



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

Seeing Clearly

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 22, 2020

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Based on 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-13, 28-3

Loving and Gracious God,

In this unique moment, grant us ears to hear and eyes to see you.

Care for us...that we may more deeply care for those around us.

In Christ's Name. Amen.

Vestry member Robert Gutheil had the line of the week when he wrote me in an email, "I hadn't really planned on giving up this much for Lent." Nor had any of us. This morning, I join the chorus of voices who are saying, "I've never experienced anything like this before." Something beyond our control has changed life for all of us. We're all saying it because we haven't experienced anything quite like this, and we, who like to think we've seen it all and done it all, find ourselves in *entirely* unfamiliar territory.

The Coronavirus Pandemic is turning our world upside down. I see more lights on in the apartments around ours at 3 and 4 in the morning, and I notice them because I am up as well. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

It is an anxious moment, truly. And, to make matters even more complicated, most of our tried and true strategies from previous crises don't apply to this situation. I mean, normally, when faced with a threat, we like to come closer together.

- When we're scared, we like to hold hands.
- When we're anxious, we gather around family members.
- When we're worried, we get together for a drink or a cup of coffee to commiserate.
- When we're lonely, we have dinner with a friend, and we hug one another.
- When we're alarmed, we yearn to be surrounded by the faith community of our church.
- In a crisis, we need to hear the ancient stories and sing the old, old hymns together.

In a pandemic, however, we either can't do these things, or we need to do them in very different ways, just as we are experiencing church right now. Now, make no mistake about it, we will overcome this trial, but I believe we'll see some things very differently going forward.

Upon winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, William Faulkner famously said, "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's (and, my addition here, the preacher's) duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help a man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past."¹ This is a moment that cries out for poets and maybe for preachers, too.

It's interesting to me that today's lesson would be about the healing of a blind man, because I think most of us would agree we see everything differently today than we did a few weeks ago. We now see how the health of *any* one of us is connected to the health of *every* one of us. We see some of the silliness of our consumeristic habits. We see how crucial our relationships to family and friends are to ensure our emotional well-being.

Everything looks a little different now through the lens of a pandemic. I'm receiving invitations to events I no longer care about. (There's nothing like a few life and death issues to help you sort out what's really important to you.) My once sure and certain calendar is now adrift on a sea of ambiguity. And some consumer appeals just seem utterly ridiculous now. Cruises, in particular, seem to lack their former appeal. The ad for a Caribbean vacation that used to make my heart skip a beat has lost most of its luster.

Maybe a crisis doesn't truly *change* anything. Maybe a crisis simply *reveals* things, like the blindness we live with towards some of the great inequalities in our society. Some people can be tested for the Coronavirus, others cannot. Some people will get the finest medical treatment for their symptoms, others will not. Some people will die because they are poor or uninsured, and others will not. This pandemic didn't create any of these realities. It simply reveals them in a harsher light.

Jesus asked, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." You see, our vision has changed! Our eyes see things differently. Will we ever be able to look at the simple things, like a picnic or a dinner out with friends, in exactly the same way?

Heroism, which seemed just a little bit quaint in the modern era, is experiencing a big comeback. Volunteers from our congregation are putting together bags of food and handing them out to hungry people. People are volunteering to run errands for those unable to leave their apartments. Tasks that didn't look heroic only days ago now seem epic.

- The folks who scan and bag our groceries for us and the people who dispense our prescriptions.
- The nurses and doctors who staff our emergency rooms.
- The EMT's who operate our ambulances.
- The workers who stock our store shelves.
- The folks who clean up after us and sanitize for us and who may be, without any exaggeration, saving our very lives.

We can see it all a little more clearly now.

There is a real cost to blindness. When you are physically blind, you cannot see what others can easily see. You can't see the sights and colors taken for granted by others. When you're blind, you must rely on your other senses to compensate for that critical sense which is unavailable to you. And the cost of that blindness is significant. To be unable to see the beauty of the world, the magnificence of the created order, is a tremendous loss. To be unable to see the inequalities of the world, the injustices of this world, the needs of your fellow human beings; well, in God's eyes, that is the even greater tragedy.

