

4 Lent A March 22, 2020
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What We See Gospel: John 9:1-41
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The historians among us are probably familiar with the Plague of Cyprian, but I had not heard about it until this week. I learned about while studying and preparing for this sermon. For those who are not familiar: The Plague of Cyprian was a devastating pandemic that began in the year 250 AD. Sources disagree on how long it lasted. Some say it only lasted twelve years, while others state it lasted for twenty or even thirty years. No matter how long it lasted, it was a terrible pandemic; a disease that spread quickly through populations in different cities and continents. At the peak infection period, it is recorded that five thousand people died every day in the city of Rome. Two emperors died during the pandemic, as did thousands of soldiers and citizens. The economy suffered as cities like Alexandria shrunk by an estimated two-thirds of its population.

We know so much about this pandemic because a bishop in the Christian Church kept a careful record of it. Cyprian was bishop of Carthage (modern day Tunisia) in the mid third century. His vivid description has lasted through the millennia, and that is why the pandemic bears his name. In addition to describing the painful symptoms of the disease (which historians suspect was either a form of measles or smallpox), Cyprian also described how people responded to the situation. The Roman government and popular pagan culture blamed the pandemic on the newest religion in town: the Christians. This is probably why the first Christian persecution under the Roman Emperor Decius took place during the same time. This means Christians had it particularly rough during the pandemic and suffered not just from the symptoms of the rapidly spreading disease but also the social stigma of being blamed for everyone's suffering.

It was so bad that Cyprian did not write a particularly hopeful message. He wrote that the suffering and discrimination felt like the end of the world, and he called the pandemic apocalyptic. The only hope he saw was when death took away any earthly suffering. While we might see that message as hopeless, for the time and the culture it was actually hopeful, as other Christians also proclaimed this life is not all there is, there is more to come, that death has no power to keep us from God's love.

That is why University of Washington professor Rodney Stark theorizes that while the Roman Empire began its decline and economies suffered, the Christian religion grew during the Plague of Cyprian. Because the Christians, despite being demonized and blamed for the pandemic, responded to it differently than society at large. Cyprian recorded during the pandemic doctors did not stay in cities infected by the disease to treat the sick. They fled to other places in hopes of escaping the disease. That meant sick people were left uncared for. Christians responded by seeing a need and stepped into that need by both caring for the sick and burying the dead. They chose to suffer with their neighbors, and that had a profound influence on people. It helped them see the Kingdom of God, the Light of Christ, in the midst of suffering, it gave them hope, and helped them through.

Today we might say how a person responded to the pandemic depended on what they saw. It's that kind of seeing and transformation that is in our Gospel today, when Jesus healed a man born blind. I wonder how often we think of this story from the perspective of the man who was born blind. Perhaps he believed that he had committed a sin before he was born or was suffering from a sin his ancestors committed? In those days, people often assumed things like blindness were a form of punishment, which is unfortunate because it can cause a person already experiencing challenges like loss of sight to suffer additional emotional harm. It seems a big challenge for humanity is reconciling that sometimes tragedies just happen, that they are no one's fault, that things just go wrong. Perhaps it is comforting to fix blame. Like when pagans and the Roman government blamed the Christians for a pandemic.

For the man born blind, his world changed suddenly from being without sight to being able to see. But that wasn't the only change. He also went from begging on the side of the street to being the center of attention. And despite not actually seeing Jesus heal him he saw who Jesus is, and he was courageous enough to tell the questioning Pharisees how he saw Jesus, even though they responded by casting him out of the temple.

The sudden change in giving a man born blind sight seemed to upset everyone in the story: the man's parents, the pharisees, the people who witnessed the event. It wasn't really chaos, but it might have felt like that at the time. That is why the Pharisees might have wanted to focus on the rules about the Sabbath, because there was familiarity and comfort in those Sabbath rules, and when we are pushed out of our comfort zones, some people will do whatever

they can to get back to them. But the man didn't seem to be feeling the same discomfort as the other characters in the story. And neither did Jesus. My favorite part of this story is when Jesus goes to the man after the man's parents have turned on him and the Pharisees have kicked him out the temple. It seems to me that he must have felt abandoned at that time, back in the dark. Only now the darkness is the fear and anxiety of humanity instead of the darkness of sightlessness.

