

Good morning everyone! And welcome to our third Mt. Zion-line worship video experience! It truly is a delight that we are able to worship together in this adaptive way, and thank you all for tuning in and your continued support as we learn how to be the church in new ways.

I'll start this morning with a few announcements, to help things feel a bit more like our normal worship services. First, we would love to hear from you to know how you are loving your neighbors in this wild time! Please send in pictures or videos, of you making a phone call, practicing *lectio divina*, if you kiddos are making cards for our friends over at CCH or collecting change for change, or if you're serving at the Friday Food Giveaways, please send your photos and videos to me or Anna! We would love to lift up the ministries you are doing in future communication with the congregation! (And hear how you're doing, of course :) ).

Also, if you are in need of assistance of any kind - if you are quarantining and need someone to grab groceries, pick up your medication, walk your dog, anything of that nature, please contact the church and we would be happy to connect you with someone in the congregation who can help you out. We have a team of people who would love to be of assistance, so please feel free to reach out at any time.

And now let us center our hearts and minds for worship as we begin in a word of prayer.

*Dear God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.* (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, pg. 76)

Today I'm going to structure things slightly differently - I will begin with the scripture reading, move into a message/sermon, end with the prayers of the people, and send us off with a very special musical feature!

Our Scripture reading today is the lectionary-assigned Gospel reading, which is so rich and wonderful, and also a bit lengthy.

So to help mix things up just a little bit, I would love to invite a special guest to our worship video this morning to help read the gospel. If you are interested in being a special guest for a future week's readings, via recorded Zoom video call, please let me know and I would love to have you as part of the weekly worship experience! And so due to social distancing adaptations, our special guest this morning is none other than my husband, Mike Veldhuis! Hi Mike! Mike will be reading all of the dialogue in this text, and I will read the narrator pieces.

Our Gospel reading today is John 9:1-41.

*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?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."*

*They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."*

*The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."*

*So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."*

*They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.*

*Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man? He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

The Word of the Lord.

The man who was born blind in this story experienced something so suddenly life-altering that we can hardly fathom it. This man spent his whole life without sight, without knowing what the world around him or even he himself looked like, and upon a single encounter with Christ, he was able to see everything, clearly, beautifully.

Though having something happen so quickly, boldly, and radically would certainly be disorienting - this man's entire perspective on the world and what it was changed in an instant. All the people around this man were disoriented too, asking who he was and, "wait, wasn't he the man who was begging just a bit ago?". People in every major kind of relationship in this man's life had questions about what happened, and were changed by his proclamation of Jesus as his healer.

And so we have been thrown into an entirely new, life-altering situation in which no person is left unaffected. And we have so many questions about what our lives look like now, and what they will look like after, it can be disorienting.

And yet one of the things I love about this scripture is how many questions are asked. There is curiosity from all different kinds of people after Jesus performs the miracle of giving sight to a man born blind.

There is so much that this man who was healed did not know, yet what he did know and continually professed, was that Jesus was the Son of Man. Jesus was real, the Messiah, the one who heals beyond our understanding.

Out of pure faith does the man born blind proclaim that Christ is his healer. Our faith heals our spirits. Our faith is never misplaced. Our faith is bigger than any anxiety or questioning or fear that may come our way. Our faith in Jesus Christ will carry us through anything.

This time of pandemic and our whole lives being messed around is certainly one in which many of us feel anxious. And I'll be honest with you, I am no stranger to feeling anxiety in all kinds of ways, head spinning with unending thoughts and questions and doomsday scenarios, manifesting in my body with headaches, heart racing, and hands tingling. I've struggled with

anxiety for years and have worked with a therapist to help me through my anxious times and improve my mental health. God bless good therapists. And two of things that help ground me in anxious times, two practices that can help nearly any anxious situation, are curiosity and gratitude. And both curiosity and gratitude are deeply rooted in our faith in Jesus Christ.

No matter what situation you are in, no matter what kind of discomfort or newness you encounter, you can always ask questions and be curious. Even if the situation is something you never want to be part of ever again, at the bare minimum you will learn something. As I've said before, I am convinced that curiosity does nothing but grow faith. And being curious in this time, of new ways to connect with one another, of how God is working through people stepping up to love their neighbors, of how we can find stillness and rest, will help us be strong and grounded in our situation.

Curiosity for the man born blind led him to the truth of who provided sight. And so our own curiosity also leads us to see more than just what is on the surface.

In the midst of all these changing things, all the ways our lives and our world is different in this season of pandemic, one thing you will always find is something to be grateful for. I've seen a quote from the legendary children's TV program host, and ever-wise Presbyterian minister, Mr. Fred Rogers circulating about that I'd love to share now. He said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" We can lift up in gratitude all the ways we are able to help others, all the people who are helping us, and all the ways folks in our greater society are absolutely stepping up to love and serve our neighbors in need.

