

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

We are living in strange and unusual times. None of us have ever been through anything on the scale and magnitude of what has swept through the entire world in just a few short weeks. We didn't see it coming. Neither did anyone else. It is an invisible enemy that knows no borders and is indiscriminately striking at every class and type and ethnicity of human beings. Not one human on the planet is exempt from this potential threat now known as COVID-19. Not being able to see the enemy is an additional cause for anxiety. We don't know where it is. We don't know where the 'safe places' are. We don't know when it will strike. And we don't know how to destroy it or even how to do battle with it. Our lives have been disrupted. Most of us are working from home. We can't gather for church or in public gathering places and we don't know when we might be able to hug our friends or family again. Now more than ever, we need to look to the bedrock of our faith. It feels as though we are walking on shifting sand, but we know that underneath that sand is the bedrock of the God who created us and loves us. Now is the time for us to have faith...blind faith...faith that can't be proved, but can be felt. Faith that can move in our hearts and be experienced and move through our being just as God is moving among us now in the midst of the chaos.

There's plenty to be nervous about, but Jesus says to us, "Fear not!" and the angels say to us "Fear not!" and God himself says to us, "Fear not!" As we read the appointed scripture passages for today, we can hear God speaking to each one of us right now and in our current situation. God sees when we cannot. God doesn't look at the outward appearance of a person; God looks at the heart. God showed us that very fact when Samuel went to Jesse to meet his sons and choose the new king for Israel. God told Samuel not to be fooled by outward appearances because that's not what God cares about. God cares about the heart and that's where God looks. And it's from the heart that our own light and God's light shines out in the world and lights the way forward. It's easy right now to dwell on the darkness. It's easy to see darkness all around us. Our fallback position is to be terrified. But

don't stay there. Don't dwell there for long. Jesus says to us, "Do not be afraid!" Do we have the blind faith to follow Jesus?

We were reminded this morning in Psalm 23 about the Good Shepherd. That's Jesus. And we know that Jesus is with us even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And that's what we're all thinking about right now...the valley of the shadow of death. We shall fear no evil for thy rod and thy staff they comfort us. We know that the Lords' goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. At least, that's what we just said together. The Lord Jesus *is* our shepherd. And he will attend to us.

But all of us have wondered...what happens if I get sick? What happens if someone I love gets sick? Where is God if that happens? Doesn't God guarantee that He will guard and protect all the faithful? Isn't it only the 'bad' people on whom gloom and doom descend? Actually, that's not what our faith says. That's not what scripture says. God's promise to keep us safe and in God's care does not mean that we shall never get sick or that we shall never die. It means that our souls will be preserved. Our souls...the very essence of who we are...will not perish...ever!

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus blatantly refutes the popular notion at that time that infirmity is evidence of a person having sinned (or his parents). Infirmity is *not* a punishment from God. Jesus was very clear about that. Infirmity and illness always have been random, apparently. One of the most interesting things about this lesson is the difficulty that the blind man's neighbors had in recognizing him once he was healed. All of us are in need of some form of healing...interior or exterior or both...but even when we do heal, sometimes, those around us continue to see us as infirm. They make it hard for us to heal because 'healed' is not the way they see us and folks are loathe to change their perceptions.

Just because we love God; just because we are faithful; just because we have good hearts and we follow not just the spirit of the law, but the heart of the law as well does not mean that we will be exempt from any suffering in this life. We all know that such a notion is not true. We know the randomness of this life. We know the randomness of evil. We know that God does not always spare us from trials, tribulations, and heartbreak. God did not even

spare his only Son, Jesus from trials and tribulation and heartbreak. Jesus took on our human nature to join *with* us in all those trials and tribulations and heartbreak up to and including death itself. But his great gift to us was his triumph over death.

During this period of Lent, this somber period when we set aside many of the pleasures of this life; when we examine ourselves, our actions, our motives, our own hearts and we seek out God's forgiveness for all our shortcomings, we also know that at the end of this walk through our own wilderness there will be great joy and celebration. We will celebrate the greatest triumph in the history of the creation...Jesus' triumph over death itself and his gift to us of eternal and everlasting life.

So have faith...even blind faith for which there is no proof. There are signs of God all around us: in the first responders, in the doctors and the nurses caring for the sick, in the ingenuity and creativity of citizen soldiers who are working long hours to solve problems and create equipment that we desperately need. We see it in the spontaneous singing of quarantined Italians joining together in solidarity through song. We see it in the burst of color and bloom in nature that is part of the renewal of life in the springtime. The cherry blossoms have never been as beautiful as they are this year. We see it in the army of volunteers who have figured out how to feed hundreds of thousands of hungry people on very short notice with very few resources. It's reminiscent of Jesus' feeding of the 5000. We see it in the dedication and determination of those who want to continue to care for others by developing new skills so that we can remain connected with one another if only in the 2-dimensional computer screen that gives us both sight and sound and the sense that we are 'together' although not in physical contact.

We live in uncertain times. We don't know from day to day what will happen next. There are plenty of things for us to be legitimately anxious about. God knows all that and God remains with us and moves among us as only God can. We can't always see the effects of his presence. Sometimes we don't know until we have moved to a more stable situation the things that God wrought out of the chaos. But we do know that things are changing. We do know that this experience with the invisible enemy known as COVID-19 is wreaking havoc in our world that will change things forever. Our lives have been disrupted. We have been bumped off the perpetual hamster wheel that keeps us spinning both day and night. And

that, we may discover, might be a good thing. For life never again to be the same may actually turn out to be an unexpected blessing. When we are able to see all of this in the rearview mirror, we may be able to identify all the positive changes that have come about. The negative changes will be apparent immediately. And none of this will be without suffering and heartache. But in the end, we know that God loves the creation. We know that God loves us...each one of us...individually and personally. We know that no matter how radically our lives may change, God will never abandon us.

In that spirit I would like to share a poem with you. It was written by Kathleen O'Meara, an Irish Catholic writer living in Paris in the late 1800's; in the late Victorian period....about 150 years ago.

*"And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and grew gardens full of fresh food, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.*

*And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed."*

Even though none of us has been through this before, this is not a new phenomenon for human beings. Those who went before us had fewer resources, fewer creature comforts, fewer ready solutions and the human race continued on.

We will, too!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.