

WHAT FAITH SEES

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Mark 10:46-52

TEXT: Mark 10:51 Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, My teacher, I want to see again."

PURPOSE: To assure us that God in Christ wants to give us the sight of faith that lets us see what God is really doing to draw all creation back to God's way of love and righteousness.

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October 25, 2009

The task of preaching involves a lot of things. One thing may seem simple, but sometimes, it can be a strange kind of struggle, and that is coming up with a title. I think a title needs to be a bit snappy, even though I doubt that anyone comes into a church service, checks the bulletin for the sermon title, and decides whether or not to stay based on its cleverness. So early this week, I read the passages for today, and played with possible titles as part of my process for discovering what I would preach. I finally settled on the gospel passage, and thought that the title, "What Faith Sees," was passably intriguing. Then, a few days later, I wrote this title on a blank piece of paper and began pondering what I was actually going to say. Suddenly it occurred to me: from her position on the organ bench, Faith doesn't see much at all. Such is the depth of reflection which accompanies the development of a sermon.

Actually, I was rather excited about what I saw in the story about Jesus healing the blind beggar named Bartimaeus as he was making his way toward Jerusalem. For years, I'd noticed, thanks to some help from the learned commentators, that Mark had located this story to make a stark contrast with the request of disciples James and John that appears right before it in his Gospel. In both stories, Jesus responded to a request with the exact same words: "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John asked for places of honor when Jesus came into his glory, and so proved themselves to be blind to where Jesus was leading them. Bartimaeus only wanted to see, and, upon regaining his sight, he "followed Jesus on the way," which is the gospel way of describing a true disciple.

But this is what I saw this week that I don't think I'd noticed before: Bartimaeus saw *with the eyes of faith* before Jesus restored his physical sight. This is why we listen to Bible stories over and over again, because they are a mine full of treasure that is never exhausted. Go back to the story: we see a blind beggar, the only person in Mark's Gospel whom Jesus healed whose name is recorded. There, beside the road leading from Jericho to Jerusalem, there, on the way that will take Jesus to a final confrontation with religious authorities and Roman power, a blind man recognizes who Jesus really is, and what he is here for: "Son of David, mercy, have mercy!" (Mark 10:47)

"Son of David" is a troublesome title. It evokes the hope of God's people in those days to throw off the oppression of Rome, and to re-establish an independent Israel under the sovereignty of a king descended from the great king David. This hope was behind the request of James and John to be granted places of honor when Jesus comes into his glory.

Jesus didn't reject the title, but he unquestionably rejected the popular understanding associated with it. James and John got it dead wrong; Bartimaeus got it exactly right: the Son of David is the one whose way is all about mercy. And here's what I saw that I hadn't seen before: Bartimaeus rightly perceived who Jesus was *while he was still physically blind*. And therefore, it was a totally natural thing, once he regained his physical sight, to follow Jesus on the way of discipleship, the way that leads to a crown of glory, but gets there by way of a cross of shame.

What does our physical eyesight see? This fall, our church family has experienced quite a few illnesses that have landed some of us in the hospital. It is my privilege to enter those hospital rooms. In those places, what is there to see? On the wall opposite your bed, you see a calendar, a clock whose hands move at a snail's pace, and a board with the name of your nurse and nurse assistant for the day. You see the caregivers who come in to do the routine work, and the physicians who come in to discuss your illness and its treatment. You see strange rooms filled with high-tech equipment that can see inside your body and give your doctor information about what's going on with you.

At a deeper level, people sick enough to be in the hospital see their fears for the future. They see themselves not getting better. They see a life increasingly defined by their illness, and a schedule increasingly built around visits to doctors. All these sights, the visible ones and the ones we see in our mind's eye, are sights that leave us feeling quite vulnerable, anxious, even wearied by the effort of living.

I'm not saying this is how it is for every person who goes to the hospital. Lots of people get in and out of hospitals quickly these days and do very well. But many people, and notably some of this church's most beloved people, have experienced a hospital stay that is a time of frightening insecurity.

What does faith see in such a stress-filled situation? Faith sees ourselves as Bartimaeus saw himself: as a person in need of mercy. Faith perceives the possibility, as Bartimaeus did, that Jesus might be passing by. And faith pushes us, hospitalized or not, to an exploration of that which lies down under, or deep within, the difficult situation we may be in, to look for what God may be doing right in our hard time.

Some time ago, I read a fascinating review of an essay titled, "An Invitation to Insecurity," by a woman named Marilyn Chandler McEntyre. Quoting McEntyre, the reviewer wrote that, "People of faith need to be reminded that 'the security God offers is not a promise about what won't happen (for instance, we won't be hit by plagues, bombs, loss of loved ones, or sudden poverty) but about what will happen: "If I make my bed in

hell, behold, thou art there” (Psalm 139:8, KJV).”¹

What I have discovered in my visits with people struggling with difficult illnesses is that faith gives them eyes to see just that: what will happen, through the mercy that Jesus showers on us. What faith sees is not some magical cure, some heaven-sent bubble protecting us from disease and distress, but the very presence of Christ, a presence that undergirds us with assurance that hope is stronger than fear, that heavenly peace endures in spite of earthly pain, and finally, that life and love always overcome death and loss.

