

Let me see

Mark 10.46-52

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Stewardship II

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The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus

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.

Preparation Hymn: "Open My Eyes, That I May See"

Sermon: *Let me see*

I love this old hymn, "Open my Eyes, That I May See" by Clara Scott in 1895. Some say her inspiration was Psalm 119.18: "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law."

But, at the Evergreen American Baptist gathering a couple weeks ago, the Rev. Dr. James Forbes reminded us of another possible inspiration. It's an obscure little story in II Kings.

The Arameans were at war with Israel but at every point, the Israelites seemed to be one step ahead of them. The king of Aram thought there must be a spy in his camp but his officers told him that the real problem was that there was an old prophet, Elisha, who had this ability to foresee what was going to happen next.

So the king sent an army that night to capture Elisha. When Elisha's servant got up in the morning, he looked out and saw that their sleepy little town was completely surrounded by a great army.

"What shall we do?" the servant said.

"Do not be afraid," the old prophet said, "for there are more with us than there are with them." And Elisha prayed: "Open his eyes that he may see."

So, God opened the servant's eyes, the story stays, and he saw that the mountain was full of horses and chariots protecting them.

I always thought that was where the story ends. It's a story about opening your eyes to see those unseen forces at work in the world around you – some little glimmer of that power that is already at work within you to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.

But I went back to read the rest of the story and I discovered that just being able to see those unseen forces didn't keep the army of Aram from attacking. And, as the army crashes into town, Elisha prays again. This time, ironically, he prays that the attacking soldiers be struck blind. So the whole attack comes to a screeching halt as the soldiers aren't able to see anything.

In the confusion, Elisha goes out to meet the army and offers to lead these blind soldiers to the place they are looking for. Instead, however, Elisha leads them directly to downtown Samaria, Israel's capitol.

Then Elisha prays again, "Open their eyes that they may see" and, when their eyes are opened they realize that *they* are the ones who are surrounded -- they see themselves in the very situation they intended to put Elisha in.

But the story doesn't end there either. The King of Israel, seeing this golden opportunity to get rid of his enemies says, "Shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?"

"No!" Elisha says, "Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master."

So the King prepared a great feast for them and “after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master; and the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.”

What was the weapon that won the war? Seeing. Maybe after partying together it wasn't so easy for the Israelites and the Arameans to see each other as enemies anymore.

“Open my eyes that I may see,” is about seeing the unseen. It isn't about looking at the world through those proverbial “rose colored glasses,” which is just a happier more optimistic form of blindness. It is having our eyes open to the unseen – to the connections and the relationships and the consequences to which we might otherwise be blind.

In this story, for Elisha's servant, it is about getting to see a glimpse of all the wonderful unseen forces at work around us.

But it is also seeing the ways we can be captured by the very things we use to try to control other people.

It means seeing that the revenge we think will taste so sweet is the very thing that will make us sick and keep us from ever seeing the peace we say we want.

It opens us up to the possibility of having to let go of those labels we hold on to as a way of managing the world – it's just easier to live in a world where everyone can be defined as either friend or enemy.

“Open my eyes that I may see” can be wonderful. And it can be inconvenient. And it can even be dangerous.

So, in Mark 10, when Jesus asks blind Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus isn't assuming that, just because Bartimaeus is blind, he wants to see. “Open my eyes that I may see,” has consequences. Bartimaeus has a decision to make and he says, “Let me see!”

Every time I read this story I am impressed by the connection it makes between seeing and being seen. Bartimaeus wasn't just blind. He was invisible. And the crowd was apparently invested in keeping him that way.

When he hears that Jesus is passing by, Bartimaeus starts yelling, “Jesus, have mercy on me!” And the crowd tries to shut him up. But the more they try to push him into the background, the louder he yells, “Jesus have mercy on me!”

Hearing the noise, Jesus is stopped in his tracks and calls for whoever it is to come forward. The folks in the crowd, now realizing that it’s too late to hold him back, tell Bartimaeus, “Take heart; get up, Jesus is calling you.” Jesus will see you now.

