

Isaiah 42. 1-9 (St. Michael's – Mar. 29, 2020)

Good morning St. Michael's, I bid you grace and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I'm so grateful for the gift of technology, that allows us to worship together at a time like this.

As I reflect on the crisis and upheaval of recent days, I'm reminded of a scene in the Lord of the Rings. The hero, Frodo, and his company are deep in an underground cave. They're being hunted by goblins and their prospects look dim. And at one point Frodo despairingly says to his friend Gandalf, 'I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.' And Gandalf responds, 'So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'

A month ago it would have been hard to imagine what we're facing now. But face it we must. There are no

alternatives. Each of us must decide what to do with the time that is given us.

Fortunately though, even in unprecedented times, God provides His timeless Word. Jesus says '*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*' Yes, His Word is Life. And so this morning let us feed our souls on His Word.

The prophet Isaiah was also writing in a time of great danger and calamity. The empire of Assyria was literally at the gates of Jerusalem, and Isaiah also saw Babylon on the horizon. Isaiah knew that immense amounts of suffering were coming soon. And into this crisis Isaiah speaks words of comfort and challenge, calling his readers to respond well, in the time that is given them.

Today's passage is marked by the threefold repetition of the word 'Behold.' Three times Isaiah calls us to behold

something that we need to see in the crisis. And these three things are:

1. Behold the idols.
2. Behold the servant.
3. Behold the new things.

First, behold the idols. In the last verses of chapter 41, Isaiah offers scathing critique of idols. And he asks his readers to look these idols. In verse 24 he says of the idols, ‘Behold you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing. An abomination is he who chooses you.’ Later in verse 29, Isaiah says, ‘Behold the idolaters are all a delusion, their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind.’

Essentially, Isaiah challenges us to do something that is incredibly hard, but incredibly important. He calls us to look at our idols and see how hollow they are.

Now most of the time we don’t want to do this. We don’t want to see how fragile our lives are and how impotent are the things to which we cling. But this virus is exposing

our hearts and our idols. And we're realizing, Can the stock market save me? Can my status save me? Can my technological prowess save me? Can my physical attractiveness save us? Can pleasure and entertainment save me?

No, the global fear and anxiety demonstrates that our idols are not delivering the peace we look to them for. Instead, they're hanging us out to dry. They're 'empty wind' in the words of Isaiah. And we're shivering with exposure.

David Foster Wallace, was the most promising novelist of the 21st century. He took his own life in 2008 at the age of 46. He was not a Christian, but he understood the tragic power of idols. He wrote:

“Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. [And other than god] pretty much anything else will eat you alive. If you worship money you'll never have enough, never feel you have enough... Worship your body and beauty and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age

start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you...Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will always need more power over others to numb your own fear... Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you'll end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. [And] the insidious thing about these forms of worship...it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings.”

Wallace brilliantly notes how even in the best of circumstances, idols destroy their votaries. And we're seeing this now on a macro scale.

For the first time since the World Wars, we're feeling our collective vulnerability. We aren't God. We don't have all the solutions. We don't have all the answers. You know, we can put a man on the moon, but we can't produce enough masks for our doctors and nurses.

For the first time in generations we're feeling our collective mortality, and this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Because most of the time we live in an idolatrous dream-world of vapid contentment, not realizing how precious and precarious life is.

Herman Melville, writing in *Moby Dick*, observed, *'It's only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life.'*

The great 4th century saint, Jerome actually walked around with a human skull chained to his ankle as a way of reminding himself of mortality. Because as painful as it is, this awareness is good for our souls.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn who spent 8 years in a Soviet Gulag wrote this, *'Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.'*

And so Isaiah urges us to behold our idols. Behold our true condition.

But secondly, in verse 1 of chapter 42 Isaiah also calls us to behold the Servant. *'Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I've put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.'* In contrast to idols, this servant is the one who will make things right. His agenda is justice. Three times it says He will bring justice.

Now the Hebrew word for justice, Mizpot, means so much more than our English word. It doesn't just mean punishing the wicked. It means setting things right so that people can flourish. It means there's nothing missing or lacking. It's similar to shalom, peace. And this is the servant's mission.

And the way the servant does this is breathtaking. It's like nothing the world has ever seen: Verse 2: the Servant *'Will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.'*

This servant is clearly a kingly figure as he brings justice to the nations, but His mode of doing so is unprecedented. He doesn't raise his voice, he doesn't broadcast his agenda, He treats people with incredible kindness and gentleness.

Later in verse 7 the Servant gives sight to the blind and brings prisoners out of the dungeon. What king has ever ruled in this way, but Jesus Christ? And what kind of king do we need now, so desperately, but this Servant.

I don't know about you, but many times this week I've felt like a bruised reed. Trying to process this nightmare. But the good news is that when we are in this place, feeling weak, frightened, discouraged, overwhelmed, Jesus doesn't crush us. He doesn't leave us behind. He doesn't say, 'Pull yourself together or I'm done with you.' He doesn't crush a bruised reed.

Tuesday night I had a conference call with a bunch of Dads and one of them shared how this past week was the

hardest week of his life. He's in banking and his wife is a medical doctor on the front lines, and so he's feeling this acutely and was overwhelmed. He said he was so stressed out he was having trouble breathing.

