The miracle that Jesus performs in this passage almost gets lost amid all of the debates that happen about its meaning. Jesus and his disciples are walking around Jerusalem when they see a blind baker. He’s the kind of person we see on the streets of large cities and, if we’re honest with ourselves, we often try to avoid those people. He might also be someone who shows up at our food pantry. In Jesus’s time there were no food pantries, no public assistance, or any of that. So, people with handicaps were often expected to beg for charity on the streets, so that anyone who helped them could feel better about themselves.

The disciples are in Jerusalem for the Passover feast with Jesus, and they seem to just be walking around the city at this point. And when the disciples and Jesus see this blind man, he becomes the occasion for a theological debate, at least for the disciples. Was this man a sinner, did this man sin, or did his parents sin, that he was born blind? The disciples assumed that somebody must have screwed up, and they want to hear Jesus pronounce judgement on the guilty party. Notice that they don’t really say anything about helping this man in any way, shape, or form. They just want to hear Jesus pronounce judgement on the guilty party.

Jesus, typically, rejects the terms that the disciples set for this discussion. Jesus is more interested in showing God’s mercy at work, than in parsing out who sinned. He tells the disciples that, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God’s works may be revealed in him. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” This man, Jesus says, wasn’t born blind as a punishment, or as a statement of inferiority, or so that anybody else could feel better about themselves. His blindness is instead an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate God’s grace with a healing.

I wrote this sermon this week during the time of increasing anxiety over a virus. And I’ll admit that a part of me really wanted to write a sermon that didn’t mention the coronavirus, because I was thinking, maybe we’ve all heard about it a little bit too much. By the time I finished last week’s sermon, I’d already talked about it somewhat, and events were being cancelled, and everyone was talking about how long it would last.

Since social distancing has entered our lexicon, and people have lived in varying states of quarantine, that’s really all that we’ve been talking about. And I’ll admit that a part of me has been saying all week that I don’t have time for this, and the church doesn’t have time for this. It’s already Lent season, and the closures are supposed to go through Palm Sunday, and they might last longer. And I feel like, maybe we’re all waiting with Jesus in the tomb already, waiting to come out on Easter. Grocery store shelves are bare, stock markets are falling, reliable information is in short supply, and there’s a sense of anxiety verging on panic.

And this isn’t how I wanted to spend Lent, and I think it’s not how most of us wanted to spend Lent. But what if, like the unnamed beggar’s blindness, this situation isn’t just about sickness. What if our situation can be used so that God’s works might be revealed in it. God’s works, after all, aren’t just revealed in easy times. They’re revealed even more when there’s trouble, when we don’t quite know what to do. What if social distancing and new challenges are not’ an inconvenience, but a chance to rethink, or think more deeply, about how we can relate to God and how we can serve God. Maybe this time is a chance to deepen our understanding of what it means to belong to God, and what it means to serve God.

Today’s story revolves around first, the healing of a blind man, but also, it revolves around how people interpret that miracle and come to understand what the miracle says about Jesus. We start with a man who was born blind. His neighbors know this man as a beggar, and the recipient of charity and pity, and maybe not a whole lot more. Jesus’s disciples see this man as an opportunity to assign judgement. Who’s fault is it that this man is blind? Jesus is having none of that. He sees this blind beggar as more than a charity case, more than a victim. And so he heals this man, and helps this man to be restored to the community in a fuller sense. So God’s works are revealed in this man.

We see God’s grace at work as Jesus sees a person in need and makes them whole. He restores him to the community. Not only that, but the man comes to understand who Jesus is, and becomes, in John’s terms, “a witness to Jesus as the Son of Man.” In John’s Gospel, that's really the purpose of all of the healings and the feedings of large crowds, it’s so that Jesus can demonstrate God’s concern for every person. The understanding of this formerly blind man evolves over the course of this story as the man is healed, and then confronted repeatedly by the Pharisees, and even his own parents, who seem not to believe. They refuse to see Jesus as doing God’s work, they already see this man as a sinner.

Nevertheless, this formerly blind man realizes that he’s become whole. And through that healing and wholeness, he experiences God’s grace, and comes to believe in Jesus. His witness, we have to assume, might even lead someone else to become whole.

As closures and restrictions and gatherings have mounted around the state, and the community, and the country, I have to admit that I wondered how we could still be the church. Would Lent be interrupted? Would worship stop entirely? But then I realized, how can God’s grace be interrupted? God’s grace isn’t cancelled by disease or anything else.

Maybe we’re all a little bit like this blind man. We’re in the dark, but Jesus shows up in the dark with us. He can find us and bring us light, and he can help us to respond to him. Jesus says, “You must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.” I think that it’s still daytime, and Jesus’s light is still here with us. Maybe it’s just time to be a little creative, and to look a little bit harder for Jesus.

I found this week that our food pantry has continued, we’ve had to set up some new procedures, not just to follow the rules, but to protect people. To protect each other. To continue to care about each other in new ways. We’re here experimenting with a new worship format. Again, church has not been canceled. We are still worshipping God, because that’s what we as a church do. We have an opportunity to worship in a new way, to continue worshipping, and to even be more committed to worship, because the format is different, because we’re having to do it differently.

I think God is calling us to come together and care about each other even more during these difficult times. I think God is calling us to check on our neighbors and our friends, to see them not just as people who lie nearby, but as people we maybe need to be intentional about caring for.

And I think we need to double down right now on our spiritual disciplines, on our prayer, and on our devotions, and our time with God. Because we have maybe a little bit more time on our hands. I found, in solitude and silence this week, I had more time than ever to really ponder what it looks like to serve God during this time. Maybe like this blind man we’re all going to understand who Jesus is in our lives right now.

And I think God really is challenging us to look to God when we’re in a state of anxiety. Because anxiety is really rampant right now. 1 John 24 is often attributed to the same author who wrote John, it was either the same person or likely another member of the same community that this Gospel came out of.

1 John 24 says this: “But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” That’s challenging. We can't help but fear sometimes. Especially when there’s a pandemic, and a lot of things are closed. But God’s perfect love, I believe, can help us with our fear and our anxiety. I think, number one, we should respond by trying to love our neighbors. By turning to God and remembering we’re called to love one another as we’re loved by God.

I think we should look for facts during this time. Look for facts on how we can prevent the spread of disease, and on what we should be doing right now. Like the disciples, we’re tempted to look for a culprit, or a scapegoat. Let’s remember that it’s more important to control disease and be safe right now, and to help one another, than it is to assign blame. It's regrettable that some of our leaders are talking about a “Chinese virus.” We’re all in this together, I think.

Let’s resist the urge to panic-buy, or to be careless, and instead turn to God. I mentioned Lenten disciples a while ago. This time of isolation can be a time of prayer and worship. Like this blind man, we can come to understand more deeply who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him. Amen.