

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 22, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

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

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

I want to invite you to imagine a scene from the first of the original Star Wars movies. It's the scene where R2-D2 and C-3PO land on Tatooine, fleeing from Imperial forces. They get out of the escape pod and split up, walking opposite directions.

C-3PO waves at a large vehicle on the horizon while R2-D2 slips through a dark gulch. The droid creeps slowly, knowing it's being watched. R2-D2 is just a robot, and yet the droid seems terrified. Rightly so. For it's not long before the scavenging Jawas claim it as their prize.

Psalm scholar Richard Bruxvoort Colligan suggested we think of a scene like that when we hear this morning's Psalm. He says that "the valley of the shadow of death" may have been an actual location, so we should think of something real when we hear that line from the 23rd Psalm. If I mention the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, an image pops in our head. The valley of the shadow of death is real: possibly an actual geographical spot; experientially real in any event. ⁱ

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...

That feels like a familiar landscape to us now. We call it COVID-19 ... coronavirus.

The Psalmist names the fearful place not to terrify, but to reassure. We can trust the shepherd who will stay with us ... in green meadows and beside restful waters, sure, and also in the darkest valleys, amidst Jawas and sand people. And even now, amidst a viral pandemic.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of [COVID-19], I will fear no evil;
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*

Fear. And trust. They vie for our attention this morning in life, as they do in both in the Psalm and in that wonderful story told by John in this morning's gospel.

In that story, fear seems the dominant force.

The disciples see someone "blind from birth," and out of fear, they ask, "Why?"

Now "why" isn't necessarily a bad question. We would be much worse off without people asking such questions today. Why did this virus come about? Why does it do what it does?

It frightens us, so researchers are looking for treatments, scrambling to come up with a vaccine. And because we should be afraid, we're told to maintain physical distance and do what will keep us safe. (That's why I'm preaching in an empty church.)

But fear can do harm. The disciples don't ask merely "Why?"; they ask "who sinned?"

Jesus rejects the question out of hand. He rejects the idea that bad things happen because the victims were bad, or because the devil did it, or because people don't have enough faith, or because they didn't pray properly, or whatever cockamamie theories they come up with.

Because it's a short trip from asking if it was the man or his parents who sinned to looking for someone to blame. Fear gives rise to blame and scapegoating in this story, as well.

The religious authorities are afraid of what they cannot explain. And so they interrogate both the man and his parents – expecting to find someone to blame. The leaders bluster and threaten to punish whoever is at fault. Out of fear, the man's parents abandon him to the wolves. (It's the most heart-breaking moment in the whole story, as far as I'm concerned.)

And in the end, the fearful leaders drive the man from his community, presumably imagining it's for the best for all concerned. If it happened in the church today, we'd say they'd excommunicated him. (And though we cannot gather physically together here this morning, I trust you know you're not excommunicated.)

Pay attention to the fear that pervades this story. Give it its due.

{PAUSE}

And then pay attention to Jesus moves throughout this story of fear and intimidation.

I see him showing us a better way. The disciples ask him who sinned? And Jesus says:

Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him ...

Oh, but that's not helpful. It sounds like God made the man blind for all his life just so Jesus could come along and give him sight. But I'm persuaded we should've heard this instead:

Neither this man nor his parents sinned.

Period. Full stop. Paragraph break.

Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." And then (in the next paragraph) Jesus continues:

But so that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of the one who sent me ...

The point is nobody sinned. And now that we find ourselves in this situation, we have work to do.

Eugene Peterson's translation gets it right, I think:

Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here ..."

The point is that God isn't at the front-end, causing bad things to happen. God isn't sitting in heaven passing out birth defects and earthquakes and coronaviruses. No, God is in the middle of the mess, in the worst parts of it – looking to us to help find a way forward.

"WE must work the works" of God, Jesus says. We must do these things for God. We must do them for our neighbors. We must do them for love, the perfect love that casts our fear, for as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is fond of saying, "If it isn't about love, it isn't about God."

