

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
March 15, 2020

Undefeated by Spiritual Blindness

What Do You See?

1. The Lord of Justice?
2. The Lord of Mercy?
3. The Lord of Glory?

John 9



Who sinned?

That's a great question isn't it? Who has caused this COVID-19 crisis? Was it people in China who worked too closely with wild animals? Was it government officials who didn't react soon enough? Is it medical professionals who are overreacting?

It is a tough question that the disciples asked about the man born blind. And at the moment, we are in a time of blindness. What will the future hold? Will the pandemic get worse or will all this effort contain it? How long will our lockdowns last? What is the wisest course of action right now, as a nation, as a church, as individuals?

As someone who looks to the future, it is most disturbing. I am blind to what the future holds. People are asking, "What will happen at Easter?" Four weeks away. My answer, "That's too far into the future. I can't possibly foresee what is going to happen." I've never been this blind before.

In the midst of this crisis, what do you see? If we follow in the footsteps of the disciples in John 9, we shall see **the Lord of Justice**.

"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Bad things happen. This must be punishment for someone's sins.

The church has reacted that way in the past. A pandemic began sweeping through our world in 1981. But this pandemic affected only a segment of our population at the time. The church's response? This is the Lord of Justice. HIV and AIDs was God's judgment on the homosexual community.

What happened? The church heaped judgment on gay men. People who needed the love of Christ more than ever were pushed away from the church. A new community formed in response. Before the AIDs epidemic, gays and lesbians had very little in common. But because the church society rejected them, they formed their own community, their own support groups.

Who was blind? Sadly, the church of that day, the church of which I was a leading part as a pastor. The church was blind to an opportunity God had given us to show mercy.

Brothers and sisters, are we in that setting again today? A new pandemic, this time sweeping across all demographic groups. The natural reaction is to say, “Who sinned?”

I am experiencing that as a leader of an organization. I am guilty of not caring about people. Why? Because we are having services this weekend AND because we are cancelling other things. In the eyes of some, I and the rest of the leaders here at St. Paul’s are the guilty ones. We are causing trouble. The same is true of our state and national elected leaders. People are casting about, looking for someone to blame. Overreaction! Underreaction!

Who sinned? The question comes to our minds just as readily as it did for the disciples.

It isn’t a bad question. It is just that we should be asking that question as we look in a mirror.

The last half of Isaiah’s prophecy is written for a generation that experienced the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Why did this evil come? The common answer? God failed? God is at fault. He didn’t protect us. God’s answer? You are blind to your own sins!

¹⁸ “Hear, you deaf;

look, you blind, and see!

¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant,

and deaf like the messenger I send?

Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,

blind like the servant of the LORD?

²⁰ You have seen many things, but you pay no attention;

your ears are open, but you do not listen” (Isaiah 42:18-20).

Why does God send events like a pandemic into our world and into our personal lives? It is correct to see first of all the Lord of Justice! But rather than ask, “Who else is he calling to repentance?” ask, “Of what is he calling me to repentance?”

Brothers and sisters, God is challenging us: “Who is blind but my servant?” We are so often blind to our own sins. Let this pandemic be a time where we stop pointing fingers of blame at other people or even at God, and instead search our own hearts.

- Where have I taken all of God’s gifts for granted, including the gifts of life and health, financial means and freedom of movement, my career and my abilities?
- Where have I become so busy enjoying these gifts that I have failed to have my God as the number one priority of my life, evident in the way I use my time, in the frequency of my worship, in the way that I give, in the way that I talk with family and friends?
- How has this pandemic showed me that my faith was in my own wisdom to foresee any obstacles and overcome them, rather than trusting in the Lord above all things?

Who sinned? The answer is always this. “I have sinned. I am the blind one.”

Yes, what do you see in the man born blind? What do you see in this pandemic? **See the Lord of Justice!**

But there is more. Jesus said, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

Why did the tragedy of congenital blindness strike this man? It wasn't because of some horrible sin he or his parents committed. It was in this tragedy that we might see **the Lord of Mercy!**

“Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.”

One of the highlights of my last trip to Israel was to see the recent discovery of the remains of the pool of Siloam. It is a powerful reminder to me that this isn't just a made-up story in some magical never-never land. There is a real pool of Siloam, just as I believe there is a real Savior.



Wash?

The command seemed preposterous. Why wash? What good would that do? But the man believed the impossible, and he came home seeing.

How that is like our Savior's command to wash in the waters of baptism! What can baptism do? A little water on the head, or even if you immerse yourself, what can that do?

The man came home seeing. A miracle happened. The Lord of Mercy was revealed.

That is true for us as well. When we daily come here to the waters of our baptism, we wash and we come home seeing. What do we see? We see ourselves as the Lord of mercy sees us. Washed of our sins. Read together with me the command that Jesus gave to the Apostle Paul through the prophet Ananias: “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

Call on his name, the name of the Lord of mercy, who washes your sins away. This is so important for us as we struggle with all the effects of this pandemic. Some of us, perhaps many of us, will get sick. All of us are likely to suffer from the financial fallout of this crisis. Let us see that the Lord of Justice who has opened our eyes to our sins is also the Lord of Mercy who is opening our eyes to the fact that we are forgiven.

