

Seeing Again for the First Time

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 24, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:46-52, NRSV)

“Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” Alongside “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore”, this is one of the great takeaway lines from “The Wizard of Oz.” Dorothy and her rag-tag group of companions make it to Emerald City, find the great and powerful Wizard of Oz, only to be sent on a second quest to recover the Wicked Witch’s broom to prove their worthiness. And now, having “liquidated” her awful wickedness, they return to the Wizard to be given, finally, what they had risked all to receive.

The Wizard hesitates. “Come back tomorrow!” he orders, with full pyrotechnics for extra emphasis. But Dorothy pushes back, boldly insisting that they had done everything he’d asked, and that now is the time for him to make good on his promises. Meanwhile, little Toto sees movement, gets curious, and starts tugging on a curtain, revealing a man pulling levers, pushing buttons, and shouting into a sound system. “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” he pleads. But he knows the gig is up.

The truth now known, Dorothy and her companions wonder what is to become of their hopes and dreams. It is the climactic moment of the adventure – that moment when, without seeing how, their quest is about to be fulfilled ... the elusive treasure is about to be found ... but in a way that they would never have imagined.

Today, we conclude our three-Sunday sermon series which has brought up this word “adventure” in an unusual context – the adventure of being the Church of Jesus Christ in a nearly post-COVID – and in many ways post-Christian – world. As we have seen, there are three basic stages to the great adventures of myth and story:

- (1) Leaving Home – A protagonist is called to adventure and is faced with the prospect of leaving behind the familiar, safe world, and entering a new, unfamiliar, strange one.
- (2) Initiation – Once there, the hero is challenged to the core – initiated– facing trials and tests, and even the threat of death itself. But through these struggles the hero passes, and completes the quest, finding the “hidden treasure”.

(3) Return – The hero finally returns then to the old, familiar world, but not as the same person and with gifts and wisdom for others.

We have explored what it means for us as the Church in these days to “leave everything behind,” and last week, we considered what it means for us to walk the path of “initiation” as we traverse this strange, new space. It is a path of *unlearning* things we’ve learned, of relinquishing control. And as we walk this path, for all our disorientation, we are called to discern the hand of God – bringing us more and more into the mind and will of Jesus.

But as we discover, old habits of thought and action die hard. All this giving up, all this sacrifice ... there *must* be a payoff. Today, we reach the third and final stage of the adventure – the stage in which the initiation is fulfilled, and we find the hidden treasure – and then return home. So, what *is* the treasure? What is the reward for faithfulness? To finally understand what our discipleship has been for? To receive the answers we seek? Or, for we who have given so much to keep the Church we love from dissolving into irrelevancy, to welcome its *restoration*, empowered and returned to its *rightful place* of prestige and influence?

We come to what may seem the perfect gospel text for this morning. A story in which a blind man receives his sight. It’s perfect because we are familiar with the metaphor of seeing and not seeing. We are prepared for this to be more than just another healing story. A story of a blind man receiving his sight is suggestive of the treasure which we are finally about to “see.” We might expect that the good news of the gospel today is that the long night is over ... the path of initiation being fulfilled in something we can get our minds around again.

And it’s true that this story is much, much more than just another healing story. The story actually serves as the conclusion to an entire section of Mark’s Gospel, spanning two-and-a-half chapters in which “blindness” is the unifying theme. The section begins in the middle of chapter 8 with a story in which Jesus struggles to restore sight to a blind man at Bethsaida. In chapters 9 and 10, Jesus confronts a different kind of blindness—a *spiritual* blindness among his closest followers, who seem either unwilling or unable to accept his radical, topsy-turvy ways – the ways of the *Kingdom* which he declared was at hand.

Jesus declares in one moment that he will undergo suffering, rejection, and death, only to have Peter sternly rebuke him. Jesus announces that he will be betrayed, leaving his disciples confused, and soon, they’re debating who will be the greatest among them ... and then a chapter later, jockeying for position at Jesus’ right and left hand! And so now, this episode serves as the culmination of all this.

The story starts simply enough. Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd are leaving Jericho and a blind beggar named Bartimaeus begins shouting and making a general nuisance of himself: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Such outcasts of society were *invisible* then, as they are today, and everyone is much more comfortable with them remaining that way. But this man would not stay invisible. He knows that he’s blind, but he also knows that *Jesus* is near. He

will not be kept quiet. The harsh rebukes of the crowd, telling him to shut up, do not deter him, and he shouts out all the more. And Jesus notices.

He asks for the man to be brought to him, and the crowd cooperates, telling the man that Jesus is asking for him. Hearing this, the man throws off his cloak! There is little doubt that for this man, this beggar, his cloak is his most treasured possession. It has kept him warm through cold, lonely nights. It may hold the meager spoils of his begging, his only resources in the world. But hearing the call of Jesus, he leaves it all behind. He springs up and goes to him.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks.

