

Sunday December 15th, 2019

Advent III

PRAYER: Eternal God, before whose power we bow in awe; we thank you for the majesty and grandeur of creation. But even more, and above all, we thank you for the revelation of your glory and grace in Jesus Christ. In him you kindled the hope for a new life in a new world. Let that hope be reborn in us today. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: We offer to God ourselves, as messengers of peace and goodwill. Where war threatens and strife is real, we seek by grace to demonstrate God's reconciling love. When hostilities persist and God's people are alienated, our gift is Christ's promise of intercession and accord. May our words be combined with commitment to act, and our actions conform to God's abiding desire for his people. As part of our commitment to God's cause we now offer our tithes and offerings.

PASTORAL PRAYER: How strong your voice is, O God! At the mere sound of your word the earth was created, mountains rose, flowers blossomed and animals came into being. At the sound of your voice through Jesus, the sick were healed, the truth convicted and the dead came back to life. When you stand at the world's door and knock, who can withstand the sound of your voice? Yet, how soft your voice is, O God! How it sweeps gently through the morning, calling forth life from its bed. How it comes and gently prompts us to extend love and care to others. Your soft voice is our hearts treasure, a comfort in our darkness, a surety in our confusion. O God, who can withstand your soft voice? Whether by your strong voice or your soft voice, O God, call us to again see the wounds of this world. Give us the fortitude to see the cuts and bruises we have inflicted on the souls of others. Let your word of love linger in our ears and our hearts as we seek to be reconciled to those, we have driven into estrangement from us. Let your voice empower us to be agents of: healing, hope and peace.

If we should find ourselves at this moment or at any time in our lives to be in the wilderness, let us joyfully join your voice in calling out confidence and faith. If we find ourselves standing in the raging river of a turbulent life, help us to join our voice to yours in calling for the waters to still. If you send us to those who hold authority and power like Moses long ago, help us to join your voice in calling for justice. O God, how we need your voice today, your voice of: confidence and strength. How we need your words of truth to speak to a world full of confusion and misguided priorities.

How we need your voice of hope to speak to those who are suffering due to illness or grief. O God, we know your voice is life itself. Help us to listen. Help us not to fall into the temptation of satisfying our itchy ears; listening for the words of this world that soothe but do not convict, words that excuse but do not call for repentance, or words that rationalize evil but do not call for righteousness. Help us to see that the surety of truth is not found in smoothness of speech, or articulation of big words, or in giving what the crowd wants. Sometimes the truth comes from the sole voice standing alone, against popular opinion. Dear God, bless those men and women who are our modern-day prophets, communicating your word of truth to us, despite the personal cost. Protect them, we pray and even more importantly grant us courage to stand with them.

BENEDICTION: Await with the farmer the fall of the rain, the warmth of the sun, the life of the soil. Await with God, and even the desert shall blossom. And as the wilderness becomes oasis, stretching its fields around the world, a highway shall appear, and you shall walk the holy way.

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Isaiah 7:10-16 and Luke 2:21-40

Sermon Series: God's Christmas Gifts.

Part III: "Sight for the Blind."

The story goes that an elderly woman came home to find that her house had been broken into. She immediately called the police and frantically reported how her house had been burglarized. The nearest police unit to her house was a canine unit, which responded immediately to the call. The police officer drove up to the house and proceeded to let the dog out of the car.

The woman came running out of the house at the sight of the police car only to see the dog getting out of the car. She threw up her hands in the air and in frustration screamed, "Not only have I been robbed, but now they've sent me a blind police officer." I mention this little story because of something that happened in the news recently that caught my attention.

On November 29th, a few years back, the federal court of Canada issued a judgment and court order against our own federal government. The case in question, all began when a woman by the name of Donna Jodham, whose stated career is that of accessibility consultant, launched a constitutional court challenge. Why; well because she was unable to apply for a government job or complete the 2006 census. She argued that her rights to equality were being violated.

The issue stems from the fact that Jodham is legally blind, and in fact is one of the first blind people in Canada to complete an MBA. The legal matter, centers on federal government websites that are not accessible to those with visual impairments. I have come to understand that there is software available that when used, reads the print on websites and then verbalizes the words. Jodham's problem was, however, that the websites need to be compatible with the software and the government sites are not.

