

March 14, 2021 – Lent 4

Welcome and Announcements

Good morning and welcome to worship with McClure United Church this morning. Today we continue our journey into the wilderness of Lent...

And it is out of our desire to share God's love... for everyone, that we remember at the beginning of each service our commitment as an Affirming Ministry of The United Church to do our very best to not only welcome but also to celebrate the beautiful diversity of God's people. No matter your age, class, ability, race, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation we are grateful you have joined us for worship today.

And we are worshipping here in Saskatoon on Treaty 6 territory and homeland of the Metis Nation and we take a moment to acknowledge and pay our respect to the ancestors and keepers of the land.

I have a few announcements to share with you today and I'd just like to note that all of the information I'll share with you now can be found in the weekly email, on the website and the Facebook page – so go there if you need contact info or more information on how to register and attend.

- Maundy Thursday Zoom service at 7pm on April 1
 - Easter service will be at our usual time at 9am but available to see after as well
 - There are also plans for a Living Skies Region of the UCC Easter Sunrise something... stay tuned
 - And the details all of our weekly events, Bible study, book study and coffee time can be found on our website, Facebook page and in the weekly email
- Lastly March 20th is newsletter deadline... z

And now, let's breathe deeply of God's love and prepare our hearts for this time of worship...

Sung Opening: Simply to Be verse 1

Opening Prayer

God is in the water that restores our soul.

And God is in the night when we lose our way.

God is in today and tomorrow, raising up leaders, prophets and dreamers.

And God is in the wilderness with us—every step of the way.

So with confidence we declare—

If God is in those spaces, then God is surely here.

And we light this candle as a reminder of the God of wilderness spaces.

Let us Pray...

Jesus of Nazareth, we gather in worship to remember your stories.

There are so many stories of you healing the blind scripture.

You were constantly opening people's eyes.
So today we confess that we often choose to keep our eyes closed.
We turn away from injustice in our world, worried you might ask us to work for change.
We close our eyes to our privilege, because the truth is uncomfortable.
We avoid eye contact with those who are suffering to avoid identifying with their pain.
Forgive us when we fail to be your Church in the world.
Guide us from the depths of our wilderness into your light.
Amen.

Hymn: Don't be Afraid

Scripture: John 9:1-41

As he 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 neighbours 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 Pharisees 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 worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement 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.

Reflection

The scripture today is a story that has within it many themes... and many sub-themes.

It was a bit hard to decide where to go this morning...

You know when I'm writing a reflection, God seems to guide me in many different ways...

sometimes I find myself pondering a story... sometimes personal, sometimes from the news or something I've heard from someone else.

Sometimes I think of a book or a song...

Sometimes I'm inspired by the wisdom of a great teacher – like Desmond Tutu

And this week I seemed to find inspiration from Disney...

I try not to question or fight where God leads me... I try to just get out of the way and see what happens.

So as I was reading this scripture of the healing of the blind man – the theme song from Aladdin kept playing through my head... well, the two lines that I know from the song...

"a whole new world... a new fantastic point of view"

A whole new world that opened up to the man born blind that could now see?

A whole new world view that was being opened up to Jesus' disciples... and to everyone else who witnessed this healing?

A challenging new understanding that holds up the struggle between two world views... the world in which we live... and the kingdom of God.

And I'm not talking here about a kingdom out there some where... some kind of other-worldly future existence...

I'm talking about the kingdom of God as it is here..

a radical way of living that is open to us..

open to everyone..
and it's right here..
and its happening right now.

A whole new world... a fantastic point of view.
The kingdom of God is like that.

So we hear Jesus saying over and over again... that the kingdom of God is now at hand.
The kingdom is present within you..
within each of us.
God's whole new world is ready for you.
It's calling to you to live it... today.

In this scripture today, I see the story of a man who is struggling to find his place – and a community struggling to find its place... somewhere in the convergence of two worlds – people in the wilderness.

I see people trying to make sense of it all, trying to figure out just where they belong.

And that, I think, is a pretty common theme:
how many of us have ever wondered where we belong..
what is our place in this vast world that God has created?
What's our purpose?

The story centers on a man who is born blind.
In his society... in his time...
a man born blind didn't have many options at all.
He couldn't work.. cuz he couldn't see
and so his only choice was to beg.
There was simply no question about where he belonged or what his place in the world was.
He was a beggar.
That was his place.

Then Jesus and his disciples came along.
The disciples see the beggar, and wonder why God would assign him this place:
that was their question to Jesus...
surely it must have been because he – or his parents – had sinned.

Now, I feel like they should have known better than to believe that...
I mean, it hadn't been that long since Jesus had stopped the stoning of a woman caught in adultery.
And he'd stopped the execution of that woman by saying, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."
And, of course, nobody could throw a stone.

So they knew that there was no one who had not sinned.
I guess they forgot...
I forget these important messages too sometimes... so I understand.

No one is perfect.

Why, then, was this man born blind?

I actually don't think this story is about literal blindness.
There's something much different... more metaphorical being revealed in this story.

Jesus said that this man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

Since I'm finding inspiration in Disney today... I'm going to quote another favourite.
IN Beauty and the Beast, Belle sings "I want much more than this provincial town."
And Ariel in The Little Mermaid...
She also feels trapped in her place in the world.
She wants to find the place where she belongs; a place that, as it turns out, is in a whole new world.

I'm sure the blind beggar felt that there was somewhere he belonged, that there was some greater purpose for his life.
If only he wasn't stuck where he was.
If only he could somehow break free.