And then he does something that I’m guessing he has spent his whole life trying *not* to do. He makes a spectacle of himself. He throws off that outer garment that all good, self-respecting Palestinians would, for the sake of modesty, keep tightly wrapped around their bodies and he “sprang up,” the story says, sort of like an overly anxious child on Christmas morning. Half-naked, he jumped up and came running to Jesus.

Bartimaeus wasn’t going to be invisible anymore. Being seen was all part of the process of seeing.

Many of us have said that we thought we would never live to see the day when marriage equality would be the law of the land. How did we get here? The only way this could happen was that lesbian and gay individuals and families were not willing to be invisible anymore.

The Black Lives Matter movement is about the actual lives of black people in this country not being invisible anymore.

The original organizing of Tent Cities in Seattle was specifically to not let homelessness in our city be kept invisible.

“Open my eyes that I may see,” is about seeing the unseen. *And* it’s about the ‘unseen’ being ‘seen.’

Every so often someone asks me what my vision for Seattle First Baptist Church is. Many things come to mind. But lately I’ve been thinking that, at the very least, I don’t want us to be invisible. That’s hard in a city like this. Churches are pretty much ignored in this town unless they are saying hateful things or imploding with pastoral misconduct. That’s not the kind of visibility I’m looking for.

You might think that sitting on this corner for over a hundred years with a 168 foot Spire and almost a city block of building, that it would be pretty hard for us to be invisible.

But I've discovered that's not the case. People often ask me, "Where is your church again?" And I say, "Across from the old PolyClinic, big steeple" and then they say "O, right." Apparently we are invisible.

Well, like old Bartimaeus, I'm not willing for us to be invisible anymore. That doesn't mean that I think we should start some crazy promotional campaign. It just means that I imagine all of us showing up to the world in the ways that really matter to us.

After the Charleston, South Carolina shootings in June at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church where nine people were killed at a prayer meeting, First African Methodist Episcopal Church here in town hosted a memorial service. I had a lot of things to do around here that day and there was a Diaconate meeting that night, but I felt like I had to be there – I had to show up.

I arrived at the church early and I tried to duck into one of the pews. But I got caught. One of the organizers came up to me and said, "I think I know you. You're a pastor, right?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm one of the pastors at Seattle First Baptist Church."

"Good," she said, "you will be doing the opening prayer."

Now, frankly, I didn't want to do it. I didn't feel prepared. I didn't know what to say. It felt uncomfortable stepping into another congregation's grief and pain. And, truth be told, it's often the case that public prayer gives me a horrible case of performance anxiety.

But I was also not willing, at that moment in that outcry for justice and peace, to be invisible.

And this is what happened. Because I was not willing to be invisible, I got to see things I might not have seen. I got to see, up close and personal, the pain and the struggle and the anger and the hope. I got to see the connections and relationships and consequences I hadn't seen before.

That's the wisdom of Bartimaeus' story. If you are willing to come out of the shadows of fear and shame and be seen, that's the very point at which your eyes might be open and you can see.

It's the wisdom of Elisha's story in II Kings – that “open my eyes that I may see” is a prayer to see the wonder that is at work around us, yes! But also to see the ways that we have been captured by our own system of labels and revenge and control and how that pattern will keep us from ever seeing the peace we say we want to see.

If I say that my vision for us is that we will not settle for being invisible, it isn't just because I want us to be seen. I want us *to see*! I want us to see in the way that only showing up can make happen.

Look, the world around us and the children among us are saying “Let me see.” Let me see what love and justice and peace and hope look like.

And if that matters to you, this is not the time to be invisible. Like Bartimaeus, it's time to throw off all the things you are hiding behind and jump up off those sidelines and show up to the things that really matter.

And then, well, let's see!

Open my eyes that I may see.
Open my ears that I may hear voices of truth you send so clear.
Open my heart and let me prepare, love with your children now to share.

Open our eyes. Open our ears. Break open our hearts if you have to because, today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your heart.

NOTES

See the note about Clara Scott by Richard Niell Donovan at www.lectionary.org/HymnStories. The story about Elisha is found in II Kings 6.8-23. Dr. Forbes was preaching at the Annual Meeting of the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Church in Palo Alto.