

Wow. Well... welcome to life as we now know it. Welcome to what is being called “coronapocalypse.” It’s incredible how quickly the world has changed. Just a couple of weeks ago, school and local businesses were open and thriving, the shelves at Bi-Lo and Wal-Mart were well-stocked, First UMC was gearing up to start Holy Week, my sister was finalizing plans for her upcoming wedding, and I had never heard the phrase, “social-distancing.”

Now, schools around the country are closed. Sports Center has literally nothing new to talk about. Libraries, restaurants, even church sanctuaries (the place we go to find safety and shelter) have all shut the doors. Hand sanitizer, bathroom tissue, and soap are now equivalent to gold. Churches everywhere are having to resort to being together on the internet, or not at all. Maintaining a three to six foot distance from every human being we encounter is truly difficult when we are called to gather and be social. Wow... how quickly the world can change. Welcome to life in the shadow of the coronapocalypse.

I think that’s a great summary of what life feels like right now, an “apocalypse”. After all, what apocalypse really means, by definition is an unveiling of sorts, a revelation of things previously hidden. Maybe the world hasn’t changed so much as it has been unveiled, exposed, uncovered, made known to us. Maybe we were blind before this, and the time has now come for us to see.

Our Gospel reading from John is a wild and wonderful story chalked full of this kind of apocalypse! In the long gospel reading (41 verses to be exact) John tells us of an astounding, wondrous work in only a few verses. What consumes most of the space in the story, and what seems to interest John the most, is the religious community’s back and forth argument that arises after the astoundingly wondrous work. A man who has been blind from birth, unable to provide

for himself or his family, this poorest of the poor, this broken and alone man, is miraculously healed by Jesus.

When it comes to this miracle story though we are not a passive observer. We play a major role in the story of Jesus’ miraculous healing of the poor beggar who is born blind. True, we play no part in the actual miraculous healing because that’s exclusive only to Jesus’ loving grace. And true, we are not the recipient of the miracle. We haven’t been born blind, and we are not poor and begging through some physical disability. No, not at all. But, we are a lot like the disciples who assume that the man’s blindness is his own fault. Even before Jesus heals the blind man, they ask Jesus, “Hey! Wait a minute who sinned first, this man or his parents, that he should be punished by God by being born blind”? In other words, passing by and observing this “bum,” we like the disciples are skeptical too saying to Jesus, “Sorry to pop your balloon Jesus, but how can you be so sure that this man has been properly diagnosed? Can he even afford to pay for his own medical services, or is he trying to siphon off resources from the government for his own personal health care? Is his unfortunate condition due to neglect? Or maybe it’s due to the incompetence of his parents?”

And what does Jesus do with their suspicions? What Jesus does is, he rejects the entire premise of their question. “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was that the works of God may be displayed in him,” Jesus says. There is no relationship between the man’s blind condition and his sinfulness. God does not make people sick in order to punish them for wrongdoing. To do so, to step away from our neighbors suffering because we assume it is God’s doing, is not respectable or moral. It’s wrong.

Jesus sees the blind man — a man whom no one else really sees. In the eyes of his neighbors, the man is contaminated, burdensome, and expendable. In other words, to put it in

today’s context, this man has had the coronavirus his entire life. Constantly hurting and coughing and quarantined. And by a quick calculation of human worth, the blind man barely registers with his neighbors—he’s not a human being; he’s the sole example and embodiment of Blindness. He is the condition itself, with all of its added meanings. Which is why, when the man’s sight is restored by Jesus, his own neighbors — the people he has lived and worshipped with in the synagogue for years — don’t recognize him. They don’t know how to see him without his disability. To do so would be to recognize him as a person and connect with him on a mutual level. To socialize with him as someone would, with say... a neighbor. And that would be completely impossible. Knowing who he was before and the way they treated him, things would be too uncomfortable and awkward.

So, of course, when the man shows up at the synagogue healed and made whole, the community and the religious leaders rally to question him. To restore order and re-establish the status quo. The man who has been blind since birth moves quickly from being the recipient of a miraculous healing to being the accused. “Who healed you?,” he is interrogated by the religious authorities. He responds with, “well... actually I was blind at the time so I couldn't see exactly who did it. But I do remember a voice close to me saying something about ‘working the works of God as long as it is day, because night is coming when no one can work, and something about being the Light of the world’? Then I remember feeling something cold on my eyes and the smell of dirt and the same voice said to me, ‘Go and wash in the pool of Siloam’. Which I did, and now I see. I don’t know exactly who it was, but it may have been that guy Jesus everyone is talking about, who is going around healing people.”

Then the interrogation moves to the blind man’s parents, “This can’t be! Is this guy really claiming to be miraculously healed? Is he your son”? The parents reply the only way they know

how, in fear and in coldness saying, “how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself.” John tells us that his parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, who had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was Lord would find their synagogue membership officially cancelled.

In a miraculous twist it seems everyone but the healed man is blind. Everyone’s strict observance to the Jewish law, when faced with choosing to believe the miraculous healing, prevents them from seeing the healed man; it also prevents them from seeing God’s love and power at work in their midst. Notice no one in the story rejoices when the man is healed. No one – not even the man’s parents — expresses joy, or wonder, or gratitude, or awe. No one says, “I am so happy for you!” or asks, “What is it like to see for the first time? Does the sunlight hurt your eyes? What are you excited to look at first?” Everyone is too preoccupied with their fear and their search for answers. Sound familiar?

