

Kiama Jamberoo Uniting Church
Lent 4
Sunday 22 March 2020

Scattered and Gathered

Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14 and John 9:1-41

Reflection

Well this week has certainly been different!

Today I am recording this message in my study at home in the hope that some of you will be able to download and watch it in the comfort of your own homes.

We can't meet all together for the time being, but that doesn't mean we can't share in worship and prayer together - we just need to find other ways to do that. And in the process, we are all learning new skills.

For those who do not have access to the internet, I am hoping that our Pastoral Partners might be able to deliver the written copy; and if you know of anyone who would like to receive my updates or worship notes, then please let me know and we will make that happen.

For the time being, we are asked to not meet together in larger gatherings and to keep a safe distance from each other. This will help to prevent this virus from spreading too rapidly so we can keep everyone safe.

We know the virus will still spread, and we know that people who are already vulnerable from illness or age or both are even more vulnerable. But we know that if we can slow it down, our health system has a much better chance of being able to manage.

That's the short, rational version, as I understand it.

Then there is the irrational - last week it was toilet paper; this week it is non-perishable food and other random grocery items (who knew that the world needed so much tomato sauce?!).

When I went to the supermarket on Friday, I came away feeling just a bit sad - many shelves were bare and there was a limit on how many cans of food I could buy - just 2. Now for me, that's fine - I don't have a large family to feed. But I can't imagine how I would feel if that was all I was allowed to buy to feed a family of more than 2.

Then this morning, I had reason to go to the shops again and decided to have breakfast there.

The shops were almost empty (apart from the supermarket) and the cafes are really struggling.

But here was the cafe owner, with the music turned up, singing at the top of her voice as she made coffee and meals for her few customers. What an effort - "staying positive", she said. It certainly made me smile!

Light in the darkness, says the letter to the church at Ephesus.

"Live as children of the Light" (Eph 5:8).

So how do we shine light when we are asked to hide away to protect ourselves from a danger we can't see?

We sing! Loudly!

We keep our eyes open to those around us - pick up the phone, send an email, send a note - and follow up if you don't get a response! Check on our neighbours.

Here in the middle of Lent, I have seen a meme doing the rounds of Facebook saying something like, "I never imagined I would be giving up this much for Lent!"

The gospel reading from John's gospel tells the story of a man, born blind, who encounters Jesus. First Jesus makes it clear that his blindness is not the punishment for sin (John 9:3). Our illness or disability is never a punishment for sin - God is not like that!

And then Jesus makes a poultice from saliva and mud and puts it on the man's eyes. [Definitely, in no circumstances, should we be trying this at home, particularly given the warnings about how Covid-19 is transmitted!] Jesus tells him to go and wash it off in the pool of Siloam.

The man does as he is told and when he returns, he can see.

The Pharisees are not happy. First, here is an unexplained healing by someone unknown to them, and second, it was done on the Sabbath.

They track the man down and question him and then they question his parents. But they don't get the answers they want so they question the man again - and here we have the words made famous by John Newton, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." (Jn 9:25) The man, now able to see, proclaims that Jesus is "from God" but the Pharisees don't like it and drive him out (Jn 9:34).

Jesus finds out that the man has been treated like this by the Pharisees and seeks him out. The exchange between Jesus and this man ends with the man professing his belief in Jesus, the Son of Man and worshipping him.

The passage ends with the Pharisees asking Jesus about their own blindness, "Surely not us?" "Absolutely you," says Jesus. Because you think you can see, because you think you know it all, you are still caught in darkness and sin.

Can you find yourself in this story?

Are you like the man born blind, now given the gift of sight, seeing the world anew or in a fresh light, giving praise to Jesus, worshipping him?

Or are you like the Pharisees, refusing to see the new thing God is doing in the world, that thing that breaks apart our expectations and reshapes the world, thinking that we already know all there is to know?

What are we blind to?

How might we ask God to break through our blindness and help us to see with God's eyes, to hear with God's ears, to feel with God's heart, to understand with God's mind?

In many ways, this time of spatial distancing, and isolation, while difficult for many of us (we need to keep in touch and make sure we all have what we need for our physical well-being), might also give us opportunity to see our lives and our communities in a new light. In being forced to stop all our regular activities, perhaps we can take some time to think about what we do, how we spend our time, are these things helping to grow God's kingdom in the world or do we need to re-shape or re-frame some of the things we do - as individuals and as a church?

Psalm 23 reminds us that though we pass through rough times, God is always with us. May God's presence be real to you. Always.

Rev Kath Merrifield
21 March 2020