

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
1 Samuel 16: 1-13  
Psalm 23  
John 9: 1-41

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March 22, 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Good morning. Good morning to our St. Peter's family and welcome to all who may be joining us for the first time as part of our virtual community. We are glad you are here and all are welcome here. Our doors may be closed but our hearts are wide open to all of you. For those of you here for the first time or the first time in a long time, I'm Laura Palmer, the priest associate here at St. Peter's.

When I said "Good morning" a few moments ago, I heard a silent chorus of "Good mornings" and I'm betting many of you did, too. I'm sure that if I say the first words of our Psalm today, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," there will be a resounding silent chorus of "He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters."

These words are embedded in us, like our faith. The pandemic is showing us what our faith really means. Like a muscle, our faith has been built up over the years. We're finding out now not only how strong it is, but how strong we are together. If this week is any indication we, at St. Peter's, are mighty strong.

But we are all mightily afraid. Anyone who believes perfect faith casts out fear hasn't lived through a pandemic. Being afraid is not about a lack of faith, it's about being human. It's feeling the utter helplessness in knowing we can't protect those we love best. We are pierced by vulnerabilities we didn't know we had.

We are walking through the valley of the shadow. And those shadows loom large.

None of us could have imagined that what we would be giving up for Lent is life as we knew it. Everyone is going to take a hit. Even those who never

get infected will face the potential loss of income, employment, financial security and every other kind of security. There is no Plan B for losses like that.

Three weeks ago, when I preached on the first Sunday in Lent I said,

Jesus emptied himself to be filled, which is what Lent is all about. The paring down, the turning inward, burning away the dross of all that claims us and distracts us and *blinds* us from seeing what God sees in us.

Our gospel reading from John this morning, at first glance, is about blindness. But it is also about seeing, and more than the restoration of vision. What we see is often all we think there is but as so often with scripture, we may miss much of the richness of the text.

Yes, with spit and dirt, Jesus made the blind man see. Astonishing.

But pay attention to what happened next. His neighbors didn't recognize the blind man once his sight was restored. How is that possible? Was he, to them, nothing more than his disability? Did they fail to know him in his humanity?

The Pharisees also have a problem with seeing what really happened. Writes Deborah Kapp, associate professor of Urban Ministry at McCormick Theological seminary:

The Pharisees do not want to hear or believe this man's story because it opposes the story they want to tell. They want Jesus to be the sinner not the hero of this story; they want another explanation that leaves them in control...

The truth tellers in this text are the blind man and Jesus. The blind man doesn't back down in telling the truth about Jesus' healing miracle, despite the risk is challenging the Pharisees who are threatened by Jesus and determined to prove he is a sinner and not the prophet the blind man recognizes.

Jesus, it has been said, is on the losing team. He stands with the poor, the sick, the disenfranchised. The beggar. The blind.

Let's not be blind to the fact that Jesus is always with the marginalized. Like the woman at the well, in last week's gospel, Jesus is speaking to someone shunned. The blind man, you can be sure, in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine was living on the sidelines. And next Sunday, Jesus will raise the ultimate outcast, Lazarus, from the dead; breaking the boundaries between this world and the next.

What does this have to do with us? Everything. This hideous virus has made outcasts of us all. It knows no boundaries, searching only for a human host. Safety nets are gone. The predictable paths of our lives, at least for now, erased. This Lenten journey now feels like a forced march.

But we are all on it together. And if you feel abandoned by God, that's okay. Remember the cry from the cross: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Nothing is more utterly human, and if Jesus came to show us how to live, there's nothing wrong with crying in desperation.

Remember though, that isn't the end of the story. We are all on the road to Jerusalem, right beside Jesus. We are realizing day after day after day, what a loving and caring community we have built at St. Peter's. St. Peter's isn't about the bricks, it's about the love we have for Jesus and for each other.

It may be weeks, it could be months, until we are back together in church, but don't be blind to the fact that we are not apart. We're here for each you and your families. There are resources on our St. Peter's website, and either Emily or I am always available by phone.

When I say, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow..." You know what comes next: "I will fear no evil for thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

Don't be blind to the truth of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Jesus is with you. Steadfastly. You are protected, you are loved, and that has not changed for over 2,000 years.

Yes. The gravity in the world feels gone and this is a time unlike any other in our lives. But don't be blind to what you can now see in Jesus when so much else has been stripped away.

An oncology family I worked with made a tee shirt that said: "Faith doesn't make things easy, it makes them possible." Life is hard now and it will get even harder in the days ahead. But remember what the Bible says, over and over and over again, "Be not afraid, I am with you."

Poetry, in times of crisis, often says it best. So now this offering from poet and Unitarian Universalist minister, Lynn Ungar.

## PANDEMIC

What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.

Center down.

And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.

Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.

(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives  
are in one another's hands.

(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.

Amen

