Spiritual Longing
Psalm 103 & Mark 10:46-52
Covenant Presbyterian Church
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Have you noticed how when real life happens, in our lack of control, utter vulnerability, and true need for Divine help, the gospel hits home in a brand new way and we are led to a deeper level of costly discipleship?

That’s the blind man’s story in Mark’s gospel.

Just before our passage this morning, we learn that Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem and Jesus was walking ahead of them. He had recently stopped to tell his disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection for yet the third time when James and John decide to come forward to challenge Jesus. With all this dire talk about death and resurrection, James and John use their friendship with Jesus in order to manipulate Jesus into giving them a place beside him, thinking it will bring them prestige and power. It must not have seemed improper to them at the time. Much of the disciples’ communication—and our contemporary communication—with God consists of politely telling God how things should be. Not surprising, then, Jesus’ answer was quite the opposite of their prayer—“whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant—for the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:43-45).

Then Jesus and his disciples arrive in Jericho, the last stop before Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, according to Mark’s gospel. As they leave Jericho, they run into a blind beggar sitting by the roadside. When the beggar began to hear that it was Jesus, he demanded Jesus’ mercy. Although many told him, in no uncertain terms, to be quiet, like a two-year old doing the opposite of what he is told to do, he shouted even louder, demanding Jesus’ attention and mercy. Jesus stopped, stood still, and then told his disciples to call the blind man to Jesus. So, obediently, the disciples did. With great energy, the blind man threw off his cloak, sprang up and came to Jesus. Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man, in all his vulnerability, asked Jesus to restore his vision. Without further thought, Jesus replied, “Go, your faith has made you well.” And the blind man was transformed—he regained his sight and became a disciple, following Jesus toward Jerusalem.

Paraphrased another way, here is the story again:

“Jesus, have mercy on me!”

No response.

“JESUS, HAVE MERCY ON ME!”

“What can I do for you?”

“Heal me—give me back my vision.”
“Consider it done. Your vulnerability and need gift you with persistent faith to make your request—you are cured.”

And the blind man could see. So he dropped everything in Jericho to follow Jesus to Jerusalem.

In our passage, as in many other passages in the gospels, Jesus is the one who shows his disciples a life of discipleship.

Have you noticed how when—BAM—real life happens, in our lack of control, utter vulnerability, and true need, the gospel hits home in a brand new way and we are led to a deeper level of costly discipleship?

Have you noticed how when your world is shaken to the core, when you lose your sight, when your husband asks for a divorce, you lose your job, your parents move you across the country, your Dr. calls with a new diagnosis, your husband suddenly dies too early, you go through bankruptcy, your dog suffers with cancer, your son calls heartbroken by your daughter-in-law’s recent miscarriage—have you noticed that when real life happens, in our lack of control, utter vulnerability, and true need, the gospel hits home in a brand new way and we are led to a deeper level of costly discipleship?

Maybe not at first. But for many of us, maybe not all, but for many, we sit in these pews Sunday after Sunday, not because we look forward to eating donuts (although we may), not because we always feel a connection with God through the preacher’s sermons (although sometimes we do), not because our stellar music ministry moves us in ways that words cannot (even though they do), and not because we like how our faithful liturgists’ prayers help us to feel close to God (although they often do), for many of us, we sit in these pews Sunday after Sunday because, whether we recognize it or not, whether we can name it and claim it for what it is or not, whether we choose to share it with others or not, we have individually, and maybe even corporately, experienced God’s powerful presence with us in the midst of real life and we are grateful and we have been called by God to a new adventure of participation with God in the costly work that God is already doing in the world.

That’s my story. I was 12 when my world came to a halt. It happened at church. On our way back from our confirmation camping trip, my best friend was killed instantaneously when a drunk driver hit her family’s Volkswagen Beetle head on. On the way back from our confirmation camping trip.

The entirety of the experience—the trip, the conversations about God, the accident, her death—sent me into a passionate tailspin of anger, grief, sadness, and despair. You can likely guess confirmation was the last thing I was looking for.

It took years of prayer, doubt, questioning, and lament to articulate my grief experience to myself and others and to recognize that no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I wanted to, I simply could not understand the biblical story of the existence of God, let alone God’s love. No matter how nimble my mental gymnastics, I could not prove for the life of me that God existed, and I felt so amazingly far from God.

But the good news was that during that horrid dark night of the soul, when I was so tired, worn out, spent from searching, over time the Holy Spirit was transforming me, gifting me with the realization that the God of my childhood—the God that I was having so much trouble articulating my belief in—was the very same loving God who had held me in a gentle embrace the entire time. It was like—POOF—an epiphany moment. And all that I had read, learned, discussed and debated up until then connected and
suddenly my eyes were open—I had new vision. I could decide to believe in God despite my ill attempt to prove. Isn’t that what faith is? I could allow myself this leap of faith in a loving God, not by proof that God exists, but through encountering God. Isn’t that what Christians do, encounter the Incarnate God? I had experienced the very nature of the crucified God, who suffered with Jesus throughout the most horrific dark night of the soul history has ever known. God had been present with me in my suffering. God had been listening to me. God had been gently asking me time after time, “What do you want me to do for you?”

