

New Scotland Presbyterian Church
Worship for the Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2020

We come to worship God, because we desire to follow God's way, but we get distracted, and sometimes overwhelmed, by the ways of the world. Jesus lived this human life, understands our challenges, and is always ready to help us. So we come to God first to ask for help with setting aside everything that is a burden.

Opening Prayer

O God, our comforter and guide, we ask for your help with all that comes between us and you. We are often blind to the faults in ourselves that we readily see in others. We look at outward appearances and fail to see what pleases you. We rush toward the temptation of satisfying ourselves without thinking of what is right for others. We deny the truth if it is voiced by people we disdain. Holy God, clear away our confusion and fill us with the light of your truth. Create a clean heart within us and teach us again your most excellent way. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Beloved in Christ, God knows us through and through, and loves us with a love that never ends. God's love enlightens our darkness, and heals our brokenness, and in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Psalm 23 (two ways)

Many of us grew up with the King James Version of this psalm, which is lovely poetry:

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:

for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in
the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Here is the Contemporary English Version:

You, LORD, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.

You let me rest in fields of green grass.

You lead me to streams of peaceful water,
and you refresh my life.

You are true to your name, and you lead me along the right paths.
I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid.

You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.
You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch.

You honor me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows.
Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life,
and I will live forever in your house, LORD.

Psalm 23 in song

Psalms are meant to be sung. Bobby McFerrin published a lovely version of Psalm 23 dedicated to his mother on his CD "Medicine Man." You can listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJixdpZ5m1o>

Gospel Reading: John 9:1-41

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them,

“Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.”²⁵ He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”²⁷ He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.³⁹ Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

Reflection

The first thing to remember in thinking about this gospel lesson is the use of the term “the Jews.” Everyone in this story is of the Jewish faith, so calling out “the Jews” is not about being Jewish as opposed to being some other religion. When John talks about “the Jews” he is talking about the religious leaders. The religious leaders are the ones who are trying to figure out what has happened between the blind man and Jesus. The religious leaders are the ones who are holding the inquiry, and making decisions about who might be banned from the synagogue.

When the neighbors see the man who was formerly blind and cannot understand what has happened to him, they bring him to the religious authorities to get a verdict.

It is interesting to note that all the questioning seems to fall along the lines of looking for someone to blame. A miracle has happened in that this man had his sight restored. But, instead of celebrating the miracle, they are looking to place blame. The rules of the

world have been broken, and everyone wants to understand how such a thing could have happened. All their questions seem to come down to one question: “Who sinned?”

There are several ideas put forth: the parents sinned, the man sinned, the sighted-man is an imposter, the one who healed the blind man (Jesus) broke the Sabbath rules so he must be practicing some kind of black magic (that would make him a sinner). The religious leaders cannot pin anything on the parents, and they cannot figure out what Jesus is up to, so they decide the healed man is the problem, and they drive him out.

When Jesus hears about this, he goes to find the healed man, and he seems to address the question everyone has been pondering: Who sinned? Jesus says the sinners are the ones who remain blind to God’s presence. Sinners are those who refuse to see God’s light reaching into the world’s darkened corners.

That can be a challenge for us. We hear far more about the dark corners, than we hear about God’s light. As we listen to the current news, we may hear people looking to place blame: Why is this happening? Who knew this was happening and didn’t act on it? How long will this last? What will life look like when it is all over?

Jesus says our job is not to ask why or to place blame, but to look for where God is present. What is God doing in the midst of our fear, our upset, our confusion? Because God is with us through all of it.

We may hear various religious leaders give their answers: “God is control and intends for this to happen” – that would make God pretty mean, wouldn’t it? Or, “God created the world and this is just part of how the world works, so we have to figure out how to get through it on our own” – that would make God pretty cold and distant, wouldn’t it?

Jesus came to show us that, above all else, God is with us through every event of human life. The psalm says, even if I’m in a valley “as dark as death ... I will not be afraid.”

