

Sermon Isaiah 42:14-21

Translation:

For a long time I have held my peace;
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor;
I will gasp and pant.

[15] I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their vegetation;
I will turn the rivers into islands,
and dry up the pools.

[16] And I will lead the blind
in a way that they do not know,
in paths that they have not known
I will guide them.

I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I do,

and I do not forsake them.

[17] They are turned back and utterly put to shame,
who trust in carved idols,
who say to metal images,
"You are our gods."

[18] Hear, you deaf,
and look, you blind, that you may see!

[19] Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf as my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind as my dedicated one,
or blind as the servant of the Lord?

[20] He sees many things, but does not observe them;
his ears are open, but he does not hear.

[21] The Lord was pleased, for his righteousness' sake,
to magnify his law and make it glorious.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Beloved in Christ,

Our brief mediation this evening is on the Old Testament lesson for this past Sunday, the 4th Sunday in Lent. Once again the lesson connects with the Gospel for the day, which tells of the healing of the man born blind, who was given both physical and spiritual sight by our Lord. The Pharisees and rulers of the Jews, however, though they were able to see with their eyes, saw and did not understand, but remained in spiritual blindness and unbelief. Our text gives us the perspective of almighty God as he prepared and executed judgement upon his people, Israel of old, for they, likewise, had every reason to see and understand, but turned in blindness to idols. If they would only acknowledge their lack of spiritual sight and repent, for the Lord had every good intention to deal with them in mercy and righteousness according to his ancient Word of Promise.

Dear friends, today is also the Feast of the Annunciation, when we commemorate the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, a virgin of Bethlehem, of whom the Christ would be born. We will celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Day, 9 months from today, should God grant it to us, his Church in this place. Fitting, then, that the Lord should describe himself in terms of a woman's labour. Whatever could he mean?

The Lord our God is patient and does not quickly burn with anger against his wayward people. He is, rather, forbearing, and angers slowly. His rage is a long time in coming. He holds his peace, keeps his mouth shut, restrains himself, and bears the burden of man's sin and his worship of all but the true God. God does not desire the death of the sinner, but that he turn from his evil and live. God wants all to be saved. God looks for the prodigal, anticipates our crying out in need, longs to come to our rescue, wants to bestow on us his gracious gifts in his Son, but we are preoccupied with everything else. So it was in Israel in the days of Isaiah, when the people of Israel put God to the test, and expected him not to do anything about their idolatry.

Finally, after carrying the load for so long, as a woman painfully bears her baby about to be born, the Lord must cry out, gasp and pant. Finally his judgement comes: "**I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools.**" This is a picture of the final judgement of the world, when the earth, even the universe, will be decimated, burned up in unquenchable fire, where not a drop of water will remain to refresh the land and its inhabitants. Every disaster in history and our current plague as well is a sign of that coming Day of the Lord, when all will have to answer to God.

You might think it extreme to say that this virus that rages throughout the world is a judgement of the Lord. You might argue that it has nothing to do with God, that it is explainable from a medical and scientific perspective . . .and you would be absolutely right, from a fleshly point of view. But that does not mean that God does not have his hand in this, for nothing occurs on earth apart from his will. No, he is not the cause of evil and cannot be blamed for our afflictions and troubles; we did this to ourselves, for this and every other hardship of life is our lot, for we are like our first parents, who fell into sin, and we are under the same curse.

Consider what God has done: By permitting this disease to run through the world, he has removed from the world the freedom to pursue many of our pleasures, the things that many live and work for. We are not able to play sports, to watch sports, to gather in restaurants and bars, to shop and visit places of interest and entertainment. Partying has stopped, playing music together, dancing, even card-playing among friends. There are no conferences, conventions, or workshops,

schools no longer function, and many are not able to go to work to get the money we run after above all. We are confined to our homes and must find enjoyment in our families and loved ones, who are in many cases people we hardly know, because we live such insular, selfish, self-absorbed, even decadent and immoral lives. How many live out their days as God described the people of Noah's days, for **"the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."** Does this not grieve the heart of God?