I relate to this... there's definitely been times in my own life when I have felt... stuck!
I think most people have... at some point in their lives.
I think most of us.. at some time... have wondered where we belong.
I think most of us have wanted to do something significant...
to accomplish something we could be proud of...
to do something worthy of this life that God has given us.

And I think we've all experienced those times when we felt trapped.. when we've felt unable to break free from those chains that bind us...
from those things that hold us back...
from our own limitations... real or imagined.
If only we weren't held back...
we could do something awesome.

I wonder if that's how the blind beggar felt.

Then Jesus came along... kind of like Aladdin's genie...
and takes away the blindness.

What he's done is removed the limitation that held this man back.
He set him free to do the work that God called him to do...
to find where he belongs...
he was called out of what had always been into the wilderness...
I see wilderness here as the place of transition...
The time and place where everything is strange and uncertain...
Where everything is a little – or a lot scary –
But also exciting and purpose-filled.
A whole new world awaits.
Living in the kingdom of God awaits.

And that's what Jesus does for us.
Jesus makes it possible for us to open our eyes... to see our way into the wilderness...
Through the wilderness...
To live in this whole new world that is so ready for us.
His love shows us the way,
it leads us through...
All we need to do is follow.

So Jesus blessed the man who couldn't see.
He opened his eyes to a whole new world.
He allowed him to find a place where he belonged.
He showed him his place in God's kingdom.
And then he ... disappeared.

And what about the man?
Do you think he lived a Disney tale and had a happily ever after?
I doubt it...
Not the way Disney defines it anyway.

Just because we've made our way through the wilderness...
Just because we may have found our place of belonging...
And just because our eyes may have been opened to a new way of living...
Does not mean that we will now have a fairy tale life...
A life of ease.

Absolutely in this kingdom of God, we are filled with the love of God....
And that love is the same love that Jesus lived by...
And what happened to him?

I would love to tell you that after an uneasy, unfamiliar time in the wilderness...
Once we've found our way to God's kingdom...
Once we are living more deeply into God's love...
That there'll be no more pain.. suffering.. restless nights... challenging days.

But I don't think false reassurance is at all helpful.

When the man could see and went to take his place in the world, to begin living his new life, there was, right away... controversy... conflict.

It seems as though others weren't so comfortable with him breaking free from his place and finding a new way of life.

First, his neighbours started to debate about whether he was actually the same person who used to beg.

Then they brought him to the temple authorities who interrogated him...

And then interrogated his parents...

And then interrogated him some more.

At this point he was probably wondering if his new way of seeing was worth all the trouble.

When he refused to tell them that Jesus was a sinner for healing on the sabbath... they drove him right on out of town.

Well, eventually the authorities drove him out.

This is the struggle between two worlds...

Those who hold tightly to the things of this world...

Who's lives are built on wealth and power... authority and influence....

On things staying the same – people staying the same...

Of our world views and beliefs staying the same...

Have a really hard time seeing in a new way, moving into the wilderness and through to the new world that Jesus talked so much about:

“the kingdom of God is at hand”

And...

Those who do risk the wilderness –

Who find a sense of belonging...

Who discover a greater purpose...

Who surround themselves in God's love....

May find that the structures, systems.... ways of this world are often not very friendly towards them.

They make them uncomfortable.

Think about Gandhi... Martin Luther King... Nelson Mandela... Oscar Romero.

All of them discovered their place in the world... in God's world – God's kingdom -

And all of them experienced hostility.

And yet... I don't think any of them wanted to live a life of blindness – figuratively speaking, of course.

Because living in that kind of blindness makes it impossible to live – to be – fully alive.

, none of them wished to return to a life of blindness.

All of them had to bear the burden... or as some might say – carry the cross... and yet they felt the blessings of God, because they knew that God, through Jesus, shared in their struggle. Through Jesus, God experienced persecution. God experienced the cross.

God's desire is that we live a life of wholeness. Because no matter how uncomfortable... or even how hostile... life can be... there is no better way to live... It is living in this way that we find our place of longing... of belonging.

So we carry the cross knowing that what follows the cross is resurrection... What follows the cross is new life.

Hymn: It's a Song of Praise to the Maker

Prayers

The LORD is good to all and has compassion on all God has made. (Psalm 145:2)

God of the blessed
we praise you, for mercy shown, grace given, for love shared, for Spirit's power.
We ask you for daily strength, hope for tomorrow, your word to guide, strong feet to follow
(silence)

God of Compassion: **Hear our prayer**

God of the oppressed we bring to you the broken ones, forgotten ones, exploited and abused ones.

Bring freedom and release, love and compassion to damaged hearts and souls **(silence)**

God of compassion: **Hear our prayer**

God of the distressed, we bring to you the grieving ones, hurting ones, suffering and wounded ones.

Bring wholeness and healing comfort and relief, to broken bodies and minds **(silence)**

God of compassion: **Hear our prayer**

God of the dispossessed we bring to you the lonely ones, the homeless ones, thirsty, tired and penniless ones.

Bring hope and sustenance physical and spiritual food, to hungry bodies and souls **(silence)**

God of compassion: **Hear our prayer**

The LORD is good and he has compassion on all God has made.

May the peace, love and compassion of the Lord be with us now and always.

All of this we pray to the God of compassion in the name and love of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray this way... Our Father/Mother

Sung Closing

Blessing

We continue our journey into the wilderness

Be comforted and encouraged by the truth that we do not journey alone...

We are held in the tender and abundant love of God,

Christ is with us, strengthening us for the times of struggle,

and the Spirit is guiding us every step of the way.

Amen.

Sung Blessing