

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Are Your Eyes Closed or Open?”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 22, 2020

Ephesians 5:8-14

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

‘Sleeper, awake!

*Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’*

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’ He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He answered them, ‘I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?’ Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord,

I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we gather together to be together in community, through sight and sound, and to hear your Word for us this day. So may your spirit move among us as we listen for your Word. Amen.

I found it interesting that this morning's lessons both address aspects of light and darkness, which seems very appropriate in these days of social distancing and uncertainty. I read a book not long ago by Barbara Brown Taylor called *Learning to Walk in the Dark* and she tells us of a time that she sought to understand and learn from the darkness. She knew that the word darkness can often speak about fear and the shadows of life, but she came to realize that darkness has gifts of all its own. She became aware of the fears she had when in the dark and was aware that it was about the loss of the sense of direction that bothered her the most. Yet she also came to a new appreciation for the gifts of the dark, of the stars and the moon and the quiet and the beauty. And she moved from fear to profound awareness of the importance and power of both light and darkness. And I think in many ways we can relate, these are challenging times for us as we seek to navigate in new ways our everyday lives. The rhythm of the days are changing and we're trying to figure out some kind of new normal. It can be isolating for some us, anxiety-producing for others. And for those who are called to go out and serve those who are ill, it is not easy.

I think it's a time when we rely ever more on our faith to offer us grounding and hope and support. But I have been unsettled to learn that some brothers and sisters in the faith are saying that these events are marks of punishment or the condemnation of God for various sins, and that stuns me for so many reasons. We know about the reality of viruses in the world, we know how germs spread, we know that this event was something we've been warned about as we live in an ever-increasingly interconnected world. This is not a time to forget about science and how the world works. It's not a time to focus only on blame or to rationalize this event in detrimental ways. Now, I'm not denying that we do sin and we live with the consequences of hurtful actions, but everything that Jesus does tells me that the call of faith is not to find excuses to distance ourselves but to find comfort and challenge and to build up. It's not a time to focus on condemnation, it's a time to focus on and remember the promises of God in the midst of the valleys of life, to find stability on the rock of faith and to deepen our trust in God. Faith offers us the promise of hope when we seek out God's love and truth and through the compassion and concern we show for one another. In these times we are encouraged to deepen that trust and renew our willingness to serve one another. This is the test of our faith, not blaming.

So it is interesting that this morning's gospel reading focuses on blind Bartimaeus, someone who lived on the edge of the culture. He has two strikes against him. He's blind and he's a beggar. And in those days, some people thought when bad things happened it meant they had done something to offend God. For those who think that way, his blindness was either his punishment or his parents' punishment for doing something wrong. But Jesus tells us differently. Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus. And the people in the crowd try to silence him, but he persists, and Jesus responds. And when he does, he offers the man healing and words of hope. And in time, Bartimaeus realizes the profound faith he has been offered and follows. He sees in new ways, literally and spiritually. And we sense that for him, the kingdom of God is come. Long rejected and ignored and told to be quiet, he now has a new life. He has found faith and lives a new reality. He is no longer on the edge of life, but brought back into the wholeness of life.

We remember, too, that Jesus said, "It rains on the just and the unjust." Then into our lives come moments when difficult things happen, times when we lose our sense of security and worry about what the future may hold, times when we wonder if we will ever have a new normal again, a time when we feel we are wandering in darkness and we can't find our way. And so we come together in this time to worship, to pray, to support, and to encourage one another, and to be together in the ways we are able to be together to experience community and shared experiences as members of the Body of Christ, who are also called to serve the world. I know that in the midst of unexpected changes, life and faith can offer solace and comfort. I remember that in the Psalms we find words of those who seek and yearn for the presence of God in times of turmoil. And it brought to mind the work of Walter Brueggemann who studied *The Psalms of Lament* and realizes there's a movement of three parts: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Psalm 121 was used as our call to worship. And it says, "I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come?" Beginning with words of praise, the writer speaks to the need for the promises of God to hold him up. It is a time of disorientation. And then, time passes. And like a lumbering ship, we begin to turn about and move in a new direction. The final movement of reorientation is of making one's way to a new sense of normal, finding comfort and hope in God. It is not easy, and it doesn't happen overnight. But in time for those able to open their eyes, a new possibility becomes a reality. Blind Bartimaeus entered into a new life. He was offered the gift of faith. It healed him and brought about a new normal. And it can do the same for

us as well. Bringing our way-- taking us out of exile and helping us to find our way home.

All things will not be as they were; we know that, in the days to come. But we can find strength in knowing that we're not alone on the journey and as a church, we have a calling to be together and to serve others. To be compassionate. To uphold one another. To do these things with and for those we know and love, but also to help those we may not know. The world is different. The television does not allow us to escape, even for a moment, yet while some of us stay home, others cannot. And we give thanks for the health care workers and the firemen and the grocery store people who provide for us in a time of need. In the days ahead, we will come towards our new normal. But in the meantime, we are called to help one another. I remember the powerful words of some of the songs of lament: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted. the Lord upholds all who are broken down." A call to trust the love of God even when we struggle. And I'm reminded there is such reason that we call God's name such as, our fortress, our salvation, our refuge, our sanctuary, our shelter from the storm. A reminder that God is with us. That God is a beacon of light in the darkness, and as we are reminded in Ephesians, we are called to be the light of the world.

And so I found myself thinking once again of Brown Taylor's book, about the darkness and the power and the beauty of the night skies and it reminded me of a family memory when a number of years ago we traveled to Tucson, Arizona and we drove around the university there to see where my husband's father had been sent while he was in the Navy. He was sent to Tucson to prepare for navigating a hospital ship during World War II. But as we drove around the town, we were really struck by the fact that the navy had sent him to a place with no water. We couldn't imagine why he was sent to the desert to learn to navigate at sea. But then finally the light dawned literally. We learned about the powerful observatory that is there in Tucson. We were shown that the lights in the city are all focused downward to keep the light from the night sky so that those who are observing it can see it more clearly. And we finally realized he was learning to navigate by the stars; using the constellations of the heavens to help the ship find its way. And indeed sailors do use the heavens to navigate and find their way in the darkness and those who sail in the darkness know that the North Star is the beacon. The one that holds steady at night in the northern sky. And from that, they plot their direction and it's a powerful reminder to us.

For God in Christ is our beacon, our source of light and direction. The north star symbolizes the God of love; a rudder that can guide us and direct us and help us to find our way home. This is the God we trust in. This is the God who never leaves us whether in the night skies or in the day. The God who never leaves town when things change. The God who's grace, mercy, and love are forever lasting to everlasting. I think it's no better stated than in the words of Isaiah 43, "Fear not for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name and you are mine. When you walk through the waters they will not overwhelm you. And when you walk through the fires you will not be burned for you are honored and precious in my sight and I love you." This is the God who calls us each by name. May we remember that and hold on to it as individuals and as the people of God called to serve. And may we say, "Thanks be to God from whom all our blessings flow. Amen."