

Fourth Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): "Worshiping Remotely and Shining Brightly"  
1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41  
March 21-22, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Wash your hands! Don't touch your face! Cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm!" I haven't heard anyone mention it, but NOT spitting on the sidewalk is a given ☺, even when there's no pandemic. It's interesting that in this time of the Corona virus and of high anxiety **about** germs, spit figures into today's Gospel.

We call Jesus "the great Physician," and we believe we're called to continue His healing ministry in this world, but using **spit** is not a page we want to take out of His book. People in His day were probably not as creeped out about it as we are, though. The Roman author and naturalist Pliny, whose life overlapped that of Jesus, wrote about the medicinal properties of spit. He said it helped to protect against snake bites and epilepsy, and could be used to cure both leprosy and a crick in the neck. Another author described spit's ability to ward off the evil eye from an infant. The instructions were that a god-fearing aunt or grandmother should "lift the baby from [the] cradle and 'with her middle finger apply the lustrous spittle to his forehead and slobbering lips.'"<sup>1</sup> End quote. Lovely!

Compared to that, Jesus using His spit to make a mud pack for this guy's eyes doesn't sound too bad. Having said all that, spit, of course, is not the heart of this story. Blindness and sight are. If I asked our younger Sunday School children, "How many people are blind in this story?" they'd probably say, "One. The man born blind." The older youth might recognize that plenty of other people are blind, too, but spiritually instead of physically, and unlike the identified patient, the man born blind, they are **not** healed by the end of the story.

In the early church, when only adults were baptized, only once a year at the Easter Vigil, this story of the healing of the man born blind was used in Lent as part of the catechetical process called “scrutiny,” a chance for the person on-the-road-to-baptism to examine the contents of his or her heart in God-light and see what darkness might need to be cast out. In a way, that’s what we do every time we reflect and pray the confession together in worship. More than any other church season, Lent invites us to acknowledge our sins, our shortcomings in love toward God, toward neighbor, toward self. We admit, “Yes, Lord, I’ve been blind – sometimes **willfully** blind – to Your command and to my neighbor’s need.”

A friend told me about going down to the beach yesterday for some fresh air and being dismayed at how many others were there, definitely NOT keeping social distance: holding hands on the boardwalk, clustering together on the beach: people of all ages, not just the young who might mistakenly think they’re immortal, but also older folks who should definitely know better but perhaps are feeling fatalistic. Not wise. Not good. Not loving of self or of others. Remember the old proverb?

There are none so blind as those who **will not** see. [It continues:]  
The most deluded people are those who choose to ignore what they already know.<sup>2</sup>

Thank Heaven for a Savior. Earlier in St. John’s Gospel Jesus assures us:

*“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12)

Yes, we’re human, and we’ll sometimes stumble in the darkness of sin and selfishness, but then there is always a Light (with a capital L) to turn back toward, to reorient us, to scatter the shadows and illumine our Way in this world.

Jesus not only says, *“I am the light of the world,”* but also *“You are the light of the world.”* (Matthew 5:14) That is an identity we need to take seriously, **always**, but **especially** in times like these, with life so disrupted and people so afraid. In this and every challenge, the Holy Spirit works overtime to deepen our faith and to open new doors for us to witness to the love of God in the world. In the Gospel people ask Jesus whether it was the man born blind or his parents who had sinned, and Jesus says: neither, it was for the glory of God, meaning for the sake of faith arising from the healing of the man’s physical and spiritual eyes.

God wants to use the calamity of this pandemic to draw people closer to Godself. Please hear me clearly: I’m NOT saying God sent this virus. I’m saying God is powerful to bring something good and life-giving out of the worst and most dreadful situations. In his letter to the Romans St. Paul says:

*“All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.”* (Romans 8:28, NRSV)

*...[W]e can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.* (Romans 8:28, *The Message*)

We can be so sure that... God has a role for each of us to play in these difficult times. For those who are most sequestered, your job definitely includes prayer, and perhaps encouraging others in writing or on the phone or on-line. **No one** is exempt from shining brightly with the light of Christ! In this weekend’s first lesson (1 Samuel 16:1-13) we hear about the most unlikely of the sons of Jesse, the little guy out in the fields tending the sheep, David, being anointed as future king of Israel. (‘Could’ve knocked his father and brothers over with a feather, seeing **that**.) Be creative shining with the light of Christ! Pastor Mark took a walk this morning and took a video of sidewalk art along Main Street here in

Manasquan. The brightly colored chalk drawings included rainbows, butterflies and these pieces of wisdom: "Share TP!" "Be kind!" How wonderful.... Some person, either child or adult, laid Heaven underfoot, as surely as if a tree dropped down a carpet of cherry blossoms.

We've seen other tough times and squeezed through other tight spaces, right? Many of us remember Sandy. A fair number of us remember 9/11. I keep thinking back to our community's massive, candlelit gathering in Abe Voorhees Plaza later that week of 9/11. I shared the hobbit Frodo's fretting to the wizard Gandalf about the Shadow of evil over the Shire:

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.  
 "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."<sup>3</sup>

What we are called to do is to trust in God, translate worry into prayer, and shine with the light of Christ. May God heal our occasional blindness to the presence of God in the midst of adversity, grant us clear vision of our vocation in these times, and courage to carry it out.

Amen

<sup>1</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of John: Vol. 2 (Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975)*, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>John Heywood, 1546. Cf. Jeremiah 5:21.

<sup>3</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 50.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham