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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A14
4 Lent (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist Mostly Online
Sunday 22 March 2020

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

Seeing, Belonging, Becoming in the Days of Coronavirus

"For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light..." (Ephesians 5).

How do you see things differently now? As coronavirus fear takes hold, and society shuts down, what is changing in you? I have three chapters on seeing, belonging and becoming.¹

1. Seeing. Annie Dillard writes that, "Seeing is... a matter of verbalization. Unless I call attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it. It is as [John] Ruskin says, "not merely unnoticed, but in the full and clear sense of the word, unseen.""²

Dillard describes what happened when surgeons first learned how to perform safe cataract operations to give sight to dozens of people of all ages who had been blind from birth. Many doctors tested their patients' sense perceptions before and after the surgery. They found that the vast majority of patients had no sense of space at all. They fundamentally did not understand the idea of form, distance, size or depth. The world just looked like flat patches of vivid color to them.

Before the operation the doctor would give the patient a cube or a sphere to hold. After the surgery they were showed the same object, but it seemed unrecognizable unless they could touch it. When the doctor asked a girl how big her mother was she held her index fingers a few inches apart. One newly sighted person played a game with herself of tossing a boot on the floor and then trying to guess how far away it was.

Some patients were terrified by the tremendous size of a world that previously seemed manageable and touchable. They felt overwhelmed by the effort required to comprehend everything new. Others experienced an uncomfortable new self-consciousness. They felt ashamed of what others had been seeing in them all along.

A disturbing number of patients wanted to return to being blind or simply refused to use their new sense. One girl, whose father had longed for the operation, never seemed happier than when she would carefully shut her eyes as she walked around her house. A

doctor wrote about, "the rapid and complete loss of that striking and wonderful serenity which is characteristic of those who have never seen."

At the same time many who gained their sight so profoundly relished their new visual experience that they help us to not take its wonders for granted. Although our hands are mostly invisible to us, one patient marveled at it. She described it as, "something bright and then holes." A little girl visiting a garden paused, speechless standing in front of a tree. As she touched it she called it, "the tree with the lights in it."³

A twenty year old girl was so dazzled by the world's brightness that she kept her eyes shut for two weeks. At the end of that time she opened her eyes with an expression of such joy and astonishment, as she kept repeating, "Oh God! How beautiful!"

2. Belonging. What we see arises out of how we belong. This is true of what we see physically and what we see spiritually. We might forget that this is part of the philosopher Plato's (423-347 BC) point in his book *Republic*. He gives us that memorable image of prisoners confusing shadows on the back of their cave for reality. Plato wants us to understand that the ruling elite construct our shared reality and maintain it for their own purposes. They try to determine how we will all see.⁴

Just prior to our Gospel story, Jesus has come into severe conflict with the authorities over exactly this issue. The argument gets so heated that they try to kill him right there but he escapes into hiding (Jn. 8:59).

Then walking along Jesus meets someone who is invisible to nearly everyone, a blind beggar. Like us, from childhood he has been socialized. He has been taught to believe in a particular picture of the world, that our health is determined by our own sinful actions or those of our parents. His society regards him as unclean and he probably sees himself in that way too.

We might think that we have grown out of this way of thinking. But as events unfold around the coronavirus I am sure we will continue to hear people who want to blame and scapegoat others for our suffering. I refuse to believe that our Chinese brothers and sisters are responsible for this no matter who it is that accuses them.

The religious leaders ask Jesus, "who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?" This is not just about politics. It also reminds me of people who cannot believe in God because of the suffering that they see. Jesus replies that it does not help to ask why the man was born blind. Instead we should be looking for a way to do God's work.

Jesus spits in the dirt, makes it into clay, puts it on the blind man's eyes and asks him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Through this baptism this man is completely transformed. He is reborn not just physically but spiritually. For him the world is no longer a place in which God punishes people with blindness, or where we have to accept the judgment of leaders who continually assert their own superiority over others. His identity has changed too. He's not the blind man any more. He's not the beggar, but a new person who can see the truth and has the confidence to confront authorities. And this makes him unrecognizable to nearly everyone.

There is too much to say about this. To maintain their false picture of an all-embracing sacred order the religious leaders threaten the parents with expulsion from the synagogue. Ultimately these authorities give up their argument with the blind man. They want to put him back in the box saying that he was born in sin. They excommunicate him. But by this time everything is clear.

