

# “Seeing Again”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 8, 2019*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Psalm 40:4-10

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 10:46-52

Some of the deepest and most long-standing historical divisions within the Christian family have centered around the question of baptism. On one side of the debate is “believer baptism” where receiving the sacrament of baptism coincides with the public profession of faith; one made, presumably, at an age when the baptized can understand and claim faith in Christ for themselves. On the other side is “infant baptism” where children – often at a very young age – are presented for the rite of baptism by their parents, who – along with the church body – make promises on behalf of the child to nurture them in the faith.

In our particular denomination, both of these baptisms are considered equally valid. If you are baptized as a child in any church – as long as it was done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – there is no need to do it again: one faith, one church, one baptism. On the other hand, older children and adults can be baptized at any point by confession of faith.

At whatever age baptism takes place, we describe the sacrament that is performed as an outward confirmation of an inward reality. We claim that in the baptismal rite, being cleansed in the living water – whether that’s done by sprinkling a few drops or full immersion – we are welcoming the newly baptized into God’s family. And yet, the truth is, God loves and claims us before we are born; or born again. There is never a time when we are removed from God’s love and absolutely nothing – seen or unseen – can separate us from this love; the love that we claim to believe when we, or our children, receive the sacrament of baptism.

Throughout the gospels, “seeing” is an important metaphor for believing. At the time of Jesus’ own baptism, the visible sign of a dove descending from heaven accompanied a voice from heaven claiming Jesus as God’s beloved son. Throughout his time of ministry, healings and other miracles allow people to see who Jesus really is, believing him to be the Son of God.

This account of the healing of “Blind Bartimaeus” concludes the central section of Mark’s Gospel that began back in chapter 8 with the healing of another

blind man. It will be followed immediately, in chapter 11, by the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The focus of this section is the establishment of Jesus' identity and mission. Included are the three passion predictions where Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem where he will be arrested, put to death and rise again. His followers, because they are not wanting or willing to believe him, cannot "see" this way forward. Others, though – especially those who are healed by Jesus – are better able to see who Jesus is and where he is heading.

While the blind man in chapter eight is quite passive in his encounter with Jesus, "Blind Bartimaeus" certainly is not. Though he cannot see, when he hears that it is Jesus passing by, he begins crying out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Perhaps, he has suffered enough, or feels like there is nothing left to lose and just doesn't care anymore. Or perhaps, he can just somehow sense – or really "see" – that in the presence of Jesus everything has changed: that he is no longer "Blind Bartimaeus," the beggar sitting by the roadside," but instead *Bartimaeus, beloved child of God*. Whatever the reason, he finds the courage and faith to call out to Jesus who makes him well.<sup>1</sup>

After he calls out to Jesus, the other people around Bartimaeus try to silence him. Maybe, they believe the blind beggar is not worthy of Jesus' time and attention, or maybe they prefer not to hear him, because that way, they can more easily not see him. Undeterred, he cried out even more loudly, so that Jesus heard him and halted his journey – standing still – and asked his disciples to fetch him. In Jesus' presence, he was not willing to stay quiet, not willing to remain on the side of the road. When Jesus called him to get up, he threw off his cloak – likely the only thing he owned – and went to Jesus.

And, as so often happens during encounters like these in the gospels, Jesus asks the one in need of healing, "what do you want me to do for you?" This will not be something imposed on Bartimaeus, but a blessing of his own choosing. "Let me see again," he says, and with that, his sight is restored. And while Jesus tells him to go, he decides that the road ahead for him is the one Jesus will take and followed him on the way.

Today, we look at the fifth of the seven marks of Vital Congregations, Spirit-Inspired Worship. Worship is central to all that we do as a church; it is our foundational expression of faith in Jesus Christ as we offer ourselves to be a holy and living sacrifice to God. In celebrating the sacrament of baptism, we also remember our own baptisms: that outward, visible sign that God loves us and has

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, "Freedom"

claimed to part of one, spiritual family. And, just as one baptism goes with us no matter which congregation of whatever Christian denomination or location we may join, innumerable expressions of worship can be found in various places and traditions. They may look and sound very different, but all are part of one body, one church, one faith.

To describe worship as “Spirit-Inspired” is intentionally redundant, because both words point back to the same Hebrew root – *ruach* – which means breath or wind. Specifically, it is the breath of God that brought life to humans at creation and the movement of the Holy Spirit that can be felt and heard but not contained. And so, worship that is spirit-inspired is genuine, it celebrates life, it may be patterned but is not always predictable.

In our particular tradition, we often describe our worship as *liturgical*, which – based on what I was taught in seminary – means, “the work of the people.” Maybe they taught us that to reassure us that planning and leading worship wasn’t all going to be left to ministers; that if we thought it was all up to us then we’d head for the door. But what I’ve learned is that in order for worship to be truly spirit-inspired – for life to be breathed into it – the work of the people of God, or God working through the people, is an absolute requirement. For, as soon as we hope to contain it, we realize it’s like trying to harness the wind.

So, what makes for spirit-inspired worship? Some of the most vial things that I have witnessed take place behind the scenes; they are in the banners that are created, the candles on the table meticulously placed, the countless hours of practice by our musicians. The Spirit is in the candies that are discreetly passed around, the words of welcome and support shared, the names of children learned, the copies of sermons that are taken home and passed along or re-read. There is inspiration in the congregants who come a half-hour early to sit and meditate in the pews, or who stay in their seats or gather around the organ to listen until the postlude is complete. It is in the voices – silent and aloud – who offer prayer requests: sometimes unique, others listed again week after week. It is being able to close your eyes and hear “give us this day our daily bread” or “Here I am, Lord. Is it I Lord?” It is the morning sun that (sometimes) shines in the windows and the creak of the ceiling when the wind blows.

It is also in the sacraments that we share as God’s family: the ones we officially name, baptism and Holy Communion; as well as the services of marriage and celebration of life that take place in this sanctuary. It is chapel with preschoolers and setting up flowers for Christmas and Easter. It is the lighting of candles on Christmas Eve and snuffing them out at the Maundy Thursday Tenebrae. It is the dedication of special offerings and mission volunteers and

canned goods and children's bibles. Inspiration comes in so many different forms.

And just as God invites and welcomes us in baptism, God is always re-inviting and re-welcoming us into inspired worship. Each Sunday, we are assured that if we honestly confess those things that appear to be keeping us from God, our eyes will be opened so that we can see that no matter what we may have done, no matter what may have been done to us, they do not define us in God's eyes. God's own breath gives us life; and God's merciful grace, like the blowing wind, cannot be contained.

And so, beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, as we celebrate baptism today, remember that you have been claimed and loved by God. And remember that, as you promise as a part of the church to love and nurture this particular child, we all have a particular part to play in the liturgy of worship – the work of the people – which is inspired by God and shared in faith by the body of Christ, the church given eyes to see again. Amen.