As we read in our scripture today, it is the physical actions of Christ, the mud and water, the healing touch, that make the man see. We need the physical body of Christ to survive. And we are that physical body of Christ in the world, called to love God and love our neighbors in all we do. In the actions and miracles of Christ we feel in our bodies and in our spirits just how powerful Christ truly is. His physical death and rising to new life gives us new life and hope beyond the grave every single day of our lives. Even if those days right now are spent in distance from neighbors, we are united by the power of the Holy Spirit in our joined breath of life. Right now our physical actions may be separated, but we are one member of the larger body of Christ, by the promises made in baptism. Our physical act of keeping distance from one another is how we are loving our neighbors. By maintaining social distancing, we are slowing the rate at which the virus is transmitted, and therefore saving lives by not overwhelming our healthcare system. What we do in our physical world matters, at any time really, but especially in this vulnerable time of pandemic and potential illness.

And even beyond the helpers, we can be grateful for a host of things - as small as a delicious meal we were able to prepare for our families and as big as the reduced pollution around the world as a result of fewer cars, planes, trains, and boats travelling around. We are grateful for the kind waves and nods of the folks who live around us, and for the increased time we get to spend with our loved ones, humans and pets, at home.

And above all we can be grateful that through Jesus Christ our Savior, we are never without hope. We are never without a promise of new life even when we are threatened by the power of death. The power of God and the power of Jesus Christ are more powerful than any earthly thing that may come our way. Jesus gives us sight even when we are blind to see the work of God in our world, in our neighbors, in the body of Christ. I pray, dear friends in Christ, that we can see the things for which we can be grateful even in this challenging time. I pray that we can see the deep love we have for our neighbors by keeping folks healthy even when distancing hurts our hearts. And I pray that we can see the miracles of Jesus Christ, the miracle of hope, with clear eyes and a clear vision for how we can best love God and our neighbors. Thanks be to God, Amen.

As a way to focus on these healing practices, curiosity and gratitude, there is another spiritual practice that I would encourage you all to try this week - journaling. Journaling is the practice that grounds me in prayer and helps my mental and spiritual health more than just about anything. And the joy is, you can write about whatever you want! Anyone of an age who can write can journal, and you can journal on fun paper, in a notebook, the pad of paper you keep for middle-of-the-night epiphanies, whatever works for you! In keeping with today's theme, let's start by keeping a journal of things we are grateful for or curious about, especially in this time full of newness and uncertainty (though of course we can be certain in the promises of God in Christ Jesus). Journaling can simply be bullet points, a list of things we're grateful for or things we want to pray for, or it can be a stream of thoughts made more alive on paper. Whatever method you try, I would encourage you to journal as a way to center your thoughts and prayers, especially with such new and overwhelming phenomena we face each day.

And as an extension of your journaling, reach out to a friend in the congregation, a family member, someone to keep in touch with and share what you're grateful about. This practice of sharing gratitude helps shine light into our lives even when they seem to be rather dark.

And now as we end our time in worship this morning, please join me as we pray for the church, those in need, and all of God's creation.

*God our comforter, we pray for all people who are struggling due to the covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. We lift to you all who are experiencing economic hardships due to job loss, who are struggling due to quarantine measures, all people whose mental health is hurting due to the anxiety and isolation of this time. We pray for all people who are ill with the virus, that they may receive the care they need and recover well. Lord we pray that as you whole body of Christ in the world that we may do what we can to support one another in this anxious time. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

*God our healer, we lift to you all healthcare workers, grocery store workers, mail and delivery folks, manufacturers, and all the people in essential services who are on the front lines of combatting the spread of this virus. Thank you for the ingenuity and intelligence of the people working towards finding treatments, vaccines, and providing more protective equipment to help*

*treat this disease. Give these siblings in Christ strength and energy as they work towards eradication of this virus. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

*God of wonder and creativity, we give you thanks for the technological advances that allow us to connect even in these times of social distancing. Thank you for reliable internet, video recording capabilities, email, video chat technology, and all the other creative ways we are able to connect in a time that could otherwise be very isolating. Help us to be patient and curious as we discover new ways to connect with the help of these gifts. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

*God of peace, we pray for all people who are hurting even beyond this pandemic situation. We pray for all who are grieving, that they may find comfort by your Holy Spirit with the peace that surpasses all understanding. We pray for all those in our community who are struggling, who we name before you now: Neal, George, Walt, Rich, Ole, Pam, Vera, Jim, Becky, Stacy, Nickki, Emily, Dianna, Judy, Dodie, Rebecca, Terry, Chad, Mark and Marge, Sandy, Barb, Laura, and Gwen. As we journey through grief and the unsure nature of illness, Lord, we find that the path is not always linear, but no matter where the turns may lead we are confident that we will always find your empowering presence. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

*God our creator, we thank you for the gifts of your creation which we are blessed to be part of. Thank you for the sunshine, the signs of spring rising up, and the opportunity to appreciate the world around us with greater strength during this time. Though there may be pain in the night, we know that joy rises in the morning, just like the sun, as your promises of new life rise up from every grave, throughout your whole world. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

*Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy and peace, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, Amen.*

And now, dear friends in Christ, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you, may God look upon you with favor and give you peace. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

And last but certainly not least, I am happy to present you with a very special sending for this online worship service. This beautifully harmonized "Amen" was performed by our very own Mt. Zion Senior Choir a few years ago, and I am so happy to share it with you all today! Thank you to our senior choir director, Craig Gustafson, for providing this audio file. So without further ado:

(sung Amen is played).

Thank you all again for being part of our online worship experience. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.