We do not have to be afraid because we know that wherever there are shadows, there is also light. Jesus encourages us to see anew. He invites us not to look more and more at the darkness, but to turn and see the light.

Sinners are those who refuse to see God’s light reaching into the world’s darkened corners.

To follow Jesus, we are invited to keep our eyes open for God’s light, even when we would rather turn away to the safety of the dark. Jesus invites us to move beyond asking “Why?” back to Jesus’ call: “How can we do the work of God here and now?”

We are to seek the light, and reflect that light into all the dark places.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Here are prayers members have shared this week:

- ❖ I am giving thanks for all of our blessings, including good health and financial peace during this tumultuous time and simultaneously praying for strength and healing for all who are affected, both directly and indirectly, by COVID-19.
- ❖ I've been praying for Isabel Vincent and now she has passed I pray she is at peace.
- ❖ For our crazy world circumstances.
- ❖ For healthcare workers.
- ❖ I am praying each day for God's help to think and be the best I can be...not my will, but God's will to be done. I want to see God's will in everything. I want to stay informed of all the devastation in this fallen world but remember that we all have a right to be here as we are. I want to be able to see the good in all things and know that God is in control and that includes praying for the sick...we're all sick in some way and need God's healing.
- ❖ I am praying for all who feel lonely and afraid. I pray especially for those who are in nursing homes and assisted living homes. I pray that they will have the healthy caregivers available to them to assist with their needs. I pray that they will not feel abandoned by the world and that they will be safe and not struck by this virus.
- ❖ I pray for the elderly who are in their own homes. That they understand that they should be staying home and that they have the food and medicine they require. I pray that if they have people coming in to help them, that these people are able to stay healthy for everyone's safety.
- ❖ I pray for our own health and for all the people we know and love, that they will stay healthy and safe. May God guide our steps during these times of uncertainty.

Pastoral Prayer

We thank you, O God, for this new day. We give thanks for your grace that comes fresh each day, and for the promise of your presence. When we are troubled by the darkness of our world, and by our personal hurts and losses, and by the pains of everyday living, we are grateful for the awareness that we are not alone, and that you are with us, even in our troubles.

On this day we remember how Jesus healed the man born blind, and we pray for those who cannot see; for those who do not understand your goodness; for those who turn away from your truth. And we ask you, O God, to give us the eyes of faith to be part of your work in this world.

On this day we pray for those who have become lost on life's journey, for those who do not realize we are all connected and can affect one another's lives. We pray for prisoners; for those with addictions to drugs, or alcohol, or gambling, or shopping, or food, or screens, or anything that controls their lives. We pray for those who have lost hope that anything can truly change. We pray for the unloved and unwanted, and those who cannot fend for themselves.

We pray for all who suffer, especially the poor and hungry, the sick and lonely, the homeless, and those whose lives are shattered by violence.

We pray for those who are entrusted with leadership, that they may find your wisdom and your compassion to govern well.

We pray for those who are being targeted, blamed, hurt, or ignored because of this virus. O God, help us to find respect for all persons, to value the relationships that you have entrusted to us, and to follow the example of Jesus in loving you and loving one another. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Offering

Let us give thanks for the many gifts we have, and consider how we can share them with others. Whether it's money, time, attention, a phone call, a text, an e-mail, a smile – there are so many ways we can reach out to others and know we are not alone. We are blessed to be able to connect to one another and to love one another.

Singing Praise

When we sing, we pray twice, so sing this familiar hymn to yourself, or out loud. These are probably the most-sung lines in the last 300 years, so here are both the traditional words, and a second variation:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, you heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God for all that love has done;
Creator, Christ, and Spirit, One.

Benediction and Blessing

Go out into the world in peace; have courage;
 hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak, and help the suffering;
 honor all people; love and serve the Lord,
 rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
And may the love of God go with you, and all those whom you love,
 both this day and always. Amen.