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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2023

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ps. 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

I cannot begin to tell you how many times I have shared this story with friends and colleagues since mid-December (and just so you know I have permission from the people involved to share it with you today). You might remember that last fall after we didn't have the funds to hire a music/choir director, we asked our wonderful volunteers Sue Gault and Joanne Donnellan to direct the choir once a month. Joanne was preparing to direct the 3 choir anthems on Christmas Eve, but she was also hoping to play her violin on one of the pieces.

On December 11th after worship, Joanne elbowed me and pointed to a man who was part of a couple who had attended worship that day and asked, "do you know who that is?" I looked at him and said, "I have no idea who that is." She said, "that's Don Clausen who is one of the top choral conductors in the State of Washington!" Joanne and Don knew of each other and had served on the Washington Music Educators Board at different times. Don and his wife Jenise had recently moved to Ferndale, were both accomplished musicians, and Don had also directed choirs or served as a keyboardist in several congregations. They had visited Christ Lutheran the week before and Don had mentioned to Joanne that he would be happy to substitute if ever needed. Joanne said to me, "I'm going to ask him to direct one anthem on Christmas Eve so I can play violin." She did, Don said yes...and that afternoon Joanne had a heart attack.

You might remember the rest of this story, most importantly the fact that Joanne recovered—thanks be to God!—and Don ended up directing all 3 anthems on Christmas Eve, despite weather affecting 2 of the scheduled rehearsals. And since then, Don has filled in accompanying our worship services and volunteering as the choir director. And then...this story continues...Don's wife Jenise found out that she needed open heart surgery to rebuild an aortic wall and replace a valve, which she had just this past Tuesday. Again—thanks be to God!—Jenise is doing well. But what started as

a way to support Joanne on one anthem turned into the support of our entire congregation's music ministry which turned into support of Don and Jenise by our entire congregation.

Now someone from outside our congregation might see this as a wonderful story that includes a whole bunch of little coincidences. What a coincidence that Don and Jenise happened to worship at Christ Lutheran on December 11th. What a coincidence that Joanne happens to live across the street from Jennie McLaurin, a doctor in that blue house across the parking lot, who was home the Sunday afternoon Joanne had her heart attack and had Joanne chew some baby aspirin which probably saved her life. What a coincidence that Don was available to play piano when Emily needed to take a leave of absence and then step down from her job. What a coincidence that Don and Jenise decided to join our congregation right before Jenise found out she needed open heart surgery.

But these are not just coincidences. These are what I would call "God-incidences." There is no doubt in my mind that God brought Don and Jenise to Christ Lutheran. There is no doubt in my mind that God led Jennie to have Joanne chew a baby aspirin. There is no doubt in my mind that God put Don here to fill in the gaps of our music ministry. There is no doubt in my mind that God put our congregation in Don and Jenise's life to support them right now.

Do you see how what could be construed as just luck or happenstance is really the masterful work of God? Do you see how these are actually encounters with Jesus himself that we experience through one another? Do you see how the Holy Spirit works to give us exactly what we need?

I ask you these questions because even though we experience God-incidences all the time, sometimes it's even hard for us as people of faith, as religious people, to see it.

In the gospel story today, some very religious people couldn't see the work of God. The Pharisees, the ultra-conservative, law-following Jewish sect in first century Palestine, were sure that the man born blind was not given his sight by Jesus. "How could someone who is a sinner, who doesn't observe the sabbath, perform such signs?" they asked. Not only did they not believe the man who had been born blind; they didn't believe his parents either.

They could not see the masterful work of God. To them it was only a coincidence that the man born blind now saw. There was no way that it could be from God that Jesus restored his sight.

When the Pharisees overheard Jesus confirm for the man born blind that, yes, he was the one who restored his sight, they asked Jesus, “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.” Do you understand what their sin was? Their sin was not seeing the work of God, even though it was happening right in front of them.

But surely we are not blind, are we?

My dear friends in Christ, life does not just happen. God is neither controlling us like marionettes nor did God stop creating after the book of Genesis. But God is constantly working in our lives, weaving God’s wisdom and hand and grace into our decisions, our circumstances, our longings. But do we see it? Or do we, too, just think the things that happen to us are coincidences?

During this season of Lent we are given the precious opportunity to slow down, to return to the heart of God. We are called to step back from the day-to-day hecticness and routine of our lives to see God present and active. We are invited to make connections between what unfolds in our lives and the work of the Holy Spirit. We are given the opportunity to trust that if God through Jesus can work to create sight in a man born blind, surely God can unfold our lives with grace.

On Ash Wednesday Intern Pastor Jory encouraged us to take up a practice to renew our faith during the season of Lent. If you have slipped a little since then, or if you meant to begin a practice but it didn’t quite happen, let this be your invitation to renew your faith—to see the God-incidences in your life.

Because here’s the thing. Like he did with the man born blind, Jesus sees us—sees our need—and acts in our lives without us even asking for it. Jesus approached the man, spat on the ground to make mud, spread it on his eyes, and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam. It was after he was washed of the mess that he tells his neighbors and the Pharisees three times in this gospel, “I was blind but now I see.”

You and I have been washed of the mess of our lives in our baptismal waters. God is actively working to bring about new ways of being, new connections, new life that sustains us. That is not a coincidence. It is God actively at work.

As you’ve heard me say before, when things unfold and emerge in your life without you pushing, pulling, shoving or manipulating them into being, that’s the work of the Holy Spirit. It’s not a coincidence, it’s a God-incidence.

So for the rest of this season of Lent, get out of the way of the Holy Spirit. For the next three weeks, let God come to you and work in your life. Look for the ways that God is making connections, putting people or situations in your life that support you, covering you with grace.

Perhaps write about what happens to you in your journal so it’s easier to see the connections that God is bringing about. Remember your baptism every day – make the sign of the cross on your forehead and say out loud, I am a beloved child of God, I am a beloved child of God, and see how you act differently because you believe it. Trust that God will give you what you need, and then watch for the ways the Holy Spirit brings it into being.

Look for God-incidences the rest of this Lenten season, so that you can say like the man born blind, and you can sing as all we will now, “I was blind but now I see.” Amen.