

# Lent: During a Time of Isolation

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

John 9:1-41    *Philippians 4:6-8.*  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Hello, and welcome to virtual worship here at College Hill Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I'm the Rev. Todd Freeman, and I have the honor to serve this community of faith as pastor. After preaching to an empty sanctuary last Sunday, and simply the posting a print version of the sermon online, there was a growing consensus that it would be meaningful and uplifting to the entire congregation if we added some video. So, today is our first effort at that, and we decided to start simply. Therefore, I ask for a bit of grace as we try to figure all of this out.

As a way of introduction, let me share with you words of the apostle Paul from *Philippians 4:6-8*.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. **Do not worry (or be anxious) about anything**, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

We are living in what will forever be considered a monumental moment in world history. It's beyond shocking to see how the world has changed in just the past few weeks. There's not a community, let alone a person, anywhere whose life hasn't been disrupted in some way or another.

While it's never wise to tell others how to feel or think, there are a few commonalities that I expect are affecting us all. Many people, including myself, have been feeling anxious, deeply concerned, confused, a bit fearful, and wondering just what is our purpose in life at this very moment. As I mentioned last Sunday, our first Sunday of not gathering together, self-isolation is good now and then, and an absolute requirement for us introverts. Forced-isolation, however, is proving to be quite a strain on us all. And many people, again including myself, can let expectations of what we think we "should" be doing during this time lead to a sense of being overwhelmed. Perhaps it would be good for each of us to simply repeat the mantra, "I am enough."

As a pastor, one of the things I find it important to reflect upon is: Where is God in all of this? **Theologically and spiritually, I personally do not believe God is the cause and author of any tragedy, including what we are experiencing in the midst of this worldwide coronavirus pandemic. But I do believe that we can and should look for ways in which we experience how God is Present and at work in and through this crisis.**

And wouldn't you know, today's assigned lectionary Gospel reading for this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent is a story that can really help us put some of this into focus. It's a very long story, John 9:1-41. I encourage you to look it up and read it in its entirety. I'll only be referring to parts of it in this sermon. It starts like this, "As Jesus 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?**'" **The disciples reflect what it still an all-too-common judgment. If someone is suffering or ill, then someone must have sinned.** Therefore, the malady must be connected to God's judgment and punishment. And if this is the case, then who are we to interfere with God's will? Why get over-concerned about anyone who's poor circumstances in life can be justified, therefore allowing the rest of us to distance ourselves from the afflicted. **If people deserve their fate, then we can ignore their suffering.** And yes, there are still voices out there, thankfully less than usual it seems, that believe God had a hand in this new coronavirus, COVID-19 to those who have been infected, to get our attention and teach us a lesson.

Well, let's get back to the biblical story and see what Jesus has to say about such a misguided understanding of the nature and character of God. "Jesus answered, '**Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.**'" **The man's blindness is, in fact, not the result of his nor his parents' sin. Whatever the cause, however, Jesus can use it to reveal the work of God.** So, instead of judgment and social distancing, Jesus made an occasion for grace, healing, and inclusion. We learn that this may indeed help guide us during this time when all of our normal routines have been disrupted as the result of this viral pandemic.

**Where can we, you and I, see God at work in our lives at this very moment?** I think one obvious answer is that we are faced with an occasion to express more radical care and compassion for others. We are making strong efforts to actually be more intentional about reaching out and connecting with others emotionally and spiritually, though not physically for the foreseeable future. And while many of us are simply inconvenienced from our normal routine at the moment, we are witnessing what Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, stated this week, "**Those already on the edge are being pushed closer to falling off.**"

"Families experiencing food insecurity are stressing about what it means for schools to close and the source of their children's breakfast and lunch with it. The part of our economy that doesn't extend to those who have no health insurance, no paid sick leave, no safety net, is revealing how perilously many of our neighbors, if not us, live."

We are all deeply concerned about those who are paid as hourly wage earners, those who live pay check to pay check, those businesses that have been forced to close, and certainly for those who are sick, and the elderly who are especially vulnerable and increasingly isolated. But also at this time **we must be concerned for those already marginalized or living in poverty.** In other words, "**too many of God's children are already isolated, socially distanced, walked over, unseen, and left out.** Jesus tells us in this text that their circumstances are decidedly not a result of their sin and ought instead to be an occasion to reveal the loving, healing, compassionate work of God."

As the church, God is working in and through us right now to pray for and reach out to the most vulnerable, the most easily disregarded in our community, and also for those on the front lines of this pandemic – our health care workers who are already exhausted and stretched, those who depend upon the travel industry, those parents

struggling with what it means to care for their children during this time of isolation, and the list continues and is long and differs from one community to the next.

**God is working in and through this crisis to remind us how connected we really are, even how interdependent we are as a human family. God is also working in and through the fact that we are all more aware of and are indeed experiencing, as the apostle Paul reminds us, when one of us suffers, we all suffer.** It may sound strange to say, but suffering can actually lead to deeper connections – to others and to God, and to countless small moments of grace and expressions of love. God's healing love is at work right now.

**As we prayerfully discern how to do ministry virtually or remotely, let's think about and stay connected with one another like never before. But let us also remember those for whom isolation and social distance has been the norm, not the exception.** Let us see them, as well as each other, and ask God to reveal to us how we can extend the healing and inclusive love of Christ.

And during our isolation may we have a growing knowledge and experience that **we are not alone**. May you experience the reality of God's Sacred Presence *with you, within you*, and know that God is always *for you* – for the entire human family, indeed for all of creation.

Peace, comfort, hope, and blessings to you!  
Amen.