“My teacher, let me see again,” the man replied. You see, he had not been born blind. He knew what it was like to see.

“Go; your faith has made you well.” At those words, the man’s eyes open, and he sees again. He sees Jesus standing before him. And in this moment, he knows that this is not simply a restoration to his old life, but the beginning of a wholly new one. He leaves everything behind and follows Jesus on the way, as if he is seeing again for the *first time*.

We said a moment ago that this story wraps up an entire section of Mark’s gospel which uses the image of blindness to drive home its message. But Bartimaeus is not the only blind man here.

We know that the twelve disciples are “blind” ... arguing over who is the greatest ... Peter rebuking Jesus ... James and John’s childish request. And the *crowd* is blind ... blind to the needs of the most desperate among them. *All* are blind – blinded by the logic of the world which understands only the way of *glory*, not the way of the *Cross*. They are blind to what is afoot right before their eyes. They are blind to who Jesus really is and where he’s going. They are blind, *but they don’t know it*.

Bartimaeus is blind too, but with a huge difference ... he *knows* he’s blind. We aren’t told what his understanding of Jesus is beyond his belief that Jesus could help him. Perhaps he bears in his heart the same expectations that the disciples and the crowd have. Perhaps he harbors the same messianic hopes. He is not presented as a saint, but only as a man in need who *knows* that he is in need, and who therefore possesses a simple clarity: He knows he is blind, and he wants to see.

In this way, Bartimaeus’ story is like ours, as the Church today. With steps of faith, we may choose the path of unlearning what we have learned, and as we journey ever further, we come to an ever-deeper recognition of our own blindness, and an ever-deeper hunger to see whatever it is we are meant to see.

As long as we would avoid leaving behind our old familiar patterns, we remain like disciples who argue over who’s the greatest, or who jockey for position. But when we, together, answer

the call and dare to take the Road Not Taken, then it *will* begin to dawn on us that we *are truly* blind! Like those first disciples, we discover that we don't get the topsy-turvy ways of Jesus, though we may remain blind to our blindness for a long time. But all the while, also like them, something in us urges us on to more, until by grace, we can join in the cry of one who *knows* he cannot see, but *wants* to see: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Going back to the Emerald City, you remember Dorothy and her companions when the curtain has been pulled back. It looks like their quest was all for nought – all hope of receiving what they had come for had been lost: The Scarecrow, a brain ... the Tin Man, a heart ... the Lion, courage ... and Dorothy, the way back home. And then "the Wizard" – revealed not as some untouchable, unapproachable Tyrant, but as a man, simply a man – shows them that a brain ... a heart ... courage ... *home* ... had always been with them in all their questing. The "treasure" they had been looking for was not far off. It was – and *is* – always, already theirs, right before their eyes.

And so, when Dorothy does return to Kansas and sees her beloved family again, she carries the secret treasure with her: "I think that it wasn't enough to just want to see Uncle Henry and Auntie Em... and it's that if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard; because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with."

It is grace that brings us, like Bartimaeus, to Jesus ... to this place where we *know* we can't see, and we cry out for the Light. And then, again by sheer grace, it happens: *our eyes open to the Treasure*. Only, it won't be a Cosmic Superman, nor a Universal Slot Machine ... it won't be answers to all our unanswered questions ... and it won't be restored prestige or renewed success against all odds. It won't be what we may have thought we were seeking.

Like Bartimaeus, when our eyes open, it is *Jesus* we will see standing before us. But it will be as though we are seeing him again for the *first time*, for then we will finally understand. Before our eyes will not be the Jesus of our expectations ... Not a Jesus who would reinforce our own fears and prejudices ... Not a Jesus who would take away our struggles or spare us from the sufferings of others. Before us will be one who is, first and last, richly and deeply human – one who calls us to join him on the way, not to escape this world, but to live ever more deeply into it, to live ever more deeply into our humanity.

He will show himself as the hungry man on the street corner ... as an African villager without clean drinking water ... as a refugee looking to escape the horrors of war and violence. He will come to us as a working single mother who struggles to feed and clothe her children ... as a lonely old man, his mind and strength slowly leaving him.

And when our eyes are so opened, we will know deep inside that a life with this Jesus ... a life spent in serving and loving others, in serving and loving one another ... does not *lead* to some expected payoff, some dreamed-of treasure. It *is* the treasure. And as we live into this recognition, we live further into our identity in him as a Beloved Community – a community of

witness, compassion, and hope – *existing* for the healing of the world. We will come to see him and know him, as for the first time.

A little over a century ago, the great humanitarian, physician, and missionary Dr. Albert Schweitzer wrote of this Jesus – the Jesus whom he came to know in the midst of his work among the poorest of the poor in Africa:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

To the Glory of God. Amen.