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FBC | WJ
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Lent 4

Seeing. God.
John 9:1-41; (1 Samuel 16:1-7; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14)

INTRO. The whole point of Lent is to face our mortality, come to terms that we are not in total control of our lives nor are we in control of others, to confess our sins, shed old habits and form new ways. In that case, this Lenten season has felt more like Lent than any other I have experienced. Due to the coronavirus, we have certainly felt out of control these last few weeks, and I suspect that this feeling may not subside for some time; how long we don't know. We have been reminded that we are not always in control of our lives nor are we in control of when sickness or tragedy befalls us, and what it may take from us. We have been humbled by the coronavirus, forced to face our mortality as it insidiously ravages through our world. Usually, during Lent we have control of what we give up. But maybe because this Lent we have not been given the choice of what we "give up"—that we have had to give up things that we might not otherwise if given the choice—Lent has taken on a whole new meaning for us. When we are out of control, faced with our own mortality, we must rely on God, confess our sins, put off those old unhealthy habits and take up new ones that represent the abundant life to which God has called us. We must learn to see as God sees.

EXEGESIS. John 9:1-7. (1 Samuel 16:7). In our Gospel text today, we meet a man who was also out of control of his life because of a disability—he was blind—and was reminded each day of his mortality. He was blind from birth, and by this point he had probably been begging on the streets of Jerusalem for the majority of his life. Blindness was caused by many things in the ancient world, some of which might have been or at least were believed to have been contagious. So, most people kept their distance. This man was even probably kicked out of his parent's home at some point, likely homeless, because his blindness at some point would have been considered a matter of uncleanness according to certain interpretations of the Jewish Law. At the very least, the man was disabled, unable to contribute to the family household, and was either dropped off by family and friends or walked himself to high traffic areas each day to beg for his

livelihood. While in the city of Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples were walking by his begging spot and Jesus saw the man. Jesus' disciples apparently saw him, too. They looked at Jesus and said, "Teacher, what did this guy do to deserve this? Was it his fault or his parents?" Jesus said, "Neither. He's not blind because of anything he or his parents have done. Have you not learned anything from me? Watch this. Let me remind you what God can do. This man is blind. I am the light of the world." Jesus had barely finished saying this when he spat on some dirt, made some mud-pies with his spit and spread it on the man's eyes. There was a pool nearby called Siloam. The man did as Jesus commanded, and when he came back, he could see.

ILLUSTRATION/APPLICATION. By now, we know some thing about "social distancing." The world has been practicing it because of this novel coronavirus that has spread to every corner of the globe. But, the truth is that we have been practicing "social distancing" long before the coronavirus altered our existence. We have been discriminating against other people because of their race, age, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, sickness, socio-economic status, and an array of other things. In our Old Testament Reading today, even the prophet Samuel had his biases exposed when he went to choose a new king. He saw Jesse's oldest sons and they all "passed the eye test" of what he imagined a king would look like. But, God put Samuel in his place when God said, "*Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature ... for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). God had already chosen David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, not because of his looks or his height or any of the other superficial reasons we choose someone, but because of his heart. God revealed to Samuel and Jesus showed his disciples that ***God Doesn't See as Humans See***. God sees us for who we are, for our faith, for the content of our character, for our faithfulness to God's ways.

When the disciples saw this man, they saw his blindness. Jesus saw him as a child of God. Jesus saw what he had lost, his struggle, his pain, but Jesus also saw his grit and determination, his heart and his faith. Jesus gave him his sight to show that there was more to this man than what the disciples could see. Jesus revealed that ***the World is Dark, but Jesus Brings Light to the Darkness***.

We are experiencing some dark days, and I suspect that the darkness is not over. Much has been lost that we grieve because of the coronavirus, individual freedoms and social gatherings that most of us took for granted. Kids going to school, people of faith gathering for worship, recreational events and activities that represent our God-given desire for play, dinner with friends, family and neighbors, handshakes, hugs, and high-fives, going to the grocery store without fear that we will be infected with the coronavirus, the list goes on. Many businesses, individuals and families are being hit hard with closures and lay-offs. Those who live from paycheck to paycheck no longer have one. There are those that are experiencing tremendous loss of life in communities all over our world, death of loved ones, friends, community members, and many of these without a funeral that invites the in-person participation of the collective grief and remembering of community. Our individual and collective losses and grief are real, and God sees us in these dark times. God sees us as God saw David, and as Jesus saw the man who had been blind since his birth. God knows our anxieties and fears. God sees what ill us, what challenges we face. Yet, just as Jesus saw the blind man and provided light in the darkness, so Jesus does for us as well. God's works can be revealed in darkness. It is not all darkness friends. God sees us. There is light in the darkness, and that light is Jesus, the image of the invisible God, a seeing God who sees us and provides God's light for us in the darkness.

A great example is ***Psalm 23***, which reminds us that darkness is part of the journey, but that God is with us. Things like sickness and coronaviruses are part of our world and our existence. While we don't have all the answers, what we do know is that God has promised to walk with us in the darkness. God the good shepherd is with us, walking with us in the valley of death, providing for us, calming our anxieties, giving us courage in the face of our fears, gifting us with faith as we stare into the unknown. God restores us when we are weak, leads us to do what is right, comforts us when we need consoling, blesses us when we feel cursed, and shows us goodness and mercy when we need it most. God sees us. God sees our heart, knows our fears, walks with us in the dark places, and gives us light, providing us a way and helping us to see in the darkness.