Jesus understands the cost of blindness. When Jesus encounters the man blind from birth, his disciples ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned; this man or his parents?" And Jesus surprises his questioners by responding, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Now it was, and still is, a belief in many of the world's religions that some sinners are punished during their lifetime for their sins; that God may wreak an exacting vengeance and smite the evildoers living

amongst us. Some people believe the Coronavirus is a punishment for a sinful world. I am not among them.

In ancient Judaism, because sin was believed to cause sickness, forgiveness needed to take place before any healing could occur. Which is why, in ancient Israel, only priests were officially allowed to practice medicine. In Christian theology, the common association between illness and God's providential treatment finds its clearest expression among the early Puritans. Puritan clergy and lay caregivers, in the presence of someone who was ill, would first inquire, "What was the sin which led to this condition?" Of course, this whole notion then led to some obvious and tragic consequences. To this day, sick people still ask their priests what sins might have caused them to be sick. They want to know why they are being punished.

Jesus comes to set the record straight. Illness or health is not determined by your sins or by your righteousness. Blindness is not God's punishment. The prophet Samuel observes, "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Now you can begin to see why this story of Jesus healing the blind man appears at the point in the Christian year when we're forced to turn and face the Cross and see (or desperately try not to see) the meaning of Christ's sacrifice. And one can only marvel that this set of lessons comes to us in these particular circumstances. Jesus comes as a giver of sight. He comes to those who are blind in every possible way. He grants the miracle of sight to those who are physically blind and he grants the miracle of sight—literally in-sight—to those who are unable to see spiritually. He comes to all those blind Pharisees who just cannot ask enough questions of this poor man who has been the recipient of a miraculous healing.

Now there are all kinds of blindness, all sorts of ways in which people become unable to see the reality God has placed before them.

The movie *Restoration*[#] takes place during that opulent period of history following Cromwell's removal from the English throne. It's a time in which the monarchy is restored in England during a revolutionary period of cultural and scientific progress. Charles I take the throne during this period of wonder and human discovery. Yet there are horrors as well. The Great Plague of London is followed by the Great Fire, which decimates the city.

The main character is a gifted young surgeon who possesses a gift for healing. Day after day he's exposed to physical destruction and death which, in spite of his extraordinary skills, he cannot stop. He becomes haunted by the futility of his work and tormented by the limitations of the crude science he practices. Trying to escape the pain, he throws himself into drinking and easy relationships. By complete happenstance, he heals one of the King's dogs and is then appointed to the Royal Court. There, he attempts to live in a surreal atmosphere, passing his days in the foolish occupations of court life.

The young surgeon wastes his gift as a healer and loses himself. He quits medicine, and only when he's removed from the court on another whim of the King does he begin to regain his sight and see the value of his true calling. When the Great Plague of London descends upon the city, he rediscovers his identity as a healer of persons and finds salvation in giving himself to the needs of others. Restoration, indeed.

John Newton was an infamous slave trader in the 1700's. When he came to the realization of the enormity of his sins as well as the power, love, and grace of Almighty God to heal him, he wrote the immortal line, "Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

After the man who was born blind has been healed, Jesus asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” And he answers, “And who is he so that I may believe in him?” Jesus said, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” And he says to Jesus simply, “I believe.” He does NOT say, “How did you do that?” He does NOT say, “Explain all this to me!” He simply says, “I believe.”

In contemporary management circles, they are fond of saying, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” If so, then how can this pandemic open our eyes to the world about us? How can this crisis allow us to separate what is crucial from what is peripheral? How can this moment of “in-sight” transform us into the people we seek to become?

In the midst of all that is going on round about us, what would it be like to simply be able to say, “I can see.” Amen.

ⁱ William Faulkner, Nobel Banquet Speech, City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1950.

ⁱⁱ Restoration, 1995, Film directed by Michael Hoffman. Starring Robert Downey, Jr., Sam Neil, Meg Ryan, Polly Walker, David Thewlis, and Hugh Grant.

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022