The federal court gave the government 15 months to comply, meaning to make sure the sites become compatible, and has taken the unusual step to order monitoring of the government's progress, and a reporting back to the court. The reason I raise this, is that I must confess that my first reaction to all of this was one of surprise. I was surprised that in this day and age, and with the technology we possess that these websites were not made accessible long ago. It seems to me, to be a bit of a "no brainer".

I am not saying there are not serious issues in regards to accessibility that still need to be addressed, but we have collectively, as a society, made major strides. You would think, of any possible group or organization, that our own federal government would have taken the initiative and made this happen. It is after all the twenty-first century, and we are a modern, technologically advanced society. If I can file my income tax form electronically, surely a blind person should be able to access a government website.

That's just a brief snapshot of the situation in Canada, in the year 2019, but in Jesus' day, as you can imagine, it was a completely different matter.

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To be visually impaired, or handicapped in any way, was tantamount to a life sentence of poverty. In Jesus' day, there were no advocacy groups like the CNIB, or human rights lawyers, championing the cause of the blind or any other physically intellectually challenged group of people. There were no Braille books, no ramps into buildings, no unified sign language, no War Amps organization, or none of the accessibility gains many Canadians now enjoy.

To make matters worse, in Jesus' day, the prevailing theological opinion was that if you were blind, or experienced some other form of disability; it was because of sin. In other words, you were blind because God's was punishing you. Take the very curious and interesting case in John 9 of the man born blind. A man who was relegated to a life of extreme poverty, and left to live off whatever he could beg from others.

The entire chapter is predicated on a question the disciples ask, "What caused this man's blindness; his sin, or his parent's sin"? In trying to understand why people experienced disability, sickness, or tragedy: the assumption was made that the sufferer was to blame. Imagine the guilt this man's parents felt, or he himself felt. As a blind person you were left to the mercy of others, and as I mentioned, relegated to a life of begging, as with another blind man mentioned in the bible, named Bartimaeus, in Mark 10.

Perhaps you now understand the powerful and radical nature of Jesus' application of Isaiah's prophecy in Luke 4, to himself. Especially, I would say for today's focus, the words, "recovery of sight to the blind". If, as I have been arguing through this Advent season, the words of Luke 4 are promised benefits of Jesus' incarnation, then the blind seeing was at the very least, life changing.

As was the case in John 9, when the blind man recovered his sight, everything about his life changed, and I would argue with some surety, changed for the better. He would no longer have to beg, but could gain some employment. Maybe he could even find someone to marry and have a family. All we know is that it was a new day for him.

The clear implication of Jesus' words is that the blindness he was referring to was indeed to include curing physical blindness; and throughout his ministry that is exactly what happened. When Jesus encountered a blind person in the gospels, they received their sight back. The gospels have several records of such healings. Curing blindness therefore was a fulfillment of prophecy, and a true sign of Jesus' being the Messiah.

It is also this physical healing by Jesus that has inspired mission groups, like Operation Eyesight that we support; that seeks to take up the cause of Christ in curing many forms of blindness. Project they undertake include: making sure children get vitamin D, providing cataract surgery for the poor or reusing old eye glasses. I am sure Jesus not only approves of such efforts, but blesses them as well.

Now, perhaps you know what comes next in what I am laying out for you, but it is also clear that Jesus seeks to cure spiritual blindness as well. This theme is also very prevalent in the gospels and is also implied in Isaiah's words.

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I think we can all understand that we can have fully functioning eyes, but still be blind. This particular type of blindness refers to a lack of understanding. It is a blindness that no optometrist or ophthalmologist can cure. This type of blindness was the problem experienced by those in scripture who opposed Jesus. They just couldn't see the truth. Simeon in our gospel lesson today predicted this would happen.

He said in Luke 2:34, "This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others." It is a prophecy that seems to be a mixed blessing, to say the least. We all know that in spiritual terms, there is an epidemic of blindness. Many people cannot see the truth, and even worse, refuse to see the truth. It is almost as if they enjoy being in the dark. Yes, I said, they enjoy the darkness.

This is the theme the Apostle Paul picks up at length in Romans where he writes, "Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead... Instead of believing what they knew was the truth about God, they deliberately chose to believe lies." (Romans 1:21-22, 25)

One of the things that really grabs my attention from the story of Simeon and Anna in our gospel lesson, is how in the midst of the crowds at the temple, they were able to spot Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. In the hustle and bustle of people coming and going, busy with their own lives; people intent on their own religious service of making sacrifices and heading for prayer, Simeon and Anna saw who Jesus was.