Jesus' words to the man might not sound comforting to us but it can be a type comfort to be reassured who Jesus is and reminded what Jesus wants us to see. Jesus said he didn't come to bring punishment, but to give the ability to see to the world. The man is the example of being able to see Jesus in the midst of the chaos Jesus' healing caused and proclaimed what he saw, and that in itself seems to me to be the comfort and the challenge we all need right now.

I read a commentator who said, "The church needs to deliver testimony in dismal circumstances." This isn't just what the man born blind did, it is what the Christians during the Plague of Cyprian did, and it is what we are called to do as a new pandemic called COVID-19 has suddenly brought suffering to our previously comfortable lives.

We have to be careful how we see what the third century Christians did in their pandemic. I have heard enough comments about how staying home, not participating in public gatherings, and practicing social distancing are all acts of fear that I feel I need to state I don't see them as fearful acts. I see them as how we practice love and care for our neighbors and the vulnerable among us. We are being asked to suffer inconveniences and sacrifice some of the things we enjoy and perhaps have taken for granted – let's not forget those who are being asked to sacrifice their way of life and income - in order to flatten the curve of the pandemic, to slow rate of infection so that our hospitals and doctors and nurses can care for the sick, so we don't have days where thousands die at once. That isn't fear, that's love.

Courage, however, is being required of us right now. But it isn't to go running to the sick in the hospitals. Unlike the Plague of Cyprian, our modern health care professionals are NOT leaving town to avoid the virus, they are working hard, often without proper equipment like face masks the fearful are hoarding or greedy are stock-piling in an effort to make money. For us, in our particular time, under our particular circumstances, courage looks different. We must remember what impressed the non-Christians in Cyprian's day was how the

Christians were willing to suffer with them. That is where we are called to go, and what we are called to: to suffer with each other, to share the common suffering. The suffering those who worry how they will make financial ends meet. The suffering of sacrificing social gatherings, even worshiping in-person. The suffering of learning to stay at home when it is our comfortable routine to go out. And the suffering of venturing into the world of video conferences, recording and posting videos and engaging with people where we are allowed to: on-line. And in that venue shine the Light of Christ and Love of God for all people. For some of us, that is really frightening, and with good reason. The on-line world is not a kind one. There are a few folks who are gentle and kind on social media, but most people are angry and cynical. Mean-spirited entities called “trolls” lurk unseen and wait to leave a cruel comment on someone’s posts on Facebook or Instagram just to stir up anger. Then there are the scammers who are just waiting for a kind, generous spirited individual they can take advantage of, and the hackers who will steal your account and cause you all sorts of angst. There are satirical posts that look like the truth but are just meant to be funny, though it’s hard to tell. And people who like to sound like experts but aren’t. It is not a safe place to be, and tough to navigate.

But there are also clips of baby goats and old TV shows you might remember. And it is where many people are. People who I have met in the five year’s I’ve been here with you at Church of the Good Shepherd who tell me they have never set foot in any church, and all they see of Church is what they see on-line. And what they see, frankly, did not make them think well of the Church. In fact, they believe Church is harmful to society. And while that might be hard to hear, it reminds us that no matter how beautiful our Sunday worship services, or Holy Week services, or Easter services, no matter how delicious our Wednesday Free Lunch or Deeper Roots Coffee tastes, the majority of people who walked past our red doors keep walking because of what they have seen on-line. Now is our opportunity to go on-line, into a frightening to navigate world, and show that world what the Christians in the mid third century showed their frightening to navigate world: compassion and the willingness to suffer with our neighbors while sharing with them where we see the Light of Christ in these days.

Of course, we must also care for our neighbors in other ways, however we can, and be creative with how we are going worship together when we can’t be together in one place. These are also ways to practice courage in these times. And as we begin to live into the new ways of the world, perhaps we’ll be surprised

by what we see, recognizing that nothing, not social isolation, on-line meetings, or new challenges can keep us from the love of God in Christ. Keeping our eyes on Christ will help us not only get through this time but might even help us emerge better than we are. It's happened before, it can happen again, in God's good time.