This is the first blessing that you can give to others around you. Help them to wash in the waters of baptism. There may be discouragement and despair in the members of your household, among your neighbors, among your co-workers. Invite them to come with you and wash. Invite them to go back to

the promises of their baptisms. When they wonder, “Is God angry with me? Has God forsaken me?” here at the baptismal font we are remind that all our sin and guilt is washed away. We have become God the Father’s dear children. He can no more forsake us than a loving father or mother forsaking their children.

Wash! Invite your neighbors to join you in online worship. People may be more open than ever to hearing the news that our sins are washed away, that they have a Father who is watching over them.

Wash! Then let’s follow up by being the ones who bring physical help to those around us. Let them see the Lord’s mercy in action through us.

Paul’s words to the Galatians comes to mind:

⁷Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Sisters and brothers, at this time more than ever, let us battle against our sinful natures! Let us not become weary in doing good. Let the mercy of Christ wash over our fellow believers and everyone around us as we care for those in need.

Some practical ideas I have seen: Who are those in need?

- Those who get sick or quarantined. Can we bring them food or other supplies?
- Those who have lost their jobs. Can we increase our giving to the Friends in Need fund here at St. Paul’s so that we can be generous? Do you have a RAWKs Fund – a Random Acts of Kindness Fund in your home or small group?
- Those who need help caring for children. Can you reach out through social media and emails that you can provide childcare in your home?
- Those who are lonely. Would you be the one who calls them and texts them and lets them know they are not alone?
- Those who are overwhelmed by these events. Can we be the ones who evoke confidence in the future for we have a God who knows the future?

It is when the Spirit works in each of us personally and in us as God’s church that we will see **the Lord of Glory**.

Later in John 9, Jesus finds the man who was born blind.

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

³⁶“Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

³⁷Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

³⁸Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

May this be a time when the Lord of glory reveals himself in miraculous ways through us? Remember that all things, including pandemics, work together for good to those who love Jesus (Romans 8:28). This too is part of the future that our Savior foresaw. It was in the time of the greatest crises that the Lord used the church to reveal his glory in the past. Yes, let this be that kind of time!

In my mind, the only question is this: “Are we blind too?” This was the question of the Pharisees. They were blind to the Lord of Justice calling them to repentance. They were blind to the Lord of Mercy who was willing to wash their sins away. They were blind to the Lord of Glory who stood in their midst and made a tragedy an opportunity that “the work of God might be displayed.”

The COVID-19 pandemic can make us all blind, overwhelmed. Are we blind too?

May the Spirit work in us that we might remain undefeated by this spiritual blindness. May the confidence of the Apostle Paul in the quarantine of imprisonment be our confidence:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:4-7). Amen.

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My Next Steps to an Undefeated Life

- **Admit your fears:** God’s people have been afraid in the past. Read 2 Chronicles 20:1-30 and work through the GroupWork questions so that the LORD our God calms our fears.
- **Wash!** Memorize Acts 22:16, “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” By faith go back to your baptism and claim again that your sins are washed away.
- **Glorify!** Ask the Lord to open your eyes to opportunities to show love to family members, friends, co-workers and classmates who will be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Let the Savior’s love be evident in your love for those who are in need.

GroupWork

1. Talk about the fears and concerns that people have because of COVID-19. Then pray together this prayer sent out from our church body:

Lord God, our Redeemer and Protector, we come to you seeking the help that only you can give. We ask that you spare people in our country and around the world from any harm to body and soul. Grant healing and comfort to those who may be afflicted with this or any other disease. Be with those who care for the sick and keep them from danger. Give wisdom and steadfastness to our nation's leaders and a spirit of courage and cooperation to our communities. Calm our fears of the unknown. Use your Word to work in us a strong faith and trust in your promise to use all things to work for the good of those who love you. We can be confident in you and your promises in this uncertain and difficult time because of the love and faithfulness you demonstrated in sending your Son to the cross for us and for all people. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on you, our Refuge and Strength. Amen.

2. This is a time of great uncertainty regarding our health and the health of our loved ones as well as the economic fallout. King Jehoshaphat of Judah experienced that kind of uncertainty. Read 2 Chronicles 20:1-30.
 - a. What was the crisis King Jehoshaphat faced?
 - b. People "came together to seek help from the LORD." What phrases stand out to you in Jehoshaphat's prayer in verses 5 – 12?
 - c. The LORD gave Jahaziel a great prophecy (verses 15-17). What promises of the LORD our God comfort you as you think about COVID-19 and its possible effects on you and those whom you love? After sharing your own promises, look up the following and comment on how they can comfort us.

Psalm 145:8-9

Psalm 145:14

Psalm 145:15-16

Psalm 145:18-20

God's promises enabled King Jehoshaphat to meet his enemies with thanksgiving (2 Chronicles 20:20-21). Let us meet the challenges of COVID-19 with that same spirit of thanksgiving, confident that the LORD our God hears and already knows how he will answer our cries for help. Join in reading Psalm 103 as your song of praise.