The eyes of faith do not blind us to the sight of our own difficulties. Nor do they give us permission to ignore the distress of others, as if the heartache, the oppression, and the suffering of the world didn’t exist. But what faith sees yields confidence in the one who sees with faith’s eyes: confidence, even if our physical defect is not cured, as was the eyesight of Bartimaeus, that Jesus will not pass us by, that he will come to us, and shower us with mercy.

Allow me to take you into the strange world of the Letter to the Hebrews. This letter is actually a sermon of great brilliance and complexity that was offered to a congregation which had grown weary of the work of being a Christian. The key argument of Hebrews circles around the presentation of Jesus as the perfect high priest who ministers forever on our behalf in the heavenly sanctuary. This is odd language to modern Protestant ears, which are not accustomed to talk about a sacrifice-based priesthood. But here as with Bartimaeus, the text urges us to see what faith sees. The people to whom Hebrews was originally addressed, like us today, did not get to see Jesus with their physical eyes. But they probably saw, now and then, flesh-and-blood priests going about their priestly duties day after day. They got to see the fancy clothes, the grandiose temple architecture, the animals being prepared for sacrifice, and the fire and smoke of the burnt offerings. The sacrificial system was a feast for the senses: eyes, ears, smell, taste, even feel.

But Christians were no longer relying on that system for their connection to God. They were supposed to be trusting Jesus for that connection. But where was Jesus? Was he with them in the struggles and disappointments of their lives? Was he able to put on a show for them, like the show at the temple? As far as the physical eye was concerned, he was nowhere to be seen. But through the eyes of faith, Jesus is visible, seated at the right hand of God, carrying out his priestly duties in the heavenly sanctuary, continually and forever working to rightly relate those who believe in him to God.

¹In “Century Marks”; *the Christian Century*, Oct. 17, 2006, Vol. 123, No. 21 “Leap of Faith” p. 7.

The temple priests were sort of like the modern clergyperson in ministry. We pastors spend time with people seeking guidance, comfort, or encouragement, but then, we're off to the next person, or to the next project. We pop into a person's hospital room, visit a while, and then we're on our way. Maybe you get a good prayer out of us; maybe you don't. Maybe we listen to you with a truly open heart; maybe we're distracted by some other obligation or concern. What you definitely don't get from any minister is permanent presence. With Jesus, it is totally different. Because Jesus died, and then rose from death, and then ascended into heaven, Jesus never leaves our side; Jesus is always connecting us to healing mercy and saving love. Or, to put it the way the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, Jesus is always in God's temple, continually representing our concerns to God. We may not see him with our physical eyes, but we experience in our souls the effect of his priestly effort on our behalf. Because he is who he is, and because he does what he does, we see a table set before us in the presence of our enemies, we see our cup overflowing, even when our life looks empty, we see goodness and mercy following us like loyal puppy dogs wherever we go.

I hate the thought of using a TV commercial as an analogy for faith, but the connection is too good to resist. Are you familiar with the commercials about the cell phone network that has a horde of people following the cell phone customer wherever she goes? The network, which is invisible to the physical eye of the cell phone customer, is depicted for commercial purposes as it really is: a company of workers whose aim it is to make cell phone calls possible anywhere, even in the fancy restaurants, even during church services, even in places that have signs asking us to turn off our cell phones. The cell phone customer never really sees the network, but the network is reliably present at all times and places.

How about it? Is Jesus like that network, not visible to the physical eye, but truly present, surely what faith sees, and what faith trusts as the reliable means of connection between us and all God's wishes for us? Even the best network is imperfect. Jesus is perfectly present, perfectly reliable, perfectly capable of rightly connecting us to God. And here's the thing that makes Jesus totally different than any company: in the final analysis, they are in business to get something out of us. Jesus is in business to serve: to serve God, and to serve God's creation. And the service that Jesus offers is free, with no monthly statements, no costly overages, no roaming charges, no contracts obliging our allegiance. Jesus has no motive other than to mend the broken connection between God and the world God made, the world God still loves.

If that is true, then we may have courage for living faithfully in an uncertain world. If that is true, then we can be sure of God's security in insecure world. If that is true, then we can see reason for hoping where others see reason for despairing; we can see reason for

giving where others see reason for taking; we can see rivers of mercy flowing our way when others see a parched desert; and we can see reason for following Jesus on the way that leads to real life where others see that way coming to a dead end on a cross-topped hill.

What faith sees is God working out the divine purpose, for us in our personal lives, and for the whole of God's good but rebellious creation. What faith sees is cause for unbounded praise, for unflinching trust, for courageous confidence that faces every challenge fully aware that Christ is with us, and that therefore, nothing can separate us from God. What faith sees will see us through, all the way through to life shared with Christ.