Please pray with me... Eternal and loving God, I pray that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, will be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.


“The Blind Men and the Elephant” – a poem by John Godfrey Saxe, based on a Hindu Fable:  IT was six men of Indostan, To learning much inclined, Who went to SEE the Elephant (Though all of them were blind), That each by observation Might satisfy his mind. ||| The First approached the Elephant, And happening to fall Against his broad and sturdy side, At once began to bawl: "God bless me!—but the Elephant Is very like a wall!" ||| The Second, feeling of the tusk, Cried: "Ho!—what have we here: So very round and smooth and sharp? To me 't is mighty clear This wonder of an Elephant Is very like a spear!" ||| The Third approached the animal, And happening to take The squirming trunk within his hands, Thus boldly up and spake: "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant Is very like a snake!" |||The Fourth reached out his eager hand, And felt about the knee. "What most this wondrous beast is like Is mighty plain," quoth he; "T is clear enough the Elephant Is very like a tree!" ||| The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said: "E'en the blindest man Can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can, This marvel of an Elephant Is very like a fan!" ||| The Sixth no sooner had begun About the beast to grope, Than, seizing on the swinging tail That fell within his scope, "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant Is very like a rope!" ||| And so these men of Indostan Disputed loud and long, Each in his own opinion Exceeding stiff and strong, Though each was partly in the right, And all were in the wrong! |||

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Last week, I started my sermon by talking about how much things can change in a week. We had gone from not shaking hands or hugging to preaching to an empty
church, in 7 days. Well, it’s been another week of change. +++ When I started planning this sermon series about “Milestones on our Lenten Wilderness Journey” – I had no way of knowing what Lent was going to end up looking like this year. Life was still what we would all call normal. We were all out and about doing our thing. And we had never heard the term “social distancing.” +++ Now, schools, stores, restaurants, churches, libraries, museums, sports leagues, hair salons... their doors are all closed. The governor has declared a 100% work reduction on non-essential workplaces. We’ve sent Gina and Steve home until further notice. Jane is working from home – so am I really, I just have the advantage of working where I live... Everyone is having a hard time finding enough food and supplies in the stores. Right now, as I record this sermon, I had been scheduled to be in New York City on a mission trip with our youth group. It was canceled... We’ve been looking forward to a big family wedding scheduled in New Jersey in less than a month and a half. What’s going to happen with that? +++ +++ We are all so certain that we know what “normal” means. We know what life is supposed to be like. Safe. Fed. Protected. Social. Physical contact, like shaking hands – ... hugging. That’s “normal” to us because it’s what we’ve experienced... But other people have a different normal – a normal that’s less secure, more hungry, and lonely. +++ +++ Like the blind man who felt a squirming trunk just knew an elephant is like a snake... Like the one who found the swinging tail just knew an elephant was like a rope... Yeah – part of the elephant is like that – part of the elephant is like the... one... limited thing he experienced. But NO: “rope” or “snake” doesn’t come close to capturing the essence of “elephant.” +++

So, it makes me wonder... is “change” really what we’re seeing? Is the world really a fundamentally different place than it was three weeks ago? Or... have we just reached
out and touched a different part of it – the big thick knee that feels like a tree – so
now, instead of a nice safe rope, life in this world is suddenly a big thick scary tree?
And we’re afraid we’ll never find that tail again... +++ The truth is – it’s BOTH...
And, it’s NEITHER. +++ This virus has changed the way we SEE each other – but
not really who we ARE: – That same person at the store who smiled at you last week
is suddenly your competition for that last avocado. A stranger passing on the
sidewalk is suddenly a threat to you and your family. +++ We think in black &
white. People are either this or that – LIFE is either this... or that. So, if it’s not this
anymore... maybe it will start always being that. Maybe that’s why this whole ordeal
we’re sharing is so scary. +++ We’re realizing that we don’t know what to expect
from life anymore. We’re getting a rude awakening that we are fragile – that
everything we do affects everyone else in the most profound ways – that to live is to
risk. +++ Assumptions about health, and safety, and relationships, are falling by the
wayside. Too often, if we make judgments – make choices – based on what we
THINK we know – we get it wrong.

That’s what happens to the great early prophet Samuel in today’s Old Testament
reading. God sends Samuel to the home of Jesse – where the Lord will tell Samuel
which of Jesse’s sons to anoint as the next king. +++ Well, Samuel thinks he knows
what kind of king the Lord wants, so he starts falling into typical stereotypes –
beginning with Eliab, who is handsome and tall. Samuel thinks, “Surely the Lord’s
anointed is NOW before the Lord.” +++ So, God calls a quick timeout with Samuel –
to make sure he understands the game plan. “Do not look on his appearance or on the
height of his stature...”, God says, “; for the LORD does not see as mortals see;
THEY look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” ....
[REPEAT] .... “for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the
OUTWARD appearance, but the Lord looks on the HEART.” +++ One by one, 7 of Jesse’s tall, strong, handsome, sons passed by Samuel and God rejected them all… Finally, Samuel asks if that’s all the sons, and Jesse tells him – “Well there’s the youngest one but he’s out keeping the sheep.” It was David. And, he was so young – and the others looked down on him so much – his own father hadn’t even invited him for the honor of meeting Samuel. He was handsome, but was a bit of a poet and musician – not the type for leadership… But, of course, David is the one God had chosen to be king. ++++++ You can see that black & white thinking working in Samuel’s head, can’t you? He had this preconceived idea of what God was looking for – big, strong, tall... He was stuck in a rut – he couldn’t imagine anointing this youngest son who had never done anything but keep his father’s sheep. ++++ Samuel felt the elephant’s hard and pointy tusk and thought the Lord was looking for a spear. +++ He forgot to just trust the Lord, and stop trying to see things for himself.

