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.