

St. Augustine-in-the-Woods, Freeland, WA
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
25 October 2015

Mark 10:46-52

SEEING AGAIN

Rabbi, I want my sight back. I want to see again.

This is a story we can't escape. The cast varies slightly, but the yearning to see is found in all three synoptic Gospels. In Matthew, it is two blind men, begging Jesus, "open our eyes." Luke tells the same story with one unnamed blind man, saying, "I want my sight back." Today, in Mark's story, it is a man with the unfortunate name of Bartimaeus, which in Hebrew means, "Son of the Unclean."

A miracle? No doubt. Not on Jesus' part, for our miracle was his everyday normal. So, much is in the response to this "new normal." Scripture is filled with stories not of exceptional people who saw or heard or felt the presence of God, but of ordinary individuals. Of Moses who saw a bush burning and had a hunch he wasn't supposed to call 911. Of the young Samuel who heard in the silence the small, still voice. Of Bartimeaus, the Son of the Unclean, at the bottom of society, who couldn't see at all.

So why did he cry out to Jesus? Not because he analyzed Jesus' sermons and said, "hmmm...a brilliant exegesis here, a valid paradigm there...this man is smart!" Or even that he heard the gossip that this rabbi was a miracle worker or a prophet; such folks existed then, as they do today, and mostly they are not who they say they are.

Bartimaeus knew something else was going on that gave him hope, that made him throw off his cloak and jump up and beg not for money, but for healing.

There is an explanation. In the Gospels and Epistles we call it *pneuma*, a Greek word meaning soul, breath, or spirit. The ineffable transcendent, the stuff of wonder, that can't be photographed or even photoshopped. As a poor Jew, Bartimeaus almost surely didn't know Greek but he knew *ruach*, the Hebrew word which can mean breath, or wisdom, or holiness, or faith.

And it was in faith that he was healed. Jesus didn't say, "I have cured you," but "Your faith has healed you."

In other words, nothing that can ever be seen, not even if our vision is 20/20 without glasses, but is always felt. The place may vary, the intensity differs, but the wordless experience of wonder and healing and pure knowing remains.

I don't think any of us get out of life without having at least a few of these moments. Perhaps we found the mystery and wonder in a lover's kiss. Or in reaching the top of a mountain and seeing heaven spread out below. Or in a morning sunrise, shimmering just for us, different from any other. Or in awaking from surgery and realizing, "Another day." Even a moment in prayer.

About 25 years ago I went looking for sheep, and that was my moment. One of my extraordinary times.

Yes, sheep. And this seems way to obvious, but why not go all the way here...I was looking for sheep and tried to have a conversation with the Shepherd.

The place was Mt. Saviour Monastery in upstate New York, about an hour's drive from my home. At the time, I had a friend who operated a sheep farm, and because she was so busy on the farm she asked if I could maybe go and take a look at their black-faced sheep. Not that I knew as much as she did, but she was confident that I was at least capable of taking photos and asking some questions of the head shepherd. A hearty breed, she said to me. Been around a long time. Maybe I will add them to my flock. (She was referring to the sheep, not the monks.)

I booked a long weekend at the guesthouse. I wasn't Catholic; I wasn't a Christian. But I was assured that I wasn't obliged to pray with them, and all that was asked was to respect the quiet. That I could do.

I looked at the sheep. They were eating the grass. Then they ambled over to some more grass. Not much action here.

I asked to meet the head shepherd, Brother Bruno. My friend said Bruno had been doing this for years, and knew more than anyone around. Yes, he said in response to my question, they're hardy. Yes, they're good mothers. Yes, they survive cold and snow, heat and hail. Well, that conversation didn't take long. I figured that monks don't waste words.

By the end of the second day, I realized I had no excuse for feeling a bit bored. I wasn't just visiting a farm or staying at a campground. The real business here was prayer, on offer seven times a day. I would be a fool not to taste the specialty of the house. It wouldn't hurt.