EXEGESIS. John 9:8-34. That's the good news. The bad news is that it won't be easy to follow the light. When Jesus healed the man of his blindness, as he went out to

spread the good news, he was met with resistance. His neighbors had a hard time believing that it was really him. Some said, “Yep. That’s him; it’s a miracle.” Others said, “Noooo way. Can’t be.” In their search for answers, they took him to the board of deacons or elders or whatever your denomination calls your church’s leaders. As they inquired, some scoffed at the fact that Jesus didn’t follow their by-laws to heal the man. Others said, “Are you kidding me? Who cares? He healed the man?” There was no consensus. So, they called in the man’s parents. The parent’s said, “Ask him. He’s a grown man for crying out loud. He can speak for himself.” So, they called him back a second time and asked him to tell his story AGAIN. And he did. But this time, he had some commentary for them. He said, “While y’all are arguing with one another who is right and who is wrong, whether I sinned or my parents sinned to cause my blindness, whether or not this Jesus man is a sinner or a prophet or eve more, you are missing the fact that I was blind, but now I can see, and it was Jesus that gave me my sight.” The church people didn’t want to hear it. So, they kicked him out. Now, we know where the disciples got this kind of theology (or God-logic).

ILLUSTRATION/APPLICATION. Desert father Abba Anthony said, ‘A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, “You are mad, you are not like us.”’¹ We have already seen such madness in the last several weeks. First, we have seen some people claiming that this coronavirus is judgment on us, God’s punishment for our sin. To that I say, “C’mon. Really?!” Don’t listen to those people. Then, there are those that have hoarded and stockpiled basic necessities that we all are in need of, promoting a mentality of scarcity and fear instead of a spirit of generosity and faith. Both of these are examples of bad theology. Lastly, as this global health crisis has already exposed, and will do so more, our systems are broken. Those who were already the most vulnerable before this virus—those who are poor and homeless, disabled and immune-compromised, those who are living paycheck to paycheck, the small business owner, the uninsured and underemployed, our social agencies and schools systems—will be the ones that suffer the most. As people of God, part of our responsibility in these times is to see and listen to the blind man, the

¹ Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove and Shane Claiborne, *The Book of Common Prayer for Ordinary Radicals* (March 21st Morning Prayer).

least of these that are trying to tell us what Jesus said, “That whatever you do to the least of these you do to me.” We are to stand up when we hear bad theology being spouted and say, “No. That is not the God that is revealed in Jesus, the God who is Love Embodied.” And in this time of crisis, we have a responsibility as children of God to partner with our community, serve our neighbors, pray for and hold accountable our leaders, and act with compassion and love. It will not be easy, but the good news is that ***God Helps Us to See the light in the darkness, and to See as God Sees.***

EXEGESIS. John 9:35-41. (Ephesians 5:8-14). When everyone else had brushed the man off and pushed him away, Jesus searched him out and found him. Jesus said, “I’m the one who gave you your sight.” The man responded in faith, “I believe,” and he worshiped Jesus. Then, Jesus said, “I came into the world so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” The Pharisees said, “Are you talking about us?” Jesus said, “You just proved my point.”

ILLUSTRATION/APPLICATION. As long as we say we have no sin, no prejudice, no biases, that we never miss the mark, that we have nothing to improve on or change, that everything is going perfectly, then we are blind. Today, if we approach our current situation with arrogance, ignorance, and apathy as if there is nothing wrong and no need for change, then we are blind and we will be forever known for these sins.

Or, we could say, “God, we are blind, in the dark, sinners, imperfect, broken, help us to see. Then, Jesus will provide light in the darkness, a way in this wilderness in which we find ourselves, and help us to see as God sees. This means hearing and following the words of Ephesians 5:8, *For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.* Children of light, let us do what is good and right and true. This means that we are to promote and practice social, but not spiritual, distancing. While the Incarnation of God is central to our faith as Christians, during this pandemic we are going to have take time to get more in tune with the third person of the Triune God, the Holy Spirit. These last few weeks, I hope that our senses have been heightened, that we are more aware of the gift of life, of what is important. Just like he did for the blind man to whom he gave sight, Jesus helps us to see God. Churches all over the globe have chosen to love their neighbor by cancelling in-person services, which is not a lack of faith in God, but a

demonstration of our faith in the one who demonstrated love for the world by sacrificing his own comforts for the sake of others. Cancelling in-person worship and other gathers is an effort to work with the community instead of against it to help stop the spread of the coronavirus. But this does not mean that we are fully apart. God is with us, and the Holy Spirit bonds us together as the body of Christ even when we are physically apart.

Churches have come together to meet online, live-stream services, meet via videoconferencing, calling neighbors, serving the least of these in our community by preparing and delivering meals. Many others such as medical personnel, food services, social workers, and others have sacrificed their lives to help serve others. I have seen and heard firsthand people practicing the care of others while doing their best to maintain necessary boundaries to help protect their neighbors. This is what it means to *live as children of light, to shine the light of God by doing what is good and right and true.*

Children of light, these are dark times. But, God sees us and is with us in the darkness. Through Jesus, God brings darkness to the light. May we ask Jesus to heal us of our blindness, open our eyes, and be our light. Let us pray that the light of God would shine on us that seeing God we may see as God sees and be the children of light that do what is good and right and true that the world may see God.