Naturally, when fear sets in for the religious leaders they turn toward anger and return to interrogate the healed man a second time. This time though they want the blind man to apostate, to renounce his faith in the healing work of Jesus. To regain control of the situation Jesus has caused, and on God’s holy day too. How dare Jesus heal on the Sabbath! Frustrated, they ask the man to confess that Jesus is a sinner, to publicly discredit the entire miracle performed by Jesus. But what the man says next should grab our attention. He says plainly, “I. Do. Not. Know. One thing though I do know for sure is, I was blind, and now I see. I told you all of this already, why do you want to hear my testimony again? Is it because you see the truth now too? Do you want to be a follower of Jesus too?”

Even though the healed man doesn't know enough to make a decisive judgement about the Messianic identity of Jesus. Even though he's no theological expert, able to identify and label

sin, he knows one thing, one true thing, “I was blind, and now I see.” Despite the threats, and the critics, and the ridicule he speaks up saying, “Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If Jesus were not from God, how can I see?” He testifies to what he has personally experienced and to the miraculous gift that he has been given. Predictably, his testimony to the religious authorities removes none of their pride. They say to him, “You know nothing. We know Moses and the teachings given to him by God which have been passed down to us. We know that sin ultimately causes all suffering. We know of your suffering, how you were born blind, which means you were born into this world entirely in sin. How is it that you a sinner can teach us? Consider your synagogue privileges revoked.” Someone sinned and they have stopped caring whether it is the man, his parents, or Jesus. They can’t understand what has happened and he is making them too uncomfortable. “You have got to go, you are not welcome here anymore,” they say.

Notice that Jesus appears to have zero interest in speculation upon the sin or upon the sinner. He heals the man. He lets people say “no,” or “yes” to the miraculous power of God working through him and then he just moves on. Some of you, like me, may find comfort in the role played by the once blind man now testifying to what he knows, to what he now sees. There’s a sort of dignity to his proclamation, “here's all I know, I was blind, now I see.” Some of you, like me, may have good friends who when it comes to the Christian faith they just don't see what you see in Jesus. They may or may not make fun of you for your belief. They don't see why you go to church, or live the way you do. If they've ever been bold enough to ask you why you believe or what it is that you see in Jesus, and if you've ever been bold enough to attempt to explain your reason for your faith, then there's a real good chance that you responded with something like the healed man’s response, “all I know is this...”.

Through all the questions and the confusion and the anger thrown at him, the seeing man stands firm in his belief, studying everything around him. He tries to match voices with names in his head. He looks down at his hands and sees them for the first time. The light and colors he sees is almost blinding. He never imagined that the world could be like this. So full of light and color and movement. It is like he has been born into a whole new world, a world so different than the one he had known. He asks himself, “Why is everyone so angry and so upset? Can’t they see how beautiful everything is?”

Stumbling down the steps of the place he is no longer welcome in, the now complete, seeing man finally takes a beat. Processing what has happened, he’s not sure where to go. “Can’t go back to that old corner. Can’t go back to that old life,” he says to himself. He doesn’t know where his parents have gone. So he just sits. He looks at the sky and the trees. He watches the people walk by distracted by things he’s never seen. And then he humbly laughs a little to himself.

And just as he bows his head in meekness, a familiar stranger sits down next to him. “Hello,” he says. “I heard that they kicked you out of my Father’s house. I’m sorry they questioned you so harshly, and for all the trouble that has come your way. I hope it is alright, but I have an important question to ask of you too. With everything that has happened to you, do you believe in this Son of Man, this Jesus Christ?” And the voice sounds so familiar. The seeing man turns and looks at the person talking to him and he pleads, “Who is He? Tell me, so that I may believe in Him? Are you the One?”

The familiar stranger says to him, “You have seen him, and see him now. I am he.” Falling to his knees, the man who was born blind worships the one who has come back for him. Nothing had made sense for the man ever since he listened to Jesus, ever since he climbed out of

that pool and wiped the mud from his eyes. His world had completely changed and the people he thought would be happy were angry instead. But this man, the one who gave him the gift, has come back. And now he knows. He knows what he will do with the rest of his life. He is ready to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

As we read this story, we are left to wonder: who is truly blind? Is it the man whose eyes didn't work? Or is it his parents and neighbors who abandon him, who fail to see him when he sits begging by the side of the road? After all, even after Jesus gives the man back his sight, there are so many who still cannot recognize Jesus for who he is, happy to continue on, unseeing.

And maybe we too are more blind than we like to admit. Dragged down by our anxiety or our fear. Unable to see the beauty of the world anymore because of the way we have been distracted—by the hustle and bustle of a life too busy to wander. By the mocking of our faith and the belittling of our testimonies. By the rules and the regulations of a life that needs to follow a certain path. By living in the shadow of the “coronapocalypse” scare? Listen to these encouraging words by a man who was also in darkness, who was made blind, and then the Lord recovered his sight. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, “You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your life as children of light...*Wake up, sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*”

You see, Jesus meets us even in those places of darkness and our vision clears. It's like we were blind and then we can see. We can't explain it. All we know is that it happened. Happened just as clear as day. We had been lost, alone, vulnerable and dying inside. Quarantined from God. But Jesus came to us and rescued us. And the only testimony we can give is this: we have met a God who sees us, even when we are blind in darkness. A God who finds us, even when we are lost and alone. A God who saves us and loves us and who will, in the end, come

back for us too, revealing and unveiling the promised gift of His glory and presence with us. So let us all stand firm in our faith during these trying times and say together with the Psalmist, “The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He lets me rest. He leads me. He keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name. even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff – they protect me. You set a table for me in front of my enemies. You anoint me. My cup that you fill is so full it spills over! Yes, I know and believe goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the Lord’s house forever.” **Amen.**