There’s something about experiencing life-at-the-core—pain, loss, abandonment, despair, anxiety, death—that can bring us to our knees. And in our lack of control, utter vulnerability, and true need for God, by grace alone we are gifted with the courage to call on God and the strength to listen for God’s response, an invitation—“What do you want me to do for you?”

More recently, on a brisk, foggy October day on a rough and raw island off the coast of Scotland, I sat in the stone Abbey, the central worship space for the Iona community where religious brothers and sisters and visiting pilgrims gather together for prayer, fellowship, and work. Afternoon sunlight pierced stoned carved windows, casting autumn amber and ruby hues across a global congregation. Melodies of sung prayer filled the air in Gaelic, Swedish, French, English, and German, lulling our six-month old to sleep. A young Danish woman stood to read Mark 10:46-52, the same account of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus outside of Jericho we read this morning. The blind man cried out for mercy, and Jesus asked them, “What do you want me to do for you?” When I heard these words, I felt Christ gently asking the same question to me once again: “What do you want me to do for you?”

I knew my answer. I wanted God to give me a desire for God. It was and is my deepest spiritual longing.

What is your greatest longing?

North American culture is rampant with offerings for immediate gratification of many desires. Physical beauty, status, sex, and money top many lists. There are also promises to satiate longings for connection, wellness, time, and love. Some of our desires delight us with material reward, and these are often the longings that occupy our focus and attention while our culture recycles the message of immediate fulfillment: you too can have what you want and have it now! Last week I simply had to wonder about getting a new pair of shoes, and within ten minutes of online shopping and next-day delivery, I had the pair I wanted delivered to my door. While there are positive aspects to this story, it also reveals a lack of consideration for my motivations to buy. Was it the rush of feeling in control? An unchecked habit? A boost to my perceived sense of self-worth? Was there a deeper longing I was trying to appease?

When we intentionally slow down and pay attention to our actions and the choices we make, we discover deeper longings within. Many are spiritual. Our spiritual longings can be a great force that nudge us on a discipleship path and drive us to investigate our most meaningful and vulnerable spiritual questions. Linger awhile in reflection on your life choices, and spiritual longings will emerge for you to explore.

Maybe you can hear your voice in the following situations and expressed desires:

I am facing a big decision, and I need to figure out which way to go. I long for an awareness of God’s purpose and direction.
I want to be fulfilled in my work. How am I meant to express my passions and gifts?

I am busy doing lots of things. Who I am is defined by how much I am doing. I desire self-understanding and clarity of a true identity.

There is devastation throughout the world, and I can do little about it; and there are also needs in my local neighborhood. What does compassion look like? How can I live justly?

The beliefs of my childhood no longer serve me well. I want to know God and my beliefs about God as an adult.

I am surrounded by conflict. I want to know peace.

I wonder what spiritual longings lay within your life circumstances and choices? As we approach this congregation’s 60th anniversary celebration, I wonder what spiritual longings lay within our life together here at Covenant Presbyterian Church?

Jesus responded to the blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” He may have also asked, “What is the longing you have that only I can satisfy?”

In a fast-paced culture designed for desire satisfaction it is a countercultural challenge to hear Christ calling to us, inviting us to take a closer look at our spiritual yearnings. An alternative path of stillness, nurturing self-awareness, and prayer can help us discover the spiritual longings within. I wonder along with Arianne Lehn: “What would happen to our days, to our souls, if we were to take those first moments of our day for prayer with God?” The life of prayer, like life itself, is not always happy and peaceful. Into prayer we take our anxieties, loneliness, and discouragement along with our joy, awe, and celebration. In order to deepen any intimate relationship, we must be honest about our feelings. Relating to the God of the universe is no different. In fact, God knows us better than we know ourselves: “For he knows how we were made, he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). Psalm 103 reveals to us such honest prayer. It is a hymn celebrating God’s hesed, God’s steadfast love. As we read it, we share the psalmist’s gratitude. We experience the mountain-top highs of the psalmist’s spiritual journey: “Bless the Lord... who forgives... who heals... who redeems... who satisfies...” (Ps. 103:2-5), while also remembering the realities of life, death, and spiritual longing: “Jesus, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10:47).

After all, when we consider our deepest longings, we are led to the One who is their source. Spiritual longing is a gift given by God, placed within our very being; and we yearn for that which only God can satisfy so that we might know something of the yearning that God has for us. We have been loved first. We are known, claimed, and chosen. This God of relentless love, longs for us with such passion; and we glimpse it in our yearning for God in return. What an incredible sign of love to humanity that God—the source of our deepest yearnings—has made a way for us to know the desire God has for all people. For the blind man outside of Jericho, only God was able to give him sight. A new adventure of life begins when he expressed his deepest longing. So I invite you to pause today, take some time this week to observe your choices and actions, consider the longing that only God can satisfy. For the question remains. Christ has asked you: “What do you want me to do for you?”