And the love of God is what Jesus shows in the final scene of this morning's gospel, as well. After the man is driven out, Jesus seeks him out; Jesus seeks out the excommunicant. Jesus – out of love – seeks out the one who is cut off from his community.

On social media this past week, my sister-in-law, Carol posted:



“Yes,” she says. And I say, “Absolutely.”

And Jesus is our exemplar of love, of “caremongering” in the face of “fearmongering.”

Fearmongering shrinks the world down to what threatens us and our need to protect ourselves, at the expense of others. Fearmongering blinds us to the needs of our neighbors. Fearmongering obscures the bigger picture all around. Fearmongering limits our focus to nothing more than here and now.

But love will help us see others. Caremongering will show us our neighbors. Caremongering will open in us a larger sense of community. Caremongering will help us comprehend the bigger picture – and our place in it. Caremongering will empower us to step with confidence into the unknown.

Where have we seen such caremongering these days?



Medical folk and first responders. They're my heroes these days. They're on the front lines, caring for those in need, putting themselves at inevitable risk. They have families, too, and yet they go out and serve on a daily basis. Likely concerned about what's yet to come, terrified maybe, but still they serve.

And how can we – the rest of us, that is – engage in acts of caremongering these days?

Well, we're doing it right now. Staying home is an act of caremongering. It runs counter to our noblest desires. We want to be together. We want to "be there" to offer support and care. But we know the best thing we can do – the most loving thing we can do – is give up what we want to do for the sake of others and for the welfare of the world.

And we will have countless opportunities in the days and weeks and months to come:

- Reaching out to one another – even while we keep our distance – is an act of caremongering. No, we cannot stop by for a cup of coffee. We cannot go out to lunch. But we can drop someone a note or make a call.
- Washing our hands is an act of caremongering. Our Presiding Bishop made the point last Sunday in his sermon at the National Cathedral. "At the molecular level," he said, "soap breaks things apart. At the level of society it may well hold things together." ⁱⁱ
- Responding, not knee-jerk reacting, to our neighbors is an act of caremongering. Cut the folks on the road a little slack, even if they cut you off (or act like a jerk!). We're all in this. We're all feeling the stress of it.

And while you're at it, take a little time to acknowledge the service of those who attend to us as we venture out to buy groceries or stop off at the bank. They're serving on the front lines as well. Take an extra moment to say thanks to ALL those who serve. As I've already said, we're in this together. We're all feeling the stress of it.

- Supporting a local business can be an act of caremongering. They've had to lay off staff, no doubt. But they won't be around to hire them back again if they don't make it through the current crisis.
- Noticing the most vulnerable in our neighborhoods – and figuring out what to do for them – is an act of caremongering. As hard as it is for us who feel trapped in homes, how much harder it must be to have no home to call safe.
- Caring for ourselves – and our loved ones at home – is an act of caremongering. Be gentle at home. (Sometimes the preacher needs the sermon ... the reminder that my worries matter – and so, too, the concerns and dreams and fears and aspirations of those we too-easily take for granted.) Take care of one another; take care *with* one another. Be gentle at home.

This list is, of course, merely suggestive. What does caremongering look like for you?

The calling is to pay attention to our fears. Notice what clamors for our attention. Yes, the fear and anxiety is in your thoughts and on your heart. Give it its due. And then look for a better way, the way of Jesus, the way of love.

Notice the fear. Then choose love. As Michael Curry told us last week, “love really is the way. God’s love, and our lived love for each other. Love can heal and help when nothing else can. Love can life up and liberate when nothing else will.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yes, there is much to fear. And so many opportunities to love. Choose love.

ⁱ Richard Bruxvoort Colligan, in podcast episode #370 @ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent4a>.

ⁱⁱ Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/03/15/in-livestreamed-national-cathedral-eucharist-presiding-bishop-preaches-on-the-simple-power-of-soap-and-love/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/03/15/in-livestreamed-national-cathedral-eucharist-presiding-bishop-preaches-on-the-simple-power-of-soap-and-love/>.