

Lent 4A, March 22, 2020, for St. Andrew's, Des Moines, praying @ home in pandemic time
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Suddenly my life is very full of video meetings. I always have one or two a week, but now that we cannot meet in person and there is so much to figure out about how to be church without being together, I feel like I'm having a few a day. I find video meetings to be very stressful, even more stressful than conference phone calls, for some reason. Maybe because there is this illusion that we are in the room together. But I find it very difficult to really see people and their expressions and body language. I feel super self-conscious about my own expressions and body language and end up trying to be stone-faced. I can't read the room normally in a video conference. And often at the end of a meeting I feel frustrated and convinced that everyone else is frustrated with me. This our world in a season of postmodern pandemic. We are cut off from one another and have to work extra hard to connect. It's as if one of our senses has been removed.

Many years ago, Dave and I visited Carlsbad Caverns in southern New Mexico on a vacation trip. We took a tour and at one point the guide turned off the lights and I experienced darkness like I never had before. Usually there is some kind of light even at night – enough to see your hand if you put it right close to your eyes – but not deep in a cave. It was a truly surreal experience, strangely isolating, even while being aware of the people around. I became more aware of my senses of hearing and smell. But it was unnerving, and I was relieved when the lights came back on. For those moments we experienced what it is like to be blind, well, sort of. We knew the lights would come back on, of course.

John uses the story of healing a blind man in our Gospel reading today to illustrate Jesus's power and the salvation he offers us: the light of Christ. On the sabbath, Jesus gives the man sight by spreading mud and saliva on the man's eyes and instructing him to go and wash in a healing pool (not CDC-approved social distancing!). So on that day of rest and refreshment, Jesus gave him the ability to see the light of day, to be set free from blindness, to see clearly, through a demonstrably messy process. This, of course, was an opportunity for the religious leaders to criticize Jesus for "working" on the sabbath, even if that work was to relieve someone of a burden, and offered Jesus another chance to prove how wrong those leaders were in the way they were seeing the world, as one of rules and hierarchy, rather than love, believing and following.

In our first reading today, from the First Book of Samuel, God asks Samuel how long he will grieve the existence of a king who had been very much hoped for but turned out to be rather oppressive. God said that God will provide a new king and sent Samuel to find one among the sons of Jesse in Bethlehem. As Samuel was looking on the strong, older sons of Jesse, God said "no," God does not see as humans see, God "looks on the heart." Samuel kept looking until he was looking at young David, only a boy. That was the one in whom God saw the vocation to be king.

How long will we grieve this situation of isolation, social distancing, fear of illness, and loss of health and life from a nasty new bug? How long will I grieve those dreaded video meetings? How will we experience light again, so that we can see clearly as God would have us see, with new perspective, new hope, and new belief?

We can learn from the experience of Samuel's oppression by Saul, by blindness, exile, and diaspora. Indeed these experiences can put this situation in perspective and open us up to what we really need to be seeing – those who are most vulnerable now and the outcome God desires for us in the end. In Israel's exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC, initially the people felt they couldn't sing, couldn't worship God in a "foreign land." But the prophet Jeremiah urged them to build houses and plant gardens and pray for the inhabitants of the land in which they were forced to live. God called them to carry on as best they could, to stay together, and most of all to keep praying, something that the Jewish people have continued to do in subsequent diasporas and evil oppression down to this day. So at Passover the people pray, "next year in Jerusalem." In our own parish community we have members of that Jewish diaspora, as well as of the Sudanese diaspora, in which many of our Dinka members were forced to flee war as children, leaving their parents behind forever, running barefoot by night a thousand miles, surviving by eating leaves, to reach safety in Ethiopia, only to repeat that process when war broke out there. They have held fast to their faith in Jesus to lead them to abundance of life through dark years in refugee camps and challenging efforts to immigrate and build new lives here for themselves and their families.

Many of us will experience this time of isolation at home not so much as exile or oppression or blindness as of sabbath, a time to slow down, rest, read, catch up on projects, play with pets, go for walks. But many people will be challenged with having to work very differently, often while caring for young children, or with losing work and income and struggling to figure out how to survive. Together we are called to work through this mess and find the light at the end of the tunnel. Jesus is calling us, through sabbath and mess, to see the light, to become and live as children of light, as written in the Letter to the Ephesians, to rise from death and experience the light of Christ shining on us.

We are walking through the valley of the shadow of death right now, literally as people are dying from this new virus in alarming numbers, and unknown numbers will lose their lives from collateral damage from the efforts to slow down COVID-19. It is really messy. And God is with us. Jesus is calling us, offering us sight and insight and new light, new life in the resurrection that we will celebrate differently this year, but celebrate all the same. Because Jesus has risen and does offer us sight and light and life. And we can pray that next year we will celebrate Easter in the church again.

In rural areas we are entering "mud season," the end of winter and beginning of spring when there are still no leaves and it's chilly and often rainy, and the dirty snow has melted into mud. It's not the most pleasant season – it can be downright icky – but as the days grow longer, through the mud one starts to glimpse flowers sprouting up, as I am seeing in my yard through the rain. Our job now is to grieve this difficult time, and to look forward, with resurrection in

clear sight. Because, as we pray in the Eucharistic prayer at funerals, for Christians at death life is changed, not ended. Even now our life has changed, but not ended. It is different now and will be different when we emerge from our homes. God is offering us new sight, new light, a new Way. If we are thoughtful about moving through this tunnel and the mud and the cleansing, about believing and following Jesus, we will find that life to be better than we can ever have expected. If we only look to the grief and limits of human rules and authority, we may well experience even darker times.

God is offering us new sight and light and life in Jesus, a way beyond the limits of our imaginations, a way to eternal life. Let's embrace this exile and mess, this mud season, faithfully, let it be healing sabbath, and commit to helping one another through the mud and into the new light. Let's open ourselves to the light that Jesus is offering. Let's believe in him and follow his Way of Love faithfully, with open minds and hearts, into green pastures and soothing waters of a bright and glorious springtime.