



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 22, 2020
The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)

Festal Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
John 9:1-41
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Spit and Mud

We don't know how many people are sick. But we hear fearful statistics daily of how many may yet die. How many *have* died in China and Spain, Iran and Italy. Industries from the largest hotels and airlines to your local pub and barber shop are shutting down. Thousands are being laid off of work. Midtown Manhattan feels like a ghost town. And today I'm preaching this sermon to an empty, echoing church.

To some, this moment, this virus and its cascading consequences feels like the end of the world. And when we, in the 21st century, think of the world ending or falling apart we often think of the word 'apocalypse.'

The apocalypse is a frequent topic in Scripture - featuring in both the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, the entire last book of our Christian Bible, the Book of Revelation, is also known as the Apocalypse of Saint John. The word apocalypse from the Greek *apocalypsis* itself means, roughly, something like an "unveiling" or a "disclosure of knowledge." The word "apocalypse" doesn't necessarily mean The End of the World - rather, it means *revealing*. And in the strange pages of the Book of Revelation these vivid images of rampaging monsters and earthquakes and Four Horsemen and cosmic portents are less about predicting the *future* than they are about diagnosing the reality of the *present*. The beasts and monsters and plagues in the Book of Revelation are highly charged poetic imagery that John's audience would have understood as describing their own difficult and painful social, economic, and political reality.

The **revealed** truth in the book of Revelation, the *apocalypsis* of the Christian apocalypse, is that beneath the suffering of the early Christians, under the tyranny of Rome, God was present. And so the message of St. John was one of endurance. Keep the faith. Run the race. Fight the good fight. God has not abandoned you. There is suffering and profound pain all around you but in the end God wins. So hold fast. That's the message of the Book of Revelation.

When bad things happen to us or to our world, it is very easy to despair. Lots of people are feeling the pain of this pandemic right now. From layoffs from work to isolation from friends to parents trying to juggle work and kids home from school to the very real medical danger for our parents and grandparents and for ourselves. And then there's the scariest thing of all: the unknown. Not knowing what tomorrow may bring. It can all feel a bit like the end of the world.

It is not the end of the world. But it might just be an apocalypse. A time of revelation. A pulling back of the curtain. A kind of seeing anew.

Seeing how vulnerable we all are and how interconnected. Seeing how, as the Prayer Book says, “our common life depends upon each other’s toil.” Seeing how little control we actually have and how powerless we can be. Seeing how important church is to us when we can’t go to mass or how much we need our family or friends when they are far away. Seeing how powerful kindness and human interaction is and how essential. Seeing our mortality anew maybe. Seeing, perhaps, if we choose to, a glimpse of what really matters...and what doesn’t.

Jesus spat on the ground. In today’s reading from St. John’s Gospel, our Lord spits onto the dusty earth. He then kneels down there in the dust and uses his spit to make mud of the dry dirt, like a child mixing up finger paints. And he lathers that saliva and mud onto the eyes of a blind man and amazingly, miraculously grants him his sight. The man heads off to the authorities to show them his new-found vision and to tell them of the one who gave it to him. The authorities didn’t believe him. They didn’t believe that the blind-man who could now see was made to see by Jesus and the spit and the mud. They refused to believe it. They refused to see. There’s irony here. The blind man can see. Those with sight are blind. Who are we in this story? And, if we do see, if we do understand...what then?

In the great Catholic writer JRR Tolkien’s masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings* - when confronted with a dark and frightful time and a daunting task, the hobbit Frodo Baggins says of all of this - “I wish it need not have happened in my time.”

"So do I," said his friend and advisor Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

It is a small hope, small consolation, perhaps. But as we hear this odd and wonderful story about our Lord using mud and spit to make this man whole, let’s recall that this is how God works. It is the truth of the Incarnation. That God came among us in flesh and blood in Jesus Christ and continues to do so, to work in our midst. I preached to this church on Epiphany about how God uses ordinary stuff, the ordinary things of this world to show us, to *reveal* to us eternity itself. That, if we have eyes to see it, God’s grace is revealed to us every day **in** the everyday.

The trees in midtown are blooming. Sometime this past week, the buds on the bare branches burst open into little white flowers. Here amidst concrete and metal and glass and the exhaust from the few working cabs. Here in this emptying city where people pass me by in hospital masks. Here in a week when my mind is full of CDC guidelines and social distancing and the falling Stock Market and all the rest I looked up and there they were. Tiny white flowers. Like a miracle. Like a revelation. Thursday was the earliest vernal equinox in one hundred and twenty-four years. Spring has come to us again, slowly unpacking all of its usual glory, and just in time too. And if we have eyes to see, we can see in the ordinary beauty of blossoms and birdsong, the grace and goodness of God even here and even now. The beauty of nature can be our shrine, our place of prayer, when we cannot come to church. And so can the beauty of music or of literature. And so can the ordinary kindnesses of spending time with a loved one, reaching out to an old and neglected friend, calling someone who you know is living alone.

I’m sure you’ve seen the Italians quarantined in their homes singing together on their balconies. Or maybe you’ve heard of the over 100 young people in Brooklyn who safely delivered groceries and meds to their elderly neighbors who are staying indoors. There are the owners and athletes of the National Basketball Association who are donating money to help the workers at their shuttered stadiums stay afloat. Disneyland, while closed, has donated its excess food to the hungry. There are all of those individuals and businesses who are dutifully following the government’s guidelines even at great personal cost in order to safeguard the most vulnerable. And the thousands and thousands of healthcare workers, working extra hours and bravely risking their own well-being every day to care for the sick, the scared, and the dying. **We** human beings are

also, as the Genesis creation story reminds us, God's creatures of mud and spit. Fashioned by God out of the dust of this world and anointed by his Spirit breathed into us to be, like the flowering trees in empty Midtown, gateways of eternity and grace, agents of revelation and healing in this world.

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and author, once wrote this:

"I know and I speak from experience, that even in the midst of darkness, it is possible to create light and share warmth with one another; that even on the edge of the abyss, it is possible to dream exalted dreams of compassion"

In times of personal or global apocalypse, when what is revealed to us is our vulnerability and helplessness - it is helpful to remember the apocalyptic message of the Scriptures urging us to hold on. To carry on. To look for signs of hope. That great sage Mr. Rogers once said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mom would say to me 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

Look for the helpers. And look for the signs of Spring. Look to the trees budding and blooming and the days lengthening and to the people responding with kindness and mercy and **see. See** and be reminded, in these revelations, that God is with us. That God is faithful. That faith and hope and love endure even in darkness. And then let us do what **we** can do with the time that is given us to be the mud and spit, the flesh and bone, that God uses to reveal himself to the world in these times. And, with God's grace, through our steadfast faith, our resilient hope, and our fearless love, in the words of the prophet Malachi, the "sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings."