

*Lenten Worship Series: Christ Acts For Us; Sermon Title: In the Midst
I Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; John 9:1-12, 24-25, 35-41
Salem United Methodist Church; March 22, 2020
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During this season of Lent, our journey to the cross has taken a different turn. We are viewing suffering in a different light. It is no longer just a man suffering on a cross. We have those with the corona virus who are suffering as they struggle to breath. To keep from spreading this virus, we continue to practice social distancing and isolation, to not only protect ourselves, but protect others, just in case we are carriers. In the midst of all this, we cling to the promise that Christ Acts For Us.

When I planned worship for the season of Lent, I choose the title for today's sermon to be "In the Midst." Little did I know how "in the midst" we would be! We are only about one week into practicing isolation and social distancing, a term that has come out of this pandemic. Two weeks ago, we were laughing about bumping elbows, instead of shaking hands as we greet each other. Now we are told to stand six feet away from each other. Schools and businesses have closed. Concerts, graduations, conferences, and other events have been canceled for the next few months. We are told to remain at home and work from home, if it is possible. Our lives have changed dramatically and in unprecedented ways. Also, we are using technology in ways we haven't before and are grateful that we have this capability. However, after one week of being home, we are beginning to feel the dreariness of being separated from all that we know and enjoy. To quote Joni Mitchell (1970), "Don't it always seem to go. That you don't know what you've got. Till it's gone." We didn't realize how good we have "it," until we don't have "it" anymore. We tend to walk through life taking everything for granted and forget to be thankful for what we have, until it is gone. Staying at home for one week has seemed like a vacation, a sabbath, but how do we sustain this over a long period of time?

One way is by keeping the faith. We keep the faith by continuing to practice our faith. We practice our faith in two ways. First, by making time to connect with God through meditation, prayer, reading the scriptures, and through nature. During these challenging times, consider calling someone to read scriptures together and pray together. Or coming together as a couple or as a family to read scriptures and pray. We can continue to stay connected with God in solitary or in solidarity with another. Another way of connecting with God could be by taking a walk or sitting outside on one of these beautiful spring days. Aren't we blessed that this is happening when new life is bursting all around us? Imagine what this would be like if we were going into the cold, dark days of winter, instead of the warmth and brightness of spring. Second, we practice our faith by living it, by being the church through loving others. How can we "be the church" in the midst of social distancing? This week we established the Covid-19 Care Team to make sure everyone within this congregation is cared for and not missed. In addition, continue to check in with friends, neighbors, and family near and far. This virus knows no boundaries: neither male nor female, neither rich nor poor, neither Arab nor Mexican, neither Christian nor Jew nor Muslim nor other believer nor non-believer, neither Republican nor Democrat, neither black, white, pink, brown, nor whatever color of skin. None are immune to this virus. It is the great equalizer. There are those in our community who were struggling before the pandemic. They continue to struggle. Olney Help is the organization within our community which helps those in need. They continue to serve all those that they served before the pandemic, but their numbers are growing as people are losing their jobs. Olney Help is asking for financial donations. One can donate either by mailing a check or contributing online. They could also use volunteers to pack and drop food off. In addition, Cristin who makes soups in our licensed kitchen for her soup ministry, is making soup and giving it to Manna, another food bank in our county. She is seeking financial support to make this soup. We will be sending an email out soon with information on how you can donate to her efforts. In addition, we are giving out plastic gloves to whomever needs them so you can be safe when venturing into public spaces. They can be picked up in the Hall. If you don't know how to get into the hall or can't get to the hall, contact me. What other ways can we "be the church" to our community "in the midst?"

Our God is one who is always in the midst of our lives, in sickness and in health. One of the ways God speaks to us is through the reading and interpreting of scriptures. These words can help us keep the faith. So,

let's look at the lectionary scriptures for today. First, we have the story of Samuel who is grieved over King Saul's unrighteous leadership. God told Samuel, the prophet and priest, to choose Saul as the first king of Israel. He began his reign as a good king, but began to derail. God then tells Samuel to find another king. Claiming someone else to be king while there is a king on the throne was committing high treason. But Samuel obeys, and sets out for Bethlehem to find a new king. He encounters Jesse and sons. They worship together and then one by one he checks out each son. He eventually chooses David, the youngest, who has been tending the sheep in the field. The verse that connects with us spiritually are these words from God to Samuel, "God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart." We certainly do see what is visible to the eyes. We notice another's appearance, mannerisms, accent, among other things and judge them. To borrow a phrase, "we judge a book by its cover." We don't take the time to see into another's heart. In the midst of this pandemic, no matter what our appearance is, all of our hearts can be anxious, frightened, cautious, as well as seeking ways to find joy. This virus has made it easier to see into another's heart, because we are all experiencing the same thing.

Second, we have the 23rd Psalm, a psalm near and dear to the hearts of many. We often read it at funerals to comfort the grieving. But how does this Psalm bring us peace and comfort in the midst of this challenging time? Does it comfort us knowing that God continues to provide our every need like a shepherd does for the flock? Does it help to know that even if we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, our Shepherd is with us. Did you notice this psalm speaks of the shadow of death, and not death? The psalmist alludes to eternal life because we never really die, we go from taking the last breath in this life to taking the first breath in our new eternal life. God journeys with us through this shadow of death. In addition, God provides and protects us from our enemies, whatever or whomever the enemy might be. God is in the ICU rooms with those are suffering as they take each breath. And, God is with the medical personnel who are providing care. In addition, God massages our souls with healing oil, until we overflow or explode with God's love and have the assurance that neither death nor life will ever separate us from the love of God and we will live with God forever.

Third, we have the story of Jesus healing the blind man. As Jesus gives this man the ability to see, he declares, "I am the Light of the World." This healing causes an epidemic of questions from his family, friends, and the religious officials. No one seems to be willing to accept his story no matter how often he tells it. Then they kick him out. And who receives this newly sighted man? Jesus. Then, man declares his faith in Jesus. As we read this story, with whom did you stand in solidarity? The man who was healed and given a new life? "I once was blind, but now I see" The Pharisees who were resistant to new insights and refuse to accept new ways? The man's friends who couldn't accept this new reality without knowing all the details? Or Jesus who just can't stop himself for shining a light in the dark places of people's lives? Hopefully, this pandemic will create a new life for us. Hopefully, we aren't resistant to new insights and won't refuse to accept new ways. Hopefully, we can accept our new reality whatever it becomes. And hopefully, we can be a light to the world, shining for Jesus in the darkness of the pandemic.

Richard Rohr wrote these words about the pandemic, "For God to reach us, we have to allow suffering to wound us...Real solidarity needs to be felt and suffered. That's the real meaning of the word "suffer" – to allow someone else's pain to influence us in a real way." For Samuel, he suffered from his choice of Saul as king and God provided a new king. For the psalmist, in the midst of his suffering, he realizes God cares, provides, protects, and journeys with us. For Jesus, he was in solidarity with the man who lacked sight. He took action to alleviate this man's suffering, despite the criticism.

As we isolate ourselves to keep the virus from spreading, we may suffer from the lack of all that is familiar. Some may suffer from anxiety and depression. Some may physically suffer from the virus. Some may suffer from losing loved ones. No matter why or from what we are or will be suffering, know that there is always One who suffers with us, One who cares, provides, protects, and journeys with us, One who shares our pain, One who will shine light into our darkest hour. This is how Christ Acts For Us. Trust in Christ and keep the faith.

Resources: *Christ is For Us* by April Yamiasaki; "A Message from Richard Rohr about COVID-19, Love Alone Overcomes Fear," March 19, 2020, by Richard Rohr.