

10 am, Sunday, March 22, 2020

Christ Church Cathedral

Sermon by Priscilla Dowden-White, PhD

Scripture readings: 1 Samuel 16:1-13 Psalm 23 Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

There's an African American gospel song that's been in my spirit for several days now, the title of which is "What a Time!" There's been more than one version and recording of this song, but the one that I can't seem to get out of my head begins with the words, "When all God's children get together... What a time! What a time! What a time!

As a student of history, I think a lot about time; about how events impact people and the societies in which we live. About how our actions impact changes over time. Yes, as an historian, I think a lot about historical time. But, I'm not just an historian. I am also a believer in God. And, as a believer in God, I am reminded that God's time exists outside of history.

Without a doubt, the Coronavirus pandemic will surely be one for the history books. Certainly, we've experienced pandemics before, and we have no reason to believe that this will be the last one that we as humans will face. It is not the first time in human history that we've faced a collective crisis and surely it will not be the last. Nevertheless, this is our unique collective crisis, in this our moment of human history making time. What a time, what a time, what a time.

What a time it is to be a child of the Most High God! What a time it is to be in this season of repentance and renewal that we call Lent. What a time it is to be on this Lenten road of prayer, reflection, sacrifice and penance. A Lenten journey that ultimately leads to JOY! It is a joy that the world cannot give us and the world cannot take away. This Lenten journey to joy is not contingent on what the future holds; on how many rolls of bathroom tissue, hand sanitizer, and bleach wipes we've been able to stockpile, or even on the potential dire economic consequences that many people are sure to face in the days ahead.

In our humanness, we are feeling a collective sense of urgency, as we seek to protect ourselves and others from the spread of this unchecked virus. We feel a collective sense of urgency in the need to create a vaccine and treatments. Not only is the sense of urgency apparent, but there's also that growing sense of uncertainty. How long before there's a vaccine? How many test kits are available? How will I be able to pay my bills? While some of us are loading up our refrigerators, freezers, and pantries, others are worried about how they will get any food to eat. Times like these, give one pause to reflect on those things which we perceive as certain, but in reality, come with no guarantees. What are we left with when uncertainty takes hold? Our scripture readings for today, have a great deal to offer us in response to this question.

For those of us who live in Christ, we do not have to worry about what tomorrow holds, or what the future in the midst of human history will bring. For the Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want. And even when we walk through the darkest valley, and in the midst of the shadow of death, we know that his rod and his staff will comfort us. We are reminded in today's New

Testament text that while we once lived in darkness, now in the Lord we are light, so we should live as children of the light!

In the opening of our Gospel text, Jesus is walking and he sees a man blind from birth. *Jesus sees him!* He sees the man's condition. He sees his plight. And when the disciples encountered the blind man, they assumed that his blindness was the result of sin. Even though he had been born blind, the disciples thought, surely, the man's blindness must have been caused by either his own sin or the sins of his parents. But Jesus immediately shuts down that line of reasoning, and says "Neither this man nor his parents have sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Since the Bible tell us all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, we know that Jesus wasn't saying that the man and his parents were without sin (neither was he saying that sin has no consequences). He was instead saying that sin had not caused this man's physical state of blindness. And, there are people today who, like the disciplines, who from a spiritual perspective, are trying to figure out the cause of this mysterious, unchecked pandemic.

This is a challenging text, for a time such as this. For we must be careful in reading this text. Words matter. Language matters. Here, Jesus actually never gives us the *cause* of the man being born blind. Likewise, Jesus doesn't even imply that the man's blindness is a defect. The scripture states that "he was born blind so that Gods works might be revealed in him." This is a fine point of distinction that we need to be careful to recognize; a distinction between causality and God's purposes. We don't know what caused the man's blindness. We only know that God allowed it, Jesus says, so that God's *works* might be revealed.

And, here's where, if we're not careful, we'll miss the critical point in Jesus' teaching. In this text, Jesus is calling our attention to the fact that we are all born blind in some way. If not physical blindness, surely, we are born into spiritual blindness. And, throughout our lives we exhibit all manner of blindness. *Oh, this is not just a text about miracles, signs, and wonders!*

For, right after Jesus says that the man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him, in the very next line, he tells the disciples, "We must work the works of him who sent me..." Jesus is saying, "we must work the works of him who sent me," not just so that God can show off God's works, but that we must work together with God to *work the works!* *Oh, when all of God's children get together, what a time, what a time, what a time!*

So, we may never know the origin or cause of COVID-19. But, what we do know is that God allowed it. And, have we not exhibited blindness by ignoring the warning signs that preceded this pandemic? In giving us that 'terrible gift' of free will, God has allowed it.

Jesus conveys a sense of urgency in this text, because not only does he tell us that we need to work the works of him who sent Jesus while it is day, he says, "night is coming when on one can work." And even now, as night is falling, some of us continue to ignore the warning signs even now. But, then in the midst of sounding the alarm, Jesus seeks to put down panic, by offering the disciples and us the *Good News*, for he says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." And we were reminded in today's New Testament text, that while we were once in darkness – now that we are in the Lord and he in us – we are to live as children of the light! And as children of the light, we are to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Therefore, we must also participate in working the works of God! Right here in the midst of this pandemic, we have HOPE and an opportunity for new life, for renewed life – conquering death once again.

So on this 4th Sunday of Lent, we need rest assured that just as Jesus saw the blind man, God sees us in the midst of this pandemic and all of its consequences. *God sees us!* And God has given us a light, so that we may see. That light's name is Jesus. At this moment in time, we may not be able to physically gather together, for health's sake. Yet, we can still *come together* because the light in us and in our midst! Because of the light, we can come together with God and *work the works* so that God will get the glory.

During this season of Lent, in the midst of a global pandemic, we have an awesome opportunity. An opportunity to be still and know that God is God. An opportunity to go deeper in the things of God. An opportunity to become more expansive and intentional in worship. An opportunity to trust God in all things, even when the people can't be in the pews. An opportunity to praise God for God's faithfulness. An opportunity to trust and take God at God's word. An opportunity to truly walk by faith and not by sight. An opportunity to trust God to meet us at our every need. An opportunity to truly grasp that WE, GOD'S PEOPLE, ARE THE CHURCH, and that no devil in hell shall prevail against us. An opportunity to put God first, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. An opportunity to follow the light, walk in the light, and be the light. When all of God's children get together, what a time, what a time, what a time! Amen