

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.

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About 15 years ago, Nicholas and I went to the Tampa Theatre to see a film called *Into Great Silence*. It is a documentary about the everyday lives of a community of Carthusian monks living in a monastery high in the French Alps. It has no spoken commentary or added sound effects. It consists of the actual images and sounds of monastic life over the course of a year. It was originally proposed to the monks by the film maker, Philip Groning, in 1984. They said they would think about it. In 2000 (sixteen years later), they contacted Groning to say they had thought about it and were willing to participate if he was still interested.

At the end of the film, there is an interview with an elderly monk who is blind. When asked how his blindness had affected his life in the monastery, he replied very simply that he thanked God for it, because it had enabled him to see more clearly.

The contrast between sight and blindness, light and darkness, is at the heart of the very long and vividly recounted story from John's Gospel that you just heard, the story of a man born blind who regains his sight, presented in contrast to others who were born with sight and yet were unable to see what was right in front of them.

The first group with trouble seeing are the neighbors. They had seen this man many times, as he sat asking for alms. But they don't recognize him.

"Is it him? Could be. No, it's someone who looks like him."

They had looked at him on a regular basis, he was from their village, but they had not seen him as a person, only as a disability, part of the scenery as it were.

Next up are the Pharisees—they are blinded by their rigid interpretation of the law. All they can think about is the fact that this healing miracle took place on the sabbath. No righteous person would do something like that on the sabbath, they say; Jesus must be a sinner. In spite of the walking, talking evidence right before their eyes, they fail to see God's power at work in their midst—because it's the wrong day.

Even the man's parents, who are obviously not confused about his identity, are afraid to see that something has happened that clearly transcends the authority of the Pharisees and any laws about sabbath observance. They see nothing. "Ask him," they say, "he's an adult, he can speak for himself." They can't take the risk of being excluded from their synagogue community by admitting that some sort of messianic event might have taken place.

The very light of the world has come into their community and revealed God's grace, and none of them can see it, except the man born blind. He is the one who bears witness to the transformative power of God to overcome blindness and darkness and create new possibilities.

We think we can see, but we miss so much. We say that seeing is believing, but like the disciples, the neighbors, the Pharisees and the parents in John's story, we often don't believe even when we see—because it's often easier to live in the darkness rather than open our eyes to the blinding light of God's presence in our midst.

There is a lot of discussion of sin in this story. Jesus's disciples believe the blind man's disability was a result of sin—they are just not sure whose. The Pharisees believe Jesus is the sinner because he healed the man on the sabbath, a violation of Jewish law in their eyes. In the end, the formerly blind man is deemed a sinner and is driven out of his community. But Jesus opens his arms to the man, affirms him, and pronounces judgment.

And Jesus's last comment is our takeaway from this story: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

We cannot claim the vision and ignore what it reveals to us.

But if we stay in the dark, we don't have to see all the suffering and pain around us, and we can avoid the challenge of God's call to respond with love and healing. But Jesus did not come to let us remain in the dark. The light of the world came to banish the darkness. Once we see and acknowledge Jesus, we are no longer free to be blind. As followers of Jesus, we are called to see what is before our eyes: the hungry, the homeless, the terrorized, the marginalized, all the suffering of the global pandemic. We cannot ignore those in need.

The theme of sight versus blindness is also in the Old Testament story of Samuel and David. Samuel, sent by God to anoint a new king from among the sons of Jesse in Bethlehem, takes one look at Eliab, Jesse's eldest son who is tall and handsome, and assumes he is to be the successor to King Saul. A sort of beauty contest follows with God rejecting all seven of the older sons in favor of young David, the kid brother, the teenage shepherd who was not even considered as a candidate.

And David, as its purported author, is also our connection to the psalm appointed for today. The 23rd psalm is probably the best known of them all, and it seems very appropriate.

Life in the midst of a pandemic seems very much like a walk through the valley of the shadow of death. There is risk, and threat, and danger—to us and to those we love. But even in this valley, we are kept safe by God's capacity to guard, protect, and eventually transform. The timing of this pandemic, to coincide with Lent, is ironic—although it becomes clearer by the day that the 40 days of Lent will be over long before we say goodbye to COVID-19.

We have seen a great deal of blindness, both intentional and unintentional, in recent weeks—an inability to see the scope and magnitude of what is happening around us

and to understand the significant damage that will result. We take so much for granted, which is what makes it so hard to see the reality when things begin to fall apart. As this pandemic continues, the ways that our society has failed the vulnerable will be more visible to us. Not everyone can afford to stock up on food and soap in advance. People who rely on hourly wages may have those hours cut because of closures. Some may be out of work all together. Our local school districts are scrambling to feed children whose families cannot. Our guests at the Faith Cafe are forced to eat lunch in the street because the dining room is closed, and the neighbors we serve at Love INC must wait in uncertainty as ministries shut down for the duration of the emergency.

Grocery shelves are emptying. Churches are closing. Confirmed cases are growing in number. States of emergency are being declared. The stock market is plummeting. There is no end in sight. We are like the disciples in the boat with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee when a great storm rose up. Our fragile vessels are threatened by waves and winds we cannot control or predict.

As their boat tossed at sea, the disciples asked the question that Fr Connelly posed last week: *“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”* God, don’t you hear our prayers? Do you really love us after all? And, as Fr Connelly told us, the answer is still YES!

While fear wants us to believe we are alone, faith knows differently. The disciples not only have each other in that boat, they also have Jesus. When all seems lost, Jesus stretches his arms out over the tumultuous waters and says to the sea, “Peace! Be still.” He was with them, and he is with us too.

Yes, fear is a natural response. And faith in God does not bring you safety. These are still dangerous times. Danger is not optional, but fear is.

Fear can lead to a distortion of perception; it can make us see less clearly. Things can grow smaller: the world, our capabilities, our resources, even our perception of God. This is why we stockpile supplies, fear our neighbor, lose our patience, spread rumors of infection, violate people’s privacy, cast blame, and sow doubt.

As Christians, we are called to draw closer to God in these tumultuous times. To operate out of faith, not fear. To listen to Jesus. Maybe the opposite of fear isn’t bravery. Maybe the opposite of fear is love. Paul tells us that perfect love casts out fear. So in the response to the very real dangers of this world we have an invitation as people of faith: which is to respond by loving. As one of our parishioners said recently: We can weep, we can gnash our teeth, but Christ calls us to be His hands in the world.

Loving our neighbor has never been more important than it is right now. As a Christian community, we are called to share one another’s burdens, disrupt our own routines, make sacrifices to prioritize the health of someone else, and fight for one another in

both the short and long term. God calls us to value people over money, prioritize humility over ego, and listen to the vulnerable over the powerful.

And we see this happening all around us—people risking their personal safety to help others—treating the sick, caring for children, delivering food, checking in on the elderly. Our own St John's community is finding more and more ways to keep each other close in spite of our social isolation.

And on a broader, long-term level, we as members of the body of Christ and followers of Jesus can build on our new vision, our new insights and perspectives, to change the systems and institutions that made us so vulnerable to this global pandemic. In the words of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, we can answer God's call to create a world more like God's dream than the national nightmare we are living.

Let us pray:

*God of the present moment,  
God who in Jesus stills the storm  
and soothes the frantic heart;  
bring hope and courage to all  
who wait or work in uncertainty.  
Bring hope that you will make them the equal  
of whatever lies ahead.  
Bring them courage to endure what cannot be avoided,  
for your will is health and wholeness;  
you are God, and we need you. Amen.*