

Worship Service “Graceful”

Lent 4, Year A, 19th March, 2023

Ephesians 5:8-14 ESV / John 9:1-41 ESV

Prelude (Video)

[Prelude in C Major - JS Bach](#)

Opening Music (Video)

[This Little Light of Mine - NFL Choir](#)

The NFL Choice performs “The Little Light of Mine” for the American Cancer Society’s “Share the Light” virtual event. Posted to YouTube by the American Cancer Society

Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace (Video)

[Ave Verum Corpus - W.A. Mozart](#)

Opening Hymn (Lyric Video)

[To God be the Glory - 102](#)

words by Fanny Crosby, music by William Doane, performed and posted to YouTube by Northern Baptist Association, used with permission

Call to Worship (responsive)

One: Kindred of God, a new vision of leadership is called forth and God calls upon the least likely, the unheard of, and the humble of heart to assemble to receive anointing.

All: In peace, we anoint the forgotten, the youngest, smallest, and unlikeliest of siblings whom God has raised up to serve.

One: Though the call may involve risk and danger, we are called to listen, obey, and live a love unwavering.

All: In peace, we anoint the disinherited and dismissed.

One: God’s call does not depend on our outward appearance or our earthly achievements.

All: In peace, we anoint neighbor and kin alike, knowing God looks upon the heart.

All: Let us open our hearts to God this day. Amen.

Invocation

Anointed One, your love comes peaceably into our lives if we will but let it. We are so fixated on the gold standard, the familiar, and the safe choice that we often lose sight of what you are raising up right in our very midst. Enliven us with your Spirit this day so that we might get a glimpse of your peace. Take what we might imagine as too small for your kin-dom and use it to open the world to your overflowing abundance and provision for all that you have created. In the name of Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

Epistle Reading Ephesians 5:8-14 ESV

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light

(for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true),

and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible,

for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are not altogether convinced that darkness is a thing of the past. Many people in this world of ours feel their world is one of darkness and gloom. Pressures crowd in upon us and get us down.

The causes are varied: bereavement, illness, money, worries about family, trouble at work or not having work, drugs, drink, boredom, doubt, weariness, futility.

Then there are the world issues: war, poverty, climate change, disease, unfair trade and so on. It does not help when we feel that as Christians we should be doing so much better than we are. Gracious and loving God, we rejoice that you are with us in our troubles, you know us and you love us – always.

Even though we have made a mess of things personally and collectively you remain faithful. We rejoice that your Son came not to a perfect world, but to a broken world, our world. To bring light to the darkness, our darkness.

We pray for our dark and dreary world, a world in need – in need not just of a technical fix, but in need of love and grace, forgiveness and new life, hope, peace and fellowship, in need of renewal, in need of YOU.

We pray that you would come alongside us and all those for whom we pray, that you would show us Jesus, the light of the world, the one who came (and who comes) to rid us of sin, to give us life and health and peace, peace that passes all understanding – not a temporary respite from trouble but the strength to overcome it and ultimately to receive life eternal.

You don't wave a magic wand for everything to be sorted instantly – you require us to exercise our faith and to respond to your call to preach the gospel and to seek to live it out, to look to you for the strength that we need to share your love and grace. Help us to share the good news in word and action – the same good news that the fishermen were called to proclaim that there is a Saviour, a merciful king who loves us and whom we can love and adore.

We have been set free. Enable us to use our freedom to share in bringing in the kingdom. In the light of this we have something to celebrate, something to shout about – for even in our trouble and pain, even in our loss, we know that Jesus is with us.

Hear us as in a moment of silence we pray for those in darkness (of whatever kind) – let us pray that they may see and know the light of Christ: Silence

The Lord is my light and my salvation. Hear our prayers, Lord, spoken and unspoken and answer them for Jesus' sake. Amen

Hymn (Lyric Video) [There's a Wideness in God's Mercy](#) (vv 1,2,4,5) 145

Gospel Reading (Video) [John 9:1-41 ESV](#)

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As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.

And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed 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."

Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud

and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"

Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."

So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"

He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go

to Siloam and wash.' So 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.

So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see."

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them.

So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews^[a] 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 how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."

(His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus^[b] to be Christ, he was to 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 said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner."

He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. 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?"

And 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, "Why, this is an amazing 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 if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.

Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.

If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”

Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.”

He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?”

Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt;^[a] but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.

Message - *Graceful*

Why do bad things happen to good people? That is the question that has troubled humankind for all time. I would venture to guess all of us have pondered that dilemma at some point in our lives. What is our reaction when we see others suffering? For those we care deeply about, including ourselves, we tend to feel compassion and distress, wishing we could understand why this is happening, or how we can resolve the problem. Often we try to determine what we might have done wrong to cause such a negative thing to occur.

Likewise, when we see others in the world around us suffering, we might naturally wonder what occurred that led them to where they find themselves as well. We probably also feel compassion and sympathy for their circumstances, but often in both situations, we try to assign blame somewhere for the misfortune we encounter. It's only natural.