This judgement has also come upon the Christian Church, as this video clearly shows. God's people are not able to gather to hear his Word preached. We are not able to hear Holy Absolution pronounced upon the assembly of the faithful. We must gather in our homes as a few, as couples, even as individuals to meditate upon God's Word from afar. And what of the Supper of Our Lord, which has now been taken from us? Do we miss it? Do we long for the Body and Blood of Christ that grants forgiveness, life and salvation? If it is that we can take it or leave it, if it is that it doesn't matter to us that the churches are empty and that the fellowship of the Body of Christ is impaired, why should the Lord restore these gifts to his people? If we are worshipping idols and have no use for the God who has become our Saviour in Jesus Christ, perhaps he will take the precious gifts of his grace elsewhere and not return. This is a sobering thought in a desperate time, beloved.

We are like the Jews of Jesus' day, like the people of Isaiah's time – blind. We do not see; we do not understand. If we would only acknowledge it. Like the Pharisees, we claim to see, to know, to get it, to comprehend. We think we really understand how the world works and we know the things that are important, even essential in life. But God says, *"No, you don't get it."* He says to the idolaters: **"They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, 'You are our gods.'"** But who has idols, carved objects and metal images? Dear friends, whatever you fear, love and trust in this life above God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is your god: your home, your car, your family and friends, your livelihood, your investments, and your leisure—all of it can be your idol, your god, to the exclusion of the only One who has redeemed us from sins, from death and Satan. **"Seek first the Kingdom of God!"** We don't live by bread, **"by every word that comes from the mouth of God."**

Do you perceive your blindness? Good. You are very close to the Kingdom of God, for the Lord wants just such people, the spiritually blind, the lost, those in darkness and fear. What does he say? **"And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them."** What is that way, those paths, dear friends? How will the Lord guide the lost? How will he find them and not forsake them? In his Son, for Jesus said, **"I am the light of the world."** **"For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."**

Jesus came to give sight to the spiritual blind, that in him they should find the Kingdom of God and enter into his glorious eternity. God has permitted this judgement, but he has not forsaken his Church, nor will he forsake anyone who turns to him in sorrow and humility and seeks his grace and mercy his Son, who is the sacrifice for the sins of the world. Yes, you can go it alone and take your chances as you face death, or you can hold on to the One who came to lead us into the Promised Land of heaven—Jesus Christ!

He calls out to you. He says,

**"Hear, you deaf,
and look, you blind, that you may see!
Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf as my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind as my dedicated one,
or blind as the servant of the Lord?
He sees many things, but does not observe them;
his ears are open, but he does not hear."**

Our ears and eyes are open to all that is going on around us. We have our eyes glued to our screens and our ears attuned to every bit of news, every report of what is happening in this frantic and fearful world. But do we hear God? Listen to him, beloved. Why? **"The Lord was pleased, for his righteousness' sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious."** Don't think in terms of God's accusing Word, his commandments. Think of his saving Word, his Word of Promise, his Torah, which is the Gospel, the promise of the Saviour who has already come and prepared the Kingdom of heaven for all believers. Indeed, God gave his Son into death on a cross because he loves not just his Church, but the whole world of sinful people, lost people, blind people. Jesus is the messenger of God, sent by the Father to take our place, to be as blind, to be as one lost and forsaken by God, for us! God has magnified the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Christ! He has made it a glorious Gospel, able to save, able to give hope and even joy to the blind, those in darkness, those living in the shadow of death. He has done so for the sake of his righteousness, which he has granted to us by faith in his Son, who rose from death and now rules all things. Therefore, we will fear no evil. He leads us as a shepherd, and by his rod and staff he comforts our anxious and grieving souls. The judgement is coming, but it holds no fear for the blind who now have sight in Christ! Amen.