But over the weekend he turned to God and he prayed and surrendered his fear. And Jesus met him in that place. And the Dad told us that this past weekend with his family was the best one they'd had together in years, as he experienced a peace he'd never known before.

Yes my friends, the servant continues to serve. He continues his mission. He calls us to give Him our burdens. And as we experience his gentle kindness, we can then share it with others.

And so let's be kind to one another. Whatever else, use this time to love more deeply than you ever have before. Mike Mason wrote one of the most profound things I've ever heard: *'Somehow we must learn to mourn our loved ones*

while they're still alive, not waiting until they are gone and our grief does no one but ourselves any good.'

And so love well. And grieve with those who grieve. Don't suppress your emotions. Don't resign yourself stoically, or detach from our hurting world. Weep with those who weep. Jesus was a man of sorrows who grieved with suffering friends.

The writer Nicolas Wolterstorf, after the tragic death of his son, wrote this, *'I shall now look at the world through tears. [And] perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.'*

One simple way of loving well is to write notes to those you care about, sharing your heart and what's most important to you. If you've never done so, do so now, while you have the time. In 1758 Johnathan Edwards, the greatest American intellectual, was on his deathbed, dying of smallpox at the age of 54, and he wrote this to his daughter.

‘Dear Lucy, It seems to me to be the will of God, that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue forever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now like to be left fatherless; which I hope will be an inducement to you all, to seek a Father who will never fail you.’

Again, what can we do with the time that is given us?

Let’s not cower in fear, but step out in faith, daring things we have never dared before.

Last week in St. Michael’s daily devotional, I noted that Christians have found themselves in crises many times before. From Nazis to cholera, from Vikings to bubonic plague. And the historic Christian response is striking.

Did you know that in the early days of Christianity, two massive epidemics ravaged the Roman Empire? In the years 165 and 251 AD. Experts suggest that a third of the population was wiped out by the plague. In Rome they were burying 5,000 people a day. It was so horrifying that almost everyone fled the cities – including Galen, the famous doctor.

This was extreme biological terror. So great that people abandoned their friends, their faith, and their morality. But not everyone fled the cities. The Christians stayed put. And they not only cared for their own, but their pagan neighbors as well. An eyewitness named Dionysus wrote this:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need...and with them departed this life... for they were infected by others, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others transferred their

death to themselves and died in their stead. The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner.'

My friends, what could drive people to do this? To care for unknown and inconvenient strangers, knowing they would likely die? Simply because they followed the Servant, who came to care for the bruised reeds, the smoldering wicks, the blind and those in prison.

The sociologist Rodney Stark notes that the rise of Christianity in these early centuries was largely because of their response to these horrifying epidemics. People saw something in Christians they'd never seen before.

And this leads us to the third point. Isaiah calls us to behold our idols, to behold the servant, and lastly, he calls us to behold a new thing. Verse 9: *'Behold the former things have come to pass and new things I declare.'*

What are the new things God declares? Isaiah tells us in the following chapters, culminating in chapter 65: *'Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things*

shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create. For behold, I create Jerusalem to be joy and her people to be a gladness. No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days.'

Isaiah is talking about resurrection. Not just of a person, but of the cosmos. One day, God will make all things new. As Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, this whole world will one day be raised, and death will be no more.

And the key thing about resurrection, is that it's not a mere *consolation* but a *restoration*. It's not that we'll float away into some pleasant Nirvana where we can forget our sufferings. No! The Bible tells us we'll receive new bodies, to serve God in a new creation with all those who have gone before us in faith. *This* is what we have to look forward to. And it's this hope that allows us to live courageously in the present.

As the missionary martyr Jim Eliot said before his death, ‘He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.’ In the midst of suffering, God tells us ‘*Be glad and rejoice forever in what I create.*’ Because in Him it is well with our souls.

This hope is put best by Dostoyevski when he writes:

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage...that in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.’

In the words of Julian of Norwich, ‘*All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.*’

In closing though, there's one more thing. Isaiah tells us that the Servant comes to bring justice and to restore all things. But there's more. It's hinted at in verse 4, '*The Servant will not grow faint or be discouraged.*' This is a sign that the servant will face resistance. And we see this increasingly in the latter chapters of Isaiah, especially in Isaiah 53 where we see the servant's fate. On a mission of justice and mercy He is despised and rejected by men.

And the servant who would not raise his voice experiences the rolling thunder of hatred as the crowds shout in his face, 'crucify him.' The servant who would not break a bruised reed, is crushed for our iniquities. The one who came to bring justice and peace to the world, is taken away by oppression and judgment. And in the most twisted mockery of true worship, the servant is paraded before the taunting crowds, as Pilate says, 'Behold the man.'

And the very skies turn dark as the Son of God is bruised to death on the hill.

My friends, what can we do in the time that is given us? We can Repent of our idols. We can Run to the suffering and saving Servant. And we can Rest in the resurrection hope of Jesus Christ. Let us pray.

Gracious Father, thank you for your Word, thank you for your presence with us. Thank you that our times are in your hands. Lord, give us grace to see and turn from our idols, help us to know the heights and depths and breadth of Jesus' love. Protect us from all illness and evil, and give us an unshakable hope in your Resurrection. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions:

1. How has the coronavirus helped you to see your idols?
2. How can you go to Jesus at this time with you suffering and fears?
3. How do you envision the redeemed creation, and how can this inspire you to live in faith and not fear.