Jesus finds him and points out the obvious. Jesus has come, "for judgment so that those who do not see may see and those who see may become blind" (Jn. 9).

3. Becoming. Seeing and belonging ultimately lead us to the truth, the Holy One, the source of all things. As the coronavirus threatens our souls, as fear grips the people around us, as the foundations of the social order appear to be melting, people of faith have an invisible source of consolation. The Christian tradition reminds us what it was like when we went through times like these before.

About once in every generation from the 1340's to the 1600's Christians faced the plague. Imagine life for St. Catherine of Siena when between early spring and the end of August in 1493 four-fifths of the population died. Someone wrote, "for this illness seemed to strike through the breath and the sight." There were not enough survivors to bury the bodies.⁵

Great mystics of these dangerous times have contributed to our spiritual DNA. At the gate of death, in an almost fatal illness, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) came so close to God that we still remember the words that moment inspired. She wrote about the power of divine love to be everything for us saying, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."⁶

The great preacher Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) taught that the, "seed of God is in us," that we were created for union with God. He believed that the capacity for outer vision is so nurtured by the distractions of life that it is over-developed. While our inward or spiritual vision is correspondingly weak.

Eckhart believes that we identify ourselves with the wrong things – with our status or reputation. Our ego needs seem insatiable. And our soul is so busy with frivolous details. But God’s love draws us toward the Divine. And when we strip away the clutter we find ourselves at the self that understands its being is from God. He writes, “Grace is not a stationary thing; it is always found in becoming.”

Finally, Eckhart says, “when this birth really happens no creature in all the world will stand in your way, and what is more, they will all point you to God... Indeed, what was formerly a hindrance becomes now a help. Everything stands for God and you see only God in all the world.”⁷

A month ago coronavirus seemed like a problem for far distant peoples. Today we are sheltering in place, talking constantly about superspreaders, flattening the curve, social distancing and the supply of ventilators as the global economy melts down.

Stay at home. Prepare yourself and those around you for the worst. But also, remember that we do not experience the world as it is but only through the stories that give us meaning.⁸

Be baptized. Be reborn. Use this sabbath time to see more deeply into reality, into this vast, beautiful and colorful world. Stretch your picture of belonging more widely to recognize what we did not quite notice before, that without exception the whole human family is one. Become more fully alive in God.

We did this before. So let God’s works be revealed in you. Live as children of light. All will be well.

¹ Only a month ago coronavirus seemed like a distant concern, a reason to feel sympathy for people in faraway places. Before the breakout in Northern Italy and Washington State we went about our business and planned for the future. We had parties like Carnivale and Alan Jones’ 80th Birthday not realizing that we were a step away from a shocking abyss, on the brink of a dizzying precipice.

Three weeks ago it felt like we had suddenly entered a new age. In my entire life we have always offered wine with bread at communion. For the first time in our memories we told vulnerable people not to come to church and did not drink wine. People faithfully came here and it seemed as if that was how church might be for a while.

Two weeks ago we agonized over the decision to close the Cathedral for all events except solitary, private prayer. We moved everything including worship online. Last Sunday a handful of us tried to sing loudly in an empty Cathedral. Then on Monday city authorities announced that we had to shelter in place and not leave our houses.

The number of COVID-19 cases in New York increased tenfold over last week and that city’s hospitals are showing the first signs that they may soon be overwhelmed. Now we all know what it means to flatten the curve, to practice social distancing, to constantly worry for ourselves and our homeless neighbors. We

know how many respirators there are on hand in California. The stock market has crashed, oil prices dropped 60% and millions of ordinary people cannot work or get paid.

Millions of children isolated from each other are bored at home. On Twitter a parent trying to teach children at home exclaimed, "Teachers should be paid a zillion dollars!" Suddenly grocery stores seem like dangerous places and healthcare workers are our heroes. I read instructions on how to wash your hands and how keep corpses until they are ready to be buried.

² This summary of results in Marius von Senden's book *Space and Light* comes from: Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (NY: Harper & Row, 1974) 25-34.

³ One girl couldn't wait to tell her friend that, "[people] do not look really look like trees at all."

⁴ Much of this section comes from Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 249-259.

⁵ Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 199.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 191-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 194-7.

⁸ Like the cataract patients blind from birth you have the chance to see the world in a new way. We can spend all our energy resisting this new condition. We can dwell endlessly on whose fault it is. We can see the world as a dead and meaningless waste, filled with clean and unclean people. We can try to solve our problems by banning and excluding those who are different.