not trusting our baser instincts, not trusting the selfish voice within us, and not listening to those would manipulate us based on irrational fear and self-interest.

Here's what I hope you heard from me in this sermon. First, that this crisis that we are in the midst of is an opportunity for giving glory to God by loving our neighbor. Second, that loving our neighbor at this time looks surprisingly like the social distancing of the Pharisees, but without the contempt. And third, that in the darkest times we can place our ultimate confidence in God, even in the face of death, because God is at work even now, by the power of Jesus' own death and resurrection, to bring love out of hate, hope out of despair, and life out of death. May God grant us grace to trust the promise in that third point, so that we can exercise the love of God in the first two points. And so trusting, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 23:3, freely rendered.