Our rational minds are accustomed to a world full of cause and effect. Much of our scientific processes are based on this fundamental principle. Which is probably why we find it so disconcerting when we encounter situations that do not present us with a straightforward explanation for why that situation has occurred. And if we are honest with ourselves, it's not that there isn't an identifiable cause, it's that there's not an identifiable cause that we find acceptable. If someone falls tragically ill, or suddenly dies, the biological cause can be identified. If someone we encounter is downtrodden or oppressed, we can identify the series of events or actions that led to their condition. It's more the “why,” not the “how,” that we take issue with. And as I mentioned, it's certainly not a new dilemma.

Those in our gospel lesson today had the same struggle. We're presented with a man blind from birth, who has spent his life begging in the dark. His family and community, like many of us, would wonder why he would be born with such a limitation. I'm sure they were all aware that this is a natural occurrence in nature, that some are simply born lacking the ability to see. Yet they need a reason, a "why" to explain how this particular person was afflicted. And not unlike today, it was common to assume that it was due to either the actions of the man himself, or of his parents. Somebody" must have done something wrong, sinned in some way, for this seeming act of divine justice to be meted out. But is that really a correct assumption?

Is that really the response of the Creator, the God of grace, to cause a lifetime of suffering for a moral misstep, or even worse, the sins of his parents that he has no control over? When asked by his disciples where the fault lies, Jesus' response basically implies fault is not important at all to the situation. The man's blindness has become the vehicle for his testimony to the light he has experienced. It is not that his blindness is caused by God, but that his blindness becomes the occasion for the revelation of God's nearness in Jesus. Jesus tells them, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God's works may be revealed in him."

The question here is not so much the "why", but the "what." What has happened and what does that event reveal of God and God's ongoing work in our midst. Our perspective should not be why did God do something or let something happen. Instead we should recognize the result, and see what wisdom or insight we can discern about God at work in the here and now. The man in our story cannot mistake the darkness for light, whose condition does not allow him the illusion of vision. Therefore if the light should happen to shine in his sight, it can only be from God. Like God in the story of Creation, Jesus reaches down and takes dust and forms something new, eyes that see, from what was once nothing, once he has rinsed in the waters of Siloam.

Like our story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus is the living water that provides redemption and salvation. God's creation work continues through him. The important part of the story is not the "why" but the "what." The blind man testifies to the miracle and grace of the blessing from God through Jesus. Yet for his neighbors, the local religious authorities, and even Jesus' own disciples, they can't get past the "why." They just can't fathom that this event could transpire and that this can even be the same man. It's just too impossible to consider. If it is the same man, there must have been a reason he was blind, some sin committed, and therefore he can't have been healed through grace. Ironically, they are so lost in their own darkness that they can't recognize the light shining in their very midst. Only the blind man among them can truly see.

There's a story from many years ago of a man driving through a mining region one Sunday when he noticed a large number of mules in an open field. When he inquired about this unusual sight, he was told that the work animals had been brought up from the dark passages below to preserve their eyesight. Unless they were regularly exposed to the sunlight, they would eventually go blind. How many of us suffer from this condition? Have we been in the darkness so long we too

risk going blind? It's all too easy to find ourselves stuck in the “why” and “how” that we fail to see the “what” that God is doing in our midst. When we hear of loved ones suffering, do we seek to see how God is at work, and how we might be a part of that work, or do we do nothing and just ponder the “why” and who's to blame?

When we wonder why God allows so much suffering in the world, maybe the better question to ask is why do we? Today's story is a wonderful story about the light of the world shining into the darkness and recognized by the least likely observer. May we all seek that light in the world around us by opening our own eyes to the possibilities of God at work in the most unlikely ways we might imagine. Amen.

A Call to Serve

It is not the outward appearance or size of the gifts we have to share that matters to God. It is the loving generosity of our hearts that is closest to the heart of God.

We are invited to give this day out of the abundance of our lives, from our heart, knowing that no matter the size of the gift that God knows our hearts.

A Time for Reflection (Video) [Swing Low, Sweet Chariot](#) arr by Lee Evans

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Generous God, you remind us that you “anoint our heads with oil” and that our “cup overflows” with your abundance. We do not take for granted all that you provide.

Take these gifts and use them for the healing and tender care of your hurting world.

May your cup of love overflow and abide with the hurting and heartbroken, forgotten and despised, so that we may all be made whole. Amen.

HYMN (Lyric Video)

[Amazing Grace](#) **143**

performed, recorded, produced and filmed exclusively for the Hymns & Spirituals Channel in 2022.

Benediction

May God, who comes to us in the things of this world, bless your eyes and be in your seeing.

May Christ, who looks upon you with deepest love, bless your eyes and widen your gaze.

May the Spirit, who perceives what is and what may yet be, bless your eyes and sharpen your vision.

May the Sacred Three bless your eyes and cause you to see.

Postlude (Video)

[Praise the Lord](#)

W.A. Mozart