

## **“Questions And Growth”**

By Scott Runyon  
First Baptist Church Birmingham  
March 29, 2020  
Online worship, week 3

John 9

### **Announcements**

#### Online Worship

For the foreseeable future we are going to be holding services online. We are working to make this a meaningful experience by evaluating and retooling weekly using technology that is available to us. There will be glitches along the way related to mistakes as we try brand new things and bandwidth issues from so many people being online at the same time. Thank you for being patient.

#### Online Class

“Finding Purpose In The Desert” continues with the second of two classes taught by Joan Trusty online through Zoom this Wednesday, April 1 @ 7 pm. Connect using the link: <https://zoom.us/j/722778677> or call in for audio at 646-558-8656.

#### Online Groups

We are launching a brand new small group this week called “Unplugged,” who ironically will be plugged into each other through Zoom on Wednesday before Joan’s class.

#### Children & Youth Time

We also are working to get an online children’s time going through Zoom to keep our younger ones connected, and also for our Middle and Senior high students.

We want everyone to have meaningful connections with one another during this season of physical isolation and to have opportunities to grow, rather than simply hibernate and wait.

#### Being the Church in Community

As the Church, we want to be a resource for our community of Birmingham. Earlier this week, I spoke with Tiffany Gunter the Assistant City Manager of Birmingham about ways that we can help with the real needs in the community.

It seems that one specific need is that people are feeling more lonely, isolated, and depressed. I offered as a pastor in the community to be available by phone for people in the community to call whether or not they are connected with any church. I also spread the word to other pastors in the community, some of whom are also making themselves available in this way.

As we discover additional ways to serve those in need around us, we will organize to make it happen.

## **Introduction**

Now, let us turn our attention together toward God as the one who holds us together as a community and gives us purpose. Let us breathe together...

Often we think of the space of the physical church building as sacred — that the beauty of the architecture and even the decorations exemplify the glory and majesty of God — that God's presence can be found there and we can encounter God in that space. However, I want to remind you that God has made all things and all spaces sacred.

## **Prayer**

*Dear God, meet us today in the sacred space of our living rooms, kitchens, hallways, basements, porches, and bedrooms. We can feel isolated in these common places where we are spending more time in recent times. Remind us of your love. Remind us of your care. Remind us of others who are present with us through these times. Remind us that we are not alone. Remind us how your Holy Spirit binds us together over distance and through technology. Help us now to be present with one another and to see how you are working. In your holy name, Amen!*

This morning, I invite us into the sacred space of our own living

rooms, your kitchens, bedrooms. It feels familiar to us, ordinary to us, and yet all things are sacred in God's world — so consider wherever you are right now to be your sanctuary, a safe place to explore your faith and to encounter God, even now with connection to others through the internet.

Listen now to some encouraging words from the Psalms.

## **Focus On Worship**

### **Psalm 121 (NRSV)**

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.  
He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade at your right  
hand.  
The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.*

## **Community Prayer**

During this prayer time, I invite you to un-mute yourselves that we might pray together. During the prayer, I will invite you to pray about different groups of people and I will leave some space for you

to share a name, offer a prayer out loud or silently before going on to the next part of the prayer. At the end of this prayer time, I invite you to pray the Lord's Prayer with me in whatever version is familiar to you. If you are unfamiliar with the Lord's Prayer, it is okay to simply listen.

Now, let us align our lives with the heart of God.

God, together from different places we unite our minds and hearts in you. We acknowledge that we have been distracted lately by news reports, and a dramatic change of our routines. We are concerned about our safety and the safety of those we love. We are also caught in the spin of an unknown future like those ancient children of yours who survived in slavery in Egypt and cried out to you "How long will we have to endure this?" Meet us here and be near to us in this season of isolation.

We acknowledge that our economy and your economy are different. Ours depends on consumers buying products and businesses employing people, and the trade of goods. It is about making money and using that money to buy what we need and want. We struggle in this economy sometimes with fear about what we don't have that we

might need and going without those things that we want.

But God, your economy is full of abundance. It is full of compassion. It is full of generosity. It is full of peace. It is full of hope. And it is full of love. Help us today to shift our attention off of our economy and onto your economy where there is no deficiency and all have enough.

May the abundance of your economy today be available to those in pain in countries that are being torn apart by the Coronavirus: those in Italy, China, Spain, Germany, Iran, France, throughout the UK, and throughout the world. We bring these brothers and sisters of ours to you.

Pause

May your economy of abundance be with the health care workers, and emergency personnel, police officers, and others who are in harms way daily throughout the United States right now. We bring these brothers and sisters of ours to you.

Pause

Today God, bring the abundance of your economy to those who need you in difficult and unsafe situations in hospitals and homes

in Michigan, in particular southeast Michigan. We bring these brothers and sisters of ours to you.