And then, there’s today’s gospel narrative about Jesus and the blind man. It is a miracle story but Jesus actual heals the man at the beginning of the passage. The rest of the narrative is really about how everyone sees each other – Jesus, his disciples, the pharisees, and even the healed man himself. +++ Just like Samuel in our first reading, everyone except Jesus only sees in part: – based on preconceptions, prejudice, judgment, or selfishness. +++ The reading opens: As Jesus “walked along, he SAW a man blind from birth.” ...Jesus sees the man for what he is – a child of God. But what do the disciples see? A sinner. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” If he was born blind, he must deserve it. That’s an easy trap to fall into for Christians, isn’t it? +++ I’ve heard the same thing from well-meaning Christians about this pandemic we find ourselves in right now. “Maybe God finally had enough of the way the world is going – I’ll bet this is to teach us a
lesson!” +++ Just like the disciples that day – why are followers of Christ always so certain about things like sin and judgment? We think we have answers... We **know** the truth! ...+++ ... *Just like the man who felt the elephant’s big floppy ear thought elephants must be like a fan.* +++ But Jesus shoots down the whole question. No – it’s not because *anyone* sinned. God does not make people sick as punishment! ... It’s just the opposite – Christ came **to ease** the man’s suffering – not to judge him for it. +++ +++ And then there’s the Pharisees and other people in the village. They’ve already got this guy pegged as a waste of space – a public nuisance. At first, they don’t believe Jesus really heals him – maybe he had been just **pretending** to be blind all this time. In fact, even **after** Jesus restores his sight, some continue calling him “the blind man” – instead of the man who was HEALED BY CHRIST. They can’t let him change from what they **think** they know about him. +++ And – in fact – like the smiling shopper who’s now going after that last avocado – like the stranger on the sidewalk that is suddenly a threat to your life:: the **man himself** really **hasn’t** changed. He is exactly the man Jesus saw to the core of his being at the opening of the story. +++ +++ But the community won’t let him **be**... **that** man. +++

And I wonder:: do WE do that? Do we hold onto misconceptions, or prejudices, or judgments about other people +++ ... about **ourselves (our suffering)** ... or about God? +++ +++ Do we think we know everything there is to know about **the Lord** based on just a little information? ... Everything about **people** without taking time to see what’s in their heart?... Everything about God... +++ by the little tiny speck of the universe we touch – +++ or the brief... passing moment... that is... ...this pandemic? +++ +++ Have **you** been tempted to lose hope... by reaching out... like the Blind Men and the Elephant,... do you reach out and feel the feels of **this** moment ... feel the **fear** ... the **suffering** ... the **panic** ... the **loneliness** ... and wonder if that means God is a
god of judgment, or abandonment, or death. +++ +++ I think we do – whether we realize it or not – because we have to make sense of it – we have to fit it into a category. Because the only way we can rationalize something this scary is to believe God caused it – or we deserve it. +++ This is scary stuff! +++ But Scripture warns us NOT to rationalize it – as Samuel learns: the LORD does not see as mortals see; THEY look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” And, as Jesus tells the man who had been blind: “I came into this world... so that those who do not see... may see, and those who do see may become blind.” +++ Christ turns our logic on its head – because we do not see as he sees. 

By the end of our gospel reading, Jesus asks the healed man, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answers, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” +++ The man has stopped trying to understand – stopped trying to see what no person can see... instead, he just trusts... and loves... Jesus Christ. His final words are, “Lord, I believe.” And then he worships Christ. +++ He will never again be “the man who was blind,” or “the beggar, or “the waste of space,” he is a sheep of the flock of the Good Shepherd. +++ +++ You know, one reason I think this virus is so scary is that deep down, we feel like we have to understand it. +++ It’s one thing to understand the science – or understand how to slow it down – those make sense. +++ But do you also find yourself trying to understand what it tells you about the world – what it tells you about people – what it tells you about God? We try to SEE the truth based on just part of the picture – on preconceptions – or by “figuring it out.” And we fall short every time: we do not see as the LORD sees.

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A MILESTONE for your Lenten Journey through the Wilderness – a hard journey in the best of times – a crushing one this year:: Your God is a god of relationship – a
god you know in your **heart** but can never tame with **words. A god of love... a god of grace.** +++ And, you know what – maybe that’s all you **need** to KNOW – all you **CAN KNOW** – as you walk through **this** very **deep** valley of the shadow of death::

God didn’t **put** you there – no, the Lord is walking the valley **with** you. +++ The Lord is not **punishing** you – +++ the Lord has not **abandoned** you – +++ the Lord has not **turned away** from you... **The Lord is your shepherd** – a shepherd who watches, alert by your side, when the nights grow dark... a shepherd who comes to find you when you stray... a shepherd who restores your soul.

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

Pause... stop the camera