

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Lent 4-A (22 March 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2020-03-21 Sat 07:46>*

**Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.**

*1 Samuel 16:1-13, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41, Psalm 23*

## **1 Beginning: Once upon a time...**

(MP: begin with Collect)

It has been fascinating to me to encounter all the different responses people have to the virus sweeping the world. Some people express disbelief. I can understand that. There's some genuine mistrust going on there, and probably some denial as well. Some people respond with great fear and anxiety. I can relate to that, too! I've had to make choices about exactly how much news media I consume. An endless stream of news items can make a guy jumpy. So I try to walk a middle line someplace: not hoarding toilet paper but neither waiting until we're completely out of bread before going to buy a few more loaves. It's at times like these that I find my faith tested as I ask myself, in whom do I place my trust? Or, to borrow the image from today's collect, which is the true bread that I seek?

## **2 Greater Powers**

Anxiety and worry are entirely reasonable, appropriate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. People are dying around the world and, without some unprecedented actions here in the United States, extraordinary numbers of people are going to die here. That's a scary, unsettling prospect. So things that were unthinkable *last week* are starting to happen. How do you lock down an entire state like California or New York?

This virus is scary, and it is catching all our attention, because it threatens us with tragedy. If not my death, then the death of someone close to me. Our country is living in a state of anxiety because we are facing something that is not only threatening, but unknown. We can't see it, we can hardly defend against it. Most of those already infected still can't get tested for it. It is a power that is greater than we are, and for that reason it frightens us.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. In a surprising, shocking display of abundant grace, Jesus heals a lifetime of disability, healing the entire, undeveloped seeing apparatus as it extends back into the brain and the connections necessary for the man to understand these sudden new inputs that come with sight, this superpower that everyone else took for granted but he never enjoyed.

So when we look at the COVID-19 virus, we can see something that is powerful, effective, and all-too-often lethal. Something that we cannot adequately defend against. But as Christians, we believe and have discovered that God is even bigger than blindness, even congenital blindness, and God is bigger than any random corona virus. God is bigger than every disease, every evil, every adversary that threatens, right on down to the big ones like guilt and shame and death.

### **3 Who's in charge?**

But here's the interesting thing in our story. The man born blind was the only person with a disability. Right at the very end, the Pharisees, Jesus' favorite antagonists throughout the Gospel of John, ask Jesus, "What? We're not blind, are we?" And Jesus tells them that if they were blind, they would not have guilt or sin, but since they insist they can see, their guilt remains. What's that about?

This is a common theme throughout the Gospels. Who is ready to receive Jesus? Who is willing? Who is willing to recognize Jesus as Lord and Master, not just that nice boy provided wine at his poor cousins' wedding?

There was a blind man, lost in his own need, who heard the voice of Jesus and responded in faith, obedience and hope. There were the religious leaders who heard the voice of Jesus and responded with indignation, defensiveness, and self-protection. The blind man embraced Jesus' overtures of grace; the religious leaders rejected him. The blind man was open, the religious leaders were proud and resistant to change.

This is the story of our lives. Are we the blind man or the religious people? Are we ready to admit our need or do we insist that we're OK? Are we more concerned about responding to Jesus' invitation or about keeping up appearances? Are we more interested in prayer and fellowship appropriate to the season, or showing up in our Sunday best so we can say we went to church?

That's the fascinating thing about the virus. The virus is scary, and it is all people are talking about, because it takes away our power, takes away our sovereignty, takes away our status as competent adults, able to take care of ourselves. We can't see it to ward it off. A chance encounter with someone who has it, or someplace they've been, is all that is required to pass it along. Then some of the strongest among us will become weak. Some of the powerless will be resistant or perhaps asymptomatic. And all of us will be vulnerable.

The virus is a reminder of our weakness, of our need, of our helplessness. Those are not pleasant feelings. But during this season I encourage you to embrace them, to go with them. Because those are the feelings and attitudes that give the lie to our own self-sufficiency and open us up to the Kingdom of God. It's no wonder that "conversion experiences" are so often linked to tragedy.

## **4 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...**

When times are good, nobody much wants a shepherd: we want to do our own thing! When times are difficult, like at a funeral, we turn to the ideas found in Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but I fear no evil. I am not my own shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd.

When it comes to the COVID-19 virus wreaking havoc around the world, we are all blind. It's like the wind: we can't see it coming, only the effects. And by the time those effects are apparent, it's already on the move again.

With a spreading virus and the church's buildings sure to be closed for Easter, this is a season in which our faith is being tested. Fortunately, that means this is a season in which our faith can grow. A season in which our eyes will be opened and our capacity to experience God's super-abundance will be strengthened.

Through our weakness, God's strength will be made apparent. Through our isolation, the world will be changed for the better. Through our doubt and uncertainty, our faith will be renewed.

This is the true bread that comes down from heaven, even in the midst of difficult times.

Behold! The Kingdom of God is near!

**Amen.**