Pause

We also pray this morning for our friends and family who are struggling today in fear or worry because of the Coronavirus. Some of them are out of work and don't have the money they need to pay bills. Some are dealing with other issues in their private lives or feeling lonely and isolated. We bring these our brothers and sisters to you.

Pause

God, now we ask that you meet us exactly where we are today in whatever pain we feel, in whatever fear we harbor, in whatever anxiety we can't seem to shake. May your economy of compassion, generosity, peace, hope, and love comfort and transform us. We give ourselves into the abundance of your economy.

Pause

Now in unison with our brothers and sisters throughout this world let us pray the prayer you taught your disciples and are teaching us now.

### **Lord's Prayer**

*Our Father, who is in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into a time of trial but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen!*

### **Scripture Reading**

#### **John 9:1-12 (NRSV)**

*As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 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, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept*

*saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."*

## **Message**

As the story goes on in the rest of chapter 9, we find this man who was once blind and now can see is growing by taking his first steps of faith.

At first, all he knew was that he once was blind, but then a man named Jesus put some mud in his eyes and asked him to wash in a pool and then he could see. That's it. That's all. All he knows are these simple facts.

Unfortunately for him ... or perhaps fortunately, he got in the middle of the whirlwind of the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus. I say this may have been a good thing because it is in this turmoil that he takes his next steps in faith.

It is the conversation that comes to him, the questions directed at him, and the people who want to hear his story that propel him deeper into a new faith.

Isn't this the case for us as well? When things are running along smoothly, we seldom have the opportunity to grow in our faith. But when things are tough, when our faith is challenged, when CoVid-19 hits, and when we go through trials of many kinds, this is when our faith is challenged and we grow stronger.

We have this opportunity now, but more on that in a minute.

The disciples ask a question about the cause of the man's blindness, was it because of his sin or his parents'? Jesus goes a different direction with the question. Neither, he says, because it is the wrong question. They are looking for blame, while Jesus is leading the blind man and his disciples toward freedom.

Then the man is brought before the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees and questioned two different times. Now the Pharisees clearly have an agenda to trap Jesus, but even so, as he is questioned the man begins to consider that perhaps the person who healed him might be a great teacher, a prophet even, that others might want to follow. That probably never dawned on him before.

While being questioned, the man digs deeper and begins understanding God in new ways. As he is directed back time and again to his own personal experience by the Pharisees, it strikes him that God listens to those who worship God. So, Jesus, he concludes, must be from God, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to heal him.

Then, at the end of this story Jesus seeks out and finds the man who has been interrogated and even insulted by the professional religious leaders. Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man.

The man still hasn't figured things out, although he is always engaged in the inquiry. So he takes his curious mind to Jesus asking who is this Son of Man? Jesus then reveals himself as God in the flesh, the Messiah from God, and the formerly blind man now declares his belief in God and begins to worship Jesus.

The openness the man exhibits is contrasted with the disciples who are stuck in an old frame of mind that someone needs to be blamed for the man's blindness. This leaves them blind.

The man's openness to explore his faith is also contrasted with the religious leaders who thought they

had a corner on faith and possessed all the answers. Those religious leaders end the story stuck in the same place as they began, without growing one bit.

But this formerly blind man's life has now been completely transformed.

The difference for the blind man, and us, is in the openness to continue asking questions without preconceptions, as if we are brand new at faith and can be continually surprised. This leads to an ongoing exploration of faith.

A deepening and growing faith has everything to do with being real and authentic about our experience, accepting what it is and what it isn't. Next steps in faith are taken when we ask the real and often difficult questions that rest on our hearts. It is about holding an open space within us to discover the answers ... or perhaps to find new questions.

This is the path of faith. This is the journey of transformation!

In the current world of CoVid-19, many of us have lots of extra time on our hands to contemplate life and our place in it. We have time to re-evaluate our careers, our relationships, and our life direction.

We have the opportunity now to face squarely the questions that we have been stuffing below the surface because they have troubled us. If those questions remain below the surface, they will control us. When we bring them to the surface and ask them, we gain power and, even if the questions are not completely resolved, because we have honestly asked them, we can be free, and we have the opportunity to grow.

This is one of the blessings of social isolation.

## **Offering**

It is not surprising that since we have been doing online worship, our offering has decreased. This was expected. However, many of you made a commitment to give and want to follow through with that commitment. Others of you might consider for the first time supporting the critical mission of this church in this season of crisis. I invite you to listen for how God might be leading you to give. There are two ways to give financially.

1. Write out and mail a check to the church: First Baptist Church  
Birmingham • 300 Willits Street •  
Birmingham, MI 48009.

2. Visit the church website [www.FirstBaptistBirmingham.org](http://www.FirstBaptistBirmingham.org) and click the “donate” link at the top of the page and use your debit or credit card to give. On this page you can make your offering a one-time or recurring monthly donation. If you have any difficulty with giving electronically, please include a note in the comments, send me a private message or call me and I’ll get someone to help you.