

# **“On the Journey”**

Psalm 16 and Mark 10:46-52

Sunday, March 11, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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In the season of Lent, we think more deeply about following Jesus, and this year we have been reflecting on various psalms. On this fourth Sunday of Lent, we hear psalm 16, which invites us to open our eyes and find the path, themes that connect to our gospel reading.

Today’s reading concludes a three-chapter section on discipleship in the middle of Mark, where Jesus tells the disciples three times that he must go to Jerusalem and die. Three times they misunderstand him. And three times Jesus responds with a challenging teaching on discipleship such as

- Take up your cross and follow; lose your life in order to save it
- It is very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven
- Those who want to be great must be servants and slaves of all

This three-chapter section on discipleship begins and ends the same way with Jesus healing people who were blind.

In today’s reading, the final account before Jesus enters Jerusalem, we meet a man named Bartimaeus. In reflecting on this account, it’s good to remember that the Greek word *sozo* can be translated as saved, or healed, or made well.

Listen for God’s word.

As Jesus 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 Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

I am very fortunate.

I have no idea what it is like to be physically blind.

My eyes work reasonably well; the glasses help make sure that things are clear.

So when I hear about Jesus opening the eyes of someone who was blind, I wonder what it was like to have been in darkness and then to suddenly be able to see.

Perhaps you've seen one of the heart-warming videos on the internet, showing the reactions of people who are suddenly able to see, after certain medical procedures. The smiles are priceless.

As dramatic as regaining physical sight is, and as dramatic as the gospel account of Bartimaeus is, I think the gospel invites us to think beyond physical sight, to ponder how well we are seeing things in our daily living.

Gaining new sight in daily living is a focus of one of the best loved songs in the Christian tradition.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound,  
that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found  
Was blind, but now I see.

These words were written by John Newton, a minister and slave ship owner, who eventually renounced slavery after a conversion experience.

I once was blind but now I see.

The love of God in Jesus Christ helped Mr. Newton to see the evil of slavery and change his life. The love of God in Jesus Christ has helped countless others come to see the world in a new way.

The call of the Christian life is to follow Jesus on the journey, and to see things in new ways.

We are called to follow with the eyes of our hearts wide open.

One of the intriguing thing for me about the gospel narrative of Bartimaeus is that we're told that he re-gained his sight. At some point in his life he could see and then he lost his sight. We don't know how long. But after his encounter with Jesus he can see again.

It is easy for us to gradually lose our sight too. And while that can happen in a physical sense, I'm thinking more of the spiritual sense.

It's easy for us to become gradually blind to, or maybe just unclear about where we are going and what we are doing with our lives.

We have times in life of great clarity and passion, when we know who we are and why we're here and where we are going. There are times when our faith is strong, when we're inspired to live as faithful Christians. We sense God's presence with us, we read our Bibles and say our prayers, we actively seek God's will on a daily basis.

But all too often, the busyness of life, the burdens of daily living, or the temptations all around lead to a blurriness, a loss of focus, a general sense of malaise and going through the motions, of forgetting about God's presence and God's call.

Lent can be a time to learn to see again, to be renewed in faith, hope, and love. To be strengthened in purposeful living as God's people.

Jesus called four fishermen to follow him, saying "Come follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Obviously, he didn't mean hooks and nets. He meant focusing on people. Loving people.

One way of understanding the call to fish for people is to think of it as a call to have "people eyes." [Thank you Rev. Stanley Ott]

People eyes help us to see what Jesus wants us to see, on the journey of life.

But sometimes we don't see clearly. George Orwell wrote: "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

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Imagine for a minute that the next time you come to Covenant Presbyterian Church that there is a big pile of boxes and bags and junk right up in the corner of the sanctuary. You would look at that and cringe, because we like this sanctuary to look good.

If the pile of junk was still there the following Sunday, you'd might ask someone about it, or say something while we're passing the peace about how unsightly it is.

If it was there the next Sunday you'd probably groan and think to yourself "Ugh, it's still there."

And after a while, you might just get used to it and not really notice it any more. This is a natural reaction, as we get used to seeing things and ironically don't see them.

But a first-time visitor would see it and might think "What a messy church! What doesn't the senior minister do anything about it??"

I read about this dynamic in a church magazine, which encouraged church leaders to keep churches clean, to be aware of the piles of stuff that we don't see after a while.

I imagine the same is true in our homes too.

But my point here isn't about spring cleaning or tidying up the church, as important as those topics are. My point is that sometimes our eyes kind of glaze over and we don't see things, even ugly things, even when they're right in front of us.

In the ministry of Jesus, he repeatedly called attention to people, especially people who were ignored: the blind, the sick, the poor, the outcasts, the widows, the foreigners.

Those who say they follow Jesus, those who call themselves Christian, those who are willing to come to church even on one hour less sleep because of Daylight Savings Time... We are the ones who need to keep our eyes open, to see the people that Jesus sees and loves. We are called to have people eyes.

So in the gospel lesson for today, I hear an invitation for us, to be renewed in clarity and purpose, a call for us to open our eyes and follow the way of Jesus, caring for the people in our midst.

So we can see with new focus those who are around us.

Maybe it's poor, hungry, or sick people. Maybe it's foreigners, immigrants, refugees. Maybe it's people struggling with addiction.

Did anybody else see the recent TIME magazine issue about opioid usage? For those of us not on the front lines of this crisis, it was eye opening.

Maybe God is opening our eyes to people in this community, or people in your neighborhood. Or people on the prayer list.

We have been having discussions about whether or not to print the prayer list in the bulletin every week, wondering if people really see those names, wondering how many people are really praying for and caring for those names.

Maybe God is opening our eyes to our loved ones. Maybe we aren't seeing them even though they are right before our eyes. Sometimes in my prayers I ask God, help us to not take our loved ones for granted.

In my meditation app this week, the focus was on appreciating simple and basic things, like the people in your life. There was encouragement to intentionally look a loved one in the eye, with gratitude. There was encouragement to hug a loved one for 20 seconds minimum.

When I put my glasses on in the morning, just about every day I pray, asking God to help me see what God wants me to see.

Jesus came announcing God's kingdom, God's new reality, and he invited people like us to change direction, and follow, with our eyes wide open.