

Stumbling into Light
Mark 10:46-52; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22
Stewardship Dedication

Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22

- ¹I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
- ²My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
- ³O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
- ⁴I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
- ⁶This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
- ⁷The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
- ⁸O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
- ¹⁹Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.
- ²⁰He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
- ²¹Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
- ²²The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Mark 10:46b-52

⁴⁶As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”

⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then 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.” ⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”

Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

The Sermon

We pray today for siblings, friends and neighbors in Mexico, recovering from a devastating hurricane; and for all people everywhere who are suffering the effects of flooding.

There’s a river in the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas, where a drought has lowered the water level of a reservoir by more than 80 feet.

As the water level has receded, a dramatic sight has been revealed. You can see it in a striking photograph that made the rounds last week: in the midst of a wide lake, the stone structure of a 16th century church building—majestic arches and intricate walls intact—rising out of the water.

With only deep water surrounding the castle-like church walls, a tree-covered mountain looms behind the ruins, its peak obscured by a thick mist that makes the sky an opaque grey.

The church was built by monks in the mid-1500s, with walls 30 feet high and a bell tower 48 feet off the ground. It was abandoned during a plague the late 1700s, and in 1966, a dam was built to create the reservoir,ⁱ and since that time, for the most part—other than another drought in 2002, when the water level got so low that you could actually walk into the church again—the Temple of Santiago has been completely submerged under 100 feet of water.ⁱⁱ

You can imagine the promise that it had for the people who labored and contributed and sacrificed and paid for that church to be built. And, for a time, it served God’s purpose for it.

But I wonder if there is a part of you and me and everyone who sings that song,
“Lord prepare me / to be a sanctuary / pure and holy / tried and true
With thanksgiving / I’ll be a living sanctuary / for you”—

I wonder if there is a part of everyone who embodies that song that sometimes wonders if the Church of Jesus Christ—in our time, in our world, in our country, in our context—doesn’t appear, at least to some extent, to be just like that Temple of Santiago: submerged, unseen, swallowed up by the progress of the world around it and subsumed into a deep landscape from which it is always hidden and easily forgotten.

And sometimes, maybe, the Church within us is just as hidden, just as swallowed up, just as unseen by the world around us.

You can imagine the feeling of Blind Bartimaeus, unable to see because of his condition, long since reduced to asking people for money just to survive.

He’s heard of this man, Jesus of Nazareth—which is not hard to imagine, since Jesus heals people everywhere he goes; and even though he orders them not to tell anyone, of course they go out and tell everyone they see. What else are you going to do? When you get healed from what’s been weighing you down, you can’t help but tell the world about it.

And now he hears that Jesus and his disciples are walking past him on the road, right here where he’s been sitting in his cloak, and he knows this is his chance.

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And like the choppy waters that threaten to overwhelm a castaway in the middle of the ocean who’s trying to keep treading water when the search and rescue helicopter is coming by, people are all around him saying, “Keep your mouth shut; quit making all that racket; don’t be a pest; you’re making a scene; you’re embarrassing yourself.”

But he knows he’s hanging on for dear life, and he knows this is his only hope:
“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man. They said, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”

“For a long time,” God says in Isaiah 42, “I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,
I will gasp and pant.
I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their herbage;
I will turn the rivers into islands,
and dry up the pools.

“I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them” (Isaiah 42:14-16).

What do you imagine God is ready to do in the world?

What do you think God is ready to do in your church’s life?

What do you suppose God is ready to do in your life?

Either way, I think it’s telling—and it’s crucial for the Church to recognize—that it’s the person with nothing but an impoverishing disability who is demonstrating deep faith and trust in God, calling out for Jesus with, to all appearances, an absolute confidence that Jesus can and will make his life circumstances more whole, more equitable, more fulfilling.

Meanwhile, the disciples may or may not be among those yelling at the guy to pipe down, but at the very least, they are either deaf to his calling, or they’re purposely ignoring it.

That’s about the time that we look down at our feet, and feel the water creeping into our shoes.

For every cry that we either don’t hear or choose to ignore, an idea hovers over the Church: we are part of, and have at our use, a great gift.

God has great plans. Sometimes—maybe most of the time; maybe all the time—we find that God has greater plans for the Church than the Church has for itself.

