Fourth Sunday in Lent, 2nd Scrutiny

Old St. Pat’s, 2022

We don’t do this very often

As a matter of fact

Until last week

This is not something that this community has done

In recent or distant memory

The liturgical novelty that marks three successive Sundays in Lent

Last week, this week, and next week

Is what the church calls “scrutinies”

These are rituals of purification and affirmation

Intended to provide special accompaniment

For those who have been elected for Easter Initiation

These rites are taking place all across the world today

And for us are gifts this community bestows upon

Kim, Arthur, Eric and Marsela.

They with their sponsors and mentors and companions

With those who will be brought into full communion

And with others will receive their first communion

And confirmation at the Easter vigil

Have journeyed through the RCIA process

The Roman Catholic process

For the Christian Initiation of Adults

And after months of preparation

are now just three weeks away from their full incorporation

in the Roman Catholic Church.

Being scrutinized by anyone

Is seldom our favorite pastime

And being scrutinized in a public setting

Especially for those who self-identify as introverts

Could be a very uncomfortable experience.

Thus, the majority of us might be thinking

“better them than me”

Glad I can just sit her and watch.

But this always impertinent ritual says: “think again!”

If you are following along in some worship aid or missal

or some online resource for today’s worship

You might be surprised that the readings

Are not the usual ones from this lectionary cycle.

We are supposed to be in Cycle C, and reading Luke

And the usual gospel for this Sunday

Is the parable of the prodigal son …

But instead we have this tale of the man born blind

From the Gospel of John

With its parallel readings from Samuel and Ephesians

And no … the liturgy team did not make a mistake here.

This shift in the readings is a clarion announcement

About the importance of the scrutinies,

Events so critical to the initiatory process

That they disrupt the lectionary equilibrium

And sound a liturgical alarm

That something important is afoot here

And not just for those preparing for baptism.

These three readings have an unusual unity about them;

And while it is typical for the first reading

To resonate with themes in the gospel

Here we have all three texts

Pivoting around images of light and darkness

Blindness and sight

Sin and redemption

Election and healing.

Because of this convergence there could be an instinct

To flatten these readings

One-dimensionalizing them

Suggesting in a reductionist way that

Since they are only about blindness

Either physically blindness as in the gospel

Or politically blindness as in the first reading

And concluding that the Spirit of Jesus

Easily heals both kinds of blindness

That all we need to do is pray

And all such blindness will be quickly banished

Without so much as our lifting a finger.

Such a monochromatic reading of the texts

Might also lead us to conclude that in the scrutinies

With their two key elements

Of first an exorcism or rite of purification

And then the laying on of hands and rite of blessing

We are praying the elect into shedding their blindness

Putting weakness and even sin behind them

As they open their eyes and their hearts

To the saving grace of the Christ.

So you might be saying, “and what’s wrong with that?”

Isn’t the church preparing this quartet of believers

To take the Easter plunge

And in order to do that they need to embrace

A path of conversion, reconciliation, grace and light?

Of course … no doubt

But theirs is not a personal journey

Theirs is not a private conversion

And this ritual is not simply about individual grace

Furthermore, it is also not only about a nice ritual.

Rather it is about dramatically living conversion

and taking the risk to be disciples of reconciliation

That is why the church elects and prayers over

Blesses and initiates these in such a public fashion

Because their conversion is to be our conversion

Their scrutiny is to be our scrutiny

Their blessing is to be our blessing

For the sake of the Church

And for the sake of the world.

It is not breaking news to suggest

That today’s world could use an exorcism

In these difficult and dangerous times

As the innocent are suffering and dying in the Ukraine

As humanitarian crises confront the children & elderly

In Afghanistan and Congo

Venezuela and Yemen

As human dignity is under assault across the globe

And on the streets of our own city.

There is much evil that needs to be expunged,

Demonic actions that need to be halted

Unseemly hatred that needs to be quenched.

But an exorcism is not only about confronting unseen demons

If you’ve been to an infant baptism recently

You know that there is an exorcism

Performed over a newborn in all of her innocence.

This ritual is not casting out some demon

That has possessed the child since conception

But recognizing that she is born into a world

Where not only sin exists

But where we teach each other sin and prejudice

Greed and selfishness.

Praying that a child is freed from original sin

is an announcement to the family and friends

the parents and godparents

who surround the child at the font

that we cannot be perpetrators of evil

that we cannot be messengers of hatred

that we cannot be mentors in sin

rather, we must be disciples of reconciliation

so that the infants and these elect

might be faithful in their own journeys into God.

So in today’s sacred rites

When we pray that Kim, Arthur, Eric and Marsela

Are freed from the false values that surround

And may even blind them

And set them firmly in God’s truth

rendering them children of light forever

We are offering that prayer for all of us, as well,

For the whole of the church

And for the world.

In doing so we are placing the four of you

at the epicenter of grace

At the vanguard of gospel truth

At the heart of healing

So that in your metanoia … in your personal conversion

You may light the way for a world

So in need of mentors in grace.

Jesus’ instruction that his followers are to be the light of the world

Belongs to you in a special way this day

It is both a joy and a burden

But one that you do not carry alone.

Today this community and the universal church

Holds you up as the light of the world

What the ancients called the photozomenoi

People destined for light

Supporting you with our own commitment

To combat evil

And spread peace

You are the flame of this living paschal candle

And the church is the wax

Feeding and nourishing and supporting you.

And in this interchange of grace

You exercise true ministry to us all.

In this scrutiny it is not only this assembly

That acts upon and ministers to you

For you have a unique ministry now to us

As you call us to our own baptismal vocation

To be light and grace

To reject evil and live as children of the light.

So we now take a deep breath in the Spirit

bracing ourselves for this distinctive moment of grace

Opening our hearts to God’s purifying fire and boundless blessing

So that as these candidates for initiation

Continue to be transformed into the very image of Christ

So might this community be changed

In our support, care and embrace of them

And our reconciling ministry to the world.

Kim, Arthur, Eric and Marsela please come forward

With your sponsors and your companions on this Easter way

And step into the light that Christ promises you.