In the midst of the noise, and crowds, only Simeon and Anna had the vision to see the implications of one small baby being brought for his dedication. We must remember that hundreds of first-born baby boys would have been brought to the temple every year as a fulfillment of the law, just as Samuel had been brought by Hannah and handed over to Eli. Both Simeon and Anna had spent long periods of time at the temple waiting for the Messiah, and they saw the truth of who Jesus was.

One thing we need to realize right away is that truth can often be missed by the majority. As Anatole France said, "If fifty million people say a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing." As was the case with Simeon and Anna, sometimes you have to see through the crowd and the popular opinion, to see the truth. Crowds can blind us. Popular opinion is not necessarily the surety of truth.

So, I believe we can conclude that Jesus' promise of "sight to the blind" means for all of us, a new way of seeing the world and seeing the truth. The implication is that there are a number of ways our spiritual vision or comprehension can be negatively impacted.

Our vision can be clouded by sin, by a judgmental nature, by laziness, by short sightedness or simply because we don't want to see the truth and are rebellious.

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Also implied by blindness is a lack of discernment, or seeing the truth in what others are trying to get us to buy into. Like with Simeon and Anna, I think it may be getting harder and harder to see Jesus in the crowd. We go about our regular business; even our religious business, and we miss Jesus right in our midst. We don't see the spiritual implications of our actions or our inactions. We are blind.

It reminded me of something I hadn't thought of in a while. Maybe they still sell them, but do you remember a few years ago the trend in Christian retailing to sell all kinds of trinkets with the engraved letters WWJD. The letters represented "What would Jesus do." Do you remember this, or maybe remember wondering what these letters meant? Maybe you actually owned something with those letters engraved on it.

The idea was that by wearing a bracelet, hanging a poster, sticking on a bumper sticker or having shoe laces with these letters emblazoned on them, we would be encouraged to try and do things the way Jesus did them.

The problem, in my mind, was that what Jesus would really do, is not to depend on trendy trinkets to determine what to do, but rather he would rely on the Holy Spirit to navigate the tricky waters we find ourselves in. There is an old proverb and I wish I could remember the origin of it, but it reads, "In a world of blind people, the man with vision is king." How very true these words are.

It reminded me of a story Tony Campolo tells about his yearly vacation with his wife. He writes,

Almost every year, my wife makes sure that we go off to her favourite vacation spot in the whole world-Ocean City, New Jersey! One of the things I love to do is rent bicycles and ride on the boardwalk at the ocean resort. One day, I rented a bicycle built for two. I sat on the front seat and my wife sat on the backseat. After a short while, she told me that she didn't like the tandem bicycle because she couldn't steer it and she really couldn't see where she was going.

So, we traded seats, and from then on, she was in control, and she determined where we went. She liked it much better. I don't think we ever rented a tandem bike again. In so many ways, I think our experience on the tandem bike is a parable about life. Each of us wants to be up front determining where we will go. What God wants is for each of us to take the backseat and allow Him to be in control. (Let Me Tell You a Story, pg. 58)

To really deal with our blindness, we need to let God lead. Only God can truly see everything clearly. Only God truly knows the implications of all our decisions. The blind really begin to see when they see with the eyes of Christ. The truth about ourselves and about others becomes quite clear when we have our sight restored. I point back to our friend in John 9 who was grilled relentlessly by the religious authorities.

They were opposed to Jesus and sought every way to discredit him. The hypocrisy of their position was not lost on the man born blind who said, "*Why, that's very strange! He healed my eyes, and yet you don't know anything about him!*"

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Well, God doesn't listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Never since the world began has anyone been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn't do it."

The religious leaders in anger declared him a sinner and threw him out of the synagogue. Later, he runs into Jesus again and he declares his faith in Christ. Then Jesus sums this whole incident up with these words, *"I have come to judge the world. I have come to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind."*

Are we blind? Are we so caught up in our own interpretation of life and clouded by our experiences that we have missed seeing the truth? The good news today and every day is that Jesus wants to restore your sight. He wants you to see properly and truthfully. All we have to do is ask Jesus like Bartimaeus did in Mark 10. "Teacher, I want to see!" For when we say this, Jesus will respond, "Go your way. Your faith has healed you."