I have long been guilty, and continually need to repent, of inconsequential preaching around this time of year: specifically, stewardship season.

I have preached cautious, timid little stewardship sermons to congregations that might as well have been apologies for asking them to keep the church in business. I repent of that.

I have prayed little prayers. I am forever grateful to my friend and colleague Steve Mowery, who said, in a sermon that I wished I'd heard 15 years earlier, that he had had enough of church meetings that started off by someone saying, "Let's have a little prayer." He said, "I don't need a little prayer; I don't have time for a little prayer. I need prayers—this church needs prayers—the world needs prayers—as big as we can get them."

I have always appreciated a prayer composed by James T. Fatzinger that goes,

"Sometimes, God, we do not expect too much from you;
we expect too little.

Our lives are not filled with great expectations.

Sometimes your promises seem so outlandish, so unlikely
as to be laughable.

We are afraid that your promise, like our promises,
may be broken,

and we are hesitant to be so vulnerable.

Sometimes we are afraid your promises may come true
and demand too much of us.

Help us to cling to your promises

and laugh with joy

when impossibilities come true through Jesus Christ."ⁱⁱⁱ

Bartimaeus did not have the luxury of being timid about his faith,
or of expecting just a little bit of encouragement.

He didn't have time to be apologetic about feeling the need to get God's attention
by any means necessary to improve and prolong his life.

And when they finally stopped telling him to be quiet
and instead lifted him up saying, "take heart, get up, he is calling you,"
Bartimaeus was already out of his seat.

We have been entrusted with a message about a God who is larger than every circumstance;

whose love is more powerful than all the hate humans can conjure up, and by a factor that cannot be calculated;

whose power and authority are without limit and whose phenomenally self-giving grace makes every lost life redeemable.

What God wants to do with the Church—with the whole people of God—is huge.

What we are called to do is enormously consequential.

A lot of times, the bar we set for what we expect God to accomplish with us is outrageously low; the expectations we have, of both God and ourselves, are far too tempered by the demands of decorum and the unwritten rules we habitually observe that are designed to keep us from losing our precarious positions of self-protection.

We are capable of being an even better church,
reaching out further,
feeding more people,
healing more wounds,
making more peace,
sharing better news,
saving more lives,
fighting for more justice,
opening more doors,
ending more violence,
providing a better atmosphere,
rescuing more children
and bringing more light into more dark places.

What do you think God wants to do in the world?

What do you think God is ready to do in your church's life?

What do you think God is ready to do in your life?

Litany of Dedication

We lift up to you our integrity.

We mean to respond to your call to us, no matter where it may lead
or what it may demand.

We mean to do as you would have us do in all circumstances.

We mean to reflect the image in which we were created.

We mean, by your grace, to be whole.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, (Psalm 115:1)
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

O God, we lift up to you our trust.

Help us to take appropriate risks to build up your kingdom—
and perhaps sometimes even inappropriate risks

for the sake of delivering your tangible good news to everyone on earth.

You transform our fear into courage

and transform us from consumers into disciples.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

O God, our souls greet you with awe.

In your holy presence

and your magnificent, breathtaking mystery,
we are humbled.

Yet you lift us up from humiliation

and treat us as your own.

We submit ourselves to you in joy and peace.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

O God, we lift up to you our faith.

Inspire us, make us enthusiastic

by establishing your eternal presence within us as it is all around us,
and abide in us, we pray, as we seek to abide fully in you.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Accept these prayers
and the prayers we have submitted before you
expressing our dreams and our trust,
our faith, hope, and love,
our desire to learn from you
and live in you
and be held by you
every day, hour, and moment of our lives.

We pray in the name of Christ, who was born for us,
who lived and suffered and died for us,
and who is raised to new life for us,
so that we might live our new life in him.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Hear us now as we lift up the prayers of thanksgiving and supplication
that we carry with us today.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
October 25, 2015

ⁱ David von Blohn, "Colonial Church Emerges from Falling Mexican Reservoir." © 2015 The Associated Press. Retrieved October 24, 2015, http://www.lmtonline.com/article_28576b02-b179-54d1-8e49-73f5a93f7bc5.html

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi, eds. *Touch Holiness*. The Pilgrim Press, 1990.