

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

How we think about this text is certainly affected by the current worldwide struggle against this coronavirus pestilence, this pandemic that has affected hundreds of thousands worldwide and has killed over ten thousand. And, to be sure, the numbers haven't yet reached the annual death count for the influenza—not even close. According to the Johns Hopkins website there are “291,000 to 646,000 deaths worldwide [due to the flu]; 12,000 to 61,000 deaths in the U.S. per year.” As of Saturday afternoon, there were 297,090 cases worldwide with 12,755 deaths; the US had 22,177 cases confirmed with 278 deaths ... so far.

Still, as you can see, we're shut down. Now, it may be that the worldwide reaction will, in hindsight, be seen as an overreaction. But no one knows, and given that 1) people with the flu are already filling hospitals, so that, 2) we don't have an abundance of hospital beds with needed equipment, and 3) since this virus is new and no one has immunity to it, and since there is currently no vaccine for it, the overreaction is understandable, though we chafe under it.

With the health risks of the virus and the economic damage being done to our country, the destruction of livelihoods, it's also understandable that people might ask why? We almost always do when trouble besets us. “Why me?” But what hubris we display! As though, somehow, we deserve to be spared the corruption of sin that has affected (infected) the whole world.

Or think about those times when you looked at someone else who is going through some difficult times and wondered to yourself or whispered to another, “I wonder what he did to deserve that?” What a lack of charity! What a failure on your part to keep the 8th commandment's demand to “defend [your neighbor], speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way” (Luther, Small Catechism, 8th Commandment)!

I was informed that some churches here in town last Sunday, as well as some TV preachers, began to preach this virus as God's judgment on a decadent country — or perhaps the world — that has lost its way! Foretelling the end of days, Jesus said, “*There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven*” (Luke 21:11). Perhaps Death has come on his “*pale horse*” “*to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth*” (Rev. 6:8).

But you'll forgive me if I'm a bit jaded by such preaching, and distrustful. I don't know these preachers well—some not at all, but such preachers are often able to parlay a good crisis and the fears it generates into a tidy sum to line their pockets. We're not going to do that. We are going to look to God, “*our refuge and strength,*” our “*very present help in trouble.*” We are not going to fear, “*though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling*”

(Ps. 46:1-3). We're going to remember that "*The LORD of hosts is with us; [that] the God of Jacob is our fortress*" (Ps. 46:7). And "Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, Of Sabaoth Lord, And there's none other God" (LSB656:2, "A Mighty Fortress"). Jesus is the Sabaoth Lord; He's the Lord of hosts. He's the One who is with us, protecting us, fighting for us. Therefore, we will not fear!

"*Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" the disciples asked. Jesus responded, "*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents . . .*"

What? Of course, Jesus was not saying that this man or his parents never sinned. Of course, this man was a sinner. We can even say that sin caused this corruption of blindness, but, Jesus says, it was not some personal in utero sin that was to blame for his blindness . . . not by him or his parents. Nevertheless, sin is to blame. Sin makes some people blind. It makes other people deaf and still others lame. Sin unleashes deadly viruses. Some people are born with various corruptions; others acquire it later in life. Sin causes us to become weaker as we grow old. Sin brings death: to infants and youth, young adults and old.

That's not to say that personal sin is without negative consequences. We surely know that there can be many, but in this case, Jesus is saying, "don't lay the blame upon him for this blindness." Indeed, we all deserve the same.

But Jesus came as light into the darkness; He came giving sight to the blind; He came making the lame walk; He came healing the sick and cleansing the lepers; He came making the deaf to hear and raising up the dead; Jesus came preaching the good news of the forgiveness of sins and life after we die (Matt. 11:5).

And so with this man, Jesus took some dirt, mixed it with His saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's eyes. He told the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man did, and he came away seeing . . . a miracle!

More than that, he came away believing. He came away with salvation! Indeed, this miracle was just the appetizer for this "*man who had formerly been blind,*" for there is a blindness worse than being born without sight. There is the blindness of those who refuse to see.

Our Old Testament lesson is a strongly Messianic chapter, and in it, Isaiah warns of those who "*[see] many things, but [do] not observe them; [whose] ears are open, but [do] not hear.*" The prophet here was referring especially to Israel, but so it was for this man born blind. He was walking in darkness until the Lord shone His grace upon him. He was born physically blind, until Jesus gave him sight. He was born spiritually blind, until the Light of the world enlightened his path and led him on an unfamiliar path of faith. Yes, this man was given eyes to see Jesus as "*the Son of Man,*" his Savior, even as Isaiah had foretold of such disciples, "*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. . . For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior*" (Isa. 43:1, 3).

In fact, this is why God sent His own Son into the world, not to leave us as “*people [walking] in darkness,*” but to make us people who “*have seen a great light*” (Isa. 9:2). God didn’t send His own Son to us, simply to take our physical illnesses and to bear our physical diseases (Matt. 8:17), but that by His wounds He might heal us of our transgressions and our iniquities (Is. 53:5). And He would later send us His Spirit, that He might work in us a change, like He did for that man in our text, that our blindness might be turned into sight.

Now to those who say that we’re experiencing God’s judgment now, I will acknowledge this — Jesus acknowledges it — that He came for judgment: “*For judgment I came into this world*” — though you’ll remember that God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17). Those who are saved are those who believe in Jesus; but those who do “*not believe*” in God’s Son are condemned “*because [they have] not believed in the name of the only Son of God*” (John 3:18). So, this is Christ’s judgment: for believers, it’s “*that those who do not see may see.*” As the blind man told the others: “*though I was blind, now I see*” (John 9:25). And for unbelievers, it’s that “*those who see may become blind.*” “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*” (Mark 16:16).

Thus in the midst of this sign, of Jesus giving sight to the blind man, Jesus leaves us with this truth of salvation: it’s not seeing that is believing, but believing that is seeing; disbelieving, on the other hand, is blindness and condemnation.

And to us for this faith, Jesus offers us not mud and spittle, but the waters of Holy Baptism, and the bread and wine of the Holy Supper, efficacious signs of Jesus’ work among His people still today, enlightening gifts for us, His children of light, strengthening gifts for us, that we may walk on the path of faith and bear “*the fruit of light*” in what is “*good and right and true*” and “*pleasing to the Lord.*”

That’s why I wish you were here today in the midst of this crisis — we were not being foolish or reckless; we were not trying to put the Lord to the test — I wish you were here because we who are weak, need the Lord’s strength. So today, you are not able receive the Sacrament to build you up, but let this word “*strengthen [your] weak hands,*” and “*make firm [your] feeble knees.*” Let this word embolden your anxious hearts and firm up your faith in Christ: “*Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy*” (Isa. 35:3–6). O Lord, let “*my tongue ... sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, [that] my mouth [may] declare your praise*” (Ps. 51:14–15).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.