That night I attended the last of the Divine Offices, Compline, beginning at 8:15. It was May, and the sun had not gone so long that there wasn't still a red halo surrounding the octagon chapel. The chapel itself was stark, the interior of gray slate, dominated by a naked stone altar. Only candles gave inner light.

The dozen or so monks filed in. Brother Pierre played the harp. They chanted three psalms; I would later realize it was the same psalms, every night. It sounded new to me, of course, but in the monks' voices I heard no boredom, no hint that some of the eldest probably sang these words thousands of times. Yet this was outside of time. This was eternity, this was no time. At the conclusion, the abbot blessed us, sprinkled us with holy water, and the candles were extinguished.

As the monks and guests left in silence, I sat. I couldn't move. A harp. Water. Candles. Just material things, nothing I didn't see before. But they were transformed. Something happened to me, too.

"It's time to go," I heard a voice gently say. One of the monks, holding the keys, was closing up for the night.

Did I sleep in the peace of Christ that night?

No. In truth, I felt I was poisoned. My heart was racing, every cell was on fire. I didn't know what this meant. My mind couldn't make sense of this. And so I was scared.

To my amazement, I joined the monks at Vigils, the first of the Divine Offices, beginning at 4:45. A.M., that is. I was awake anyway. All I remember was that one of the monks gave me a book thicker than the Bible which contained the psalms and readings for various seasons of the year -- and it wasn't spring and summer, but the church year, such as Advent and Lent, and I had no idea what season we were in. So I listened. That was all I could do.

7 a.m. Lauds, the second office. This rhythm was starting to feel normal.

9 a.m. Mass. This was a bit more familiar, I had attended a few before. I also knew, from those occasions, that I was explicitly excluded from the Eucharist, from tasting the bread and wine. But in this place I now felt like a beloved guest, that I belonged, and surely the hosts wouldn't mind.

I lined up with the others. I watched them take the bread in their hand, then the cup. Easy. I could do this.

What happened next I can't explain. If I could, it wouldn't be worth telling. Mostly, I surrendered. I was relieved. I was home. All fear was gone. I wanted to jump up and thank someone, love everyone, go anywhere, and the who and where didn't matter and I surely didn't know "how," but all I could say, if asked, was this: "I can see where I am. And it is good."

From that moment on -- the world was exactly the same, but I saw it differently. The sheep remained sheep. But on the many visits over the years that followed, the years I became an oblate, the years when I dropped in for a meal or conversation or prayer, I would climb to a swing on the top of the hill, looking down on the chapel and the sheep, and the sheep became as holy as the chapel. Neither may have moved physically, but they moved me.

As for Brother Bruno, I soon discovered that he loved nothing better than to talk endlessly about the farm, about the monastic life, and comparing our recipes for homemade granola. That was because I stopped asking questions about what I thought was important to know and learned to listen to what he wanted to say.

And yet, there also have been many moments since then far from faith, when I wanted to tell the head shepherd: be quiet, I'm tired of listening, and when the sheep were just wool-making machines.

Perhaps this sounds familiar. There is the lover who we will never touch again. There is the descent from the mountain not into heaven but into its opposite. There is sunrise whose beauty is unseen because we're up way too early and we haven't slept all night and, damn, it's another day. Or of prayer that is now dry and empty and nothing more than words.

Faith, however, is more than feelings. For faith to remain and sustain, it needs to be fed with action and with a response so that what was *my* miracle becomes *our* miracle.

Remember what Bartimaeus did next? *He followed him on the way.* One step at a time, he took up the tasks at hand. No doubt he still sometimes stumbled, he probably got dirty again, felt poisoned now and then --traveling in strange places often makes us sick -- and tried a detour or two. Some days, the hard days, he didn't know where he was going and why.

But he, and we, can never leave the Way. Because the Way will never leave us.

Truly, our faith has healed us, and is healing us, and will heal us.