

The Gift of Sight–Hindsight, Insight, and Foresight

Up until just 13 days ago, I expected to be worshiping with Christians in Cuba today. This was to have been the last day of a week-long mission trip by our Presby Cats collegiate ministry group and our Methodist counterparts. For nearly a year we had been planning to spend time with Christians in Cuba, learning about the church there in a place so very different from our own setting, assisting them in their programs with young children, as well as disabled adults. We were going to be working on a pineapple plantation that supports the ministry of the church in that place. And of course, we were going to have had several opportunities to spend time on the famous Cuban beaches, soaking up the sun and thawing out some of the cold that had set in to our Montana bodies over the last few months. Even up until 13 days ago, it was our sense that the coronavirus situation, while serious in distant lands, was unlikely to threaten us—especially those of us in a remote place like Montana.

Just 13 days ago, many of you had travel plans and other plans as winter was giving way to mud season, another name for spring break around here. We knew the routine of more sunshine and less snow showers, the arrival of birds returning from their winter ranges, and poking through the soil shoots of green promising more color to come.

But 13 days ago our naivete was shattered when the wisdom of administrators at Montana State University declared that there would be no international travel over spring break by MSU and MSU-affiliated groups. What a blessing it is that those administrators had the insight to see that what seemed a faraway crisis would soon be a close-up-and-personal crisis. Each day after that fateful day, March 9, just 13 days ago, the crisis has increased like a steady drumbeat. And today we now have school closures and entire states that have instituted statewide shelter in place orders. It seems all but certain that we too here in Montana will also be under such an order sooner than later.

Thanks to the leadership of one of our elders, Kris Hall, the session became convinced at its February 27th meeting that the threat of this crisis called for us to create a Pandemic Response Team to prepare for and be ready to respond to this crisis as it unfolds. As your pastors, Jody and I are very grateful for this foresight that has our church dealing proactively with this crisis. Thanks to the partnership of those on this Pandemic Response Team, we're keeping our stance on high alert as events unfold. While there are still many unknowns ahead, we are heading into this future with our eyes wide open. Thanks be to God, for equipping us with this foresight.

The gift of sight—that is foresight, insight, as well as hindsight—is something that Christians have understood to be from God. It's one of the traits—sight that is—that distinguishes us as human beings. The ability to look back and analyze that which has happened, as well as to ponder the meaning of what is happening in the present, and to understand that there is a future ahead of us that is affected by how we live and act in the present, are all aspects of what we understand to be the human experience.

Throughout the Bible we read words written that express all three perspectives of sight—past, present, and future. In this brief passage from Matthew's gospel this morning, we read of an event that happened late in Jesus' ministry. In fact, according to Matthew's timeline, it is the last event before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that day we have come to call Palm Sunday—the beginning of that last week of Jesus' life before his crucifixion and death.

Jesus and his disciples and the other followers had just left Jericho, heading west on their way to Jerusalem. The text points out that it was a large crowd by now that was following Jesus. After three years, Jesus had become so well known that there were many people who had been moved by him to want to follow where he led. They could see in Jesus something winsome, something appealing, to the

extent that they were motivated to follow him. Clearly Jesus' reputation was such that word had spread about him so that there were many who had heard of him even if they had not directly experienced him.

Clearly that was the case for two blind men who were said to be sitting by the roadside when Jesus and his entourage were approaching. Being blind, they could not see who it was that was approaching, but they certainly heard that it was Jesus who was passing by, leading them to shout, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" Whether or not Jesus hear them right away, we're not sure. But there were those in the crowd of Jesus' followers who did. And when they heard the blind men shouting, they ordered them in no uncertain terms to be quiet. Undeterred, the two blind men shouted as loudly as they could, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" And this time, Jesus did hear them, because he stopped and called out to the blind men to come forward to him. When Jesus asked them what they wanted him to do for them, they asked that their eyes be opened.

Now what happens next we can take at face value, and when we do, it is yet another miracle story that in many ways is the capstone of the many marvelous miracles Jesus performed. But we can also take what happens on a more symbolic or metaphorical level, and when we consider it from that perspective it has a profound relevance for us in our day today in the midst of this COVID-19 crisis.

First, let's look at the way this story ends in that straightforward way. After the blind men make their request of Jesus that their eyes be opened, we read that Jesus was moved by compassion to grant their petition. Jesus touched their eyes and immediately they regained their sight and followed Jesus, presumably on into Jerusalem. And again, that entry by Jesus through the east gate into Jerusalem was on a donkey or colt with crowds waving branches and shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" we can surely surmise that these formerly blind men with their sight so recently restored would have been among the most enthusiastic of the branch-waving boisterous crowd. These two blind men who had called out to the "Son of David" on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem were also shouting to the Son of David as he enters the holy city of Jerusalem.

They had heard of this Jesus-this Son of David. They encounter this Jesus-this Son of David--on the road. And they proclaim the coming of this Son of David--Jesus--as he makes his way into the city of Jerusalem, heralding his arrival--this one who will save his people.

That's the straightforward, face value way of understanding this story. And this way of understanding--it packs a punch in and of itself. It is a celebration of sorts of God's gift of sight--hindsight, insight, and foresight, in this case, of the two blind men. Their hindsight enabled them to hear of this man Jesus and all that he had done in the past that would lead people to affirm that Jesus was a holy one in the lineage of King David. Their encounter of him in the present moment in the midst of their physical need of sight was a sacred moment for them. And their anticipation of what was to come in the way of Jesus entering the holy city as the heir of King David showed their foresight into the future implications of Jesus' life.

That face-value look at this story is powerful and revealing of just who Jesus is.

There is more though to be gleaned from this wonderful story of restored sight leading to following Jesus when we consider just what it has to say to us in the year 2020.

There is a lot of darkness in our world situation today. There are a lot of people in our country and around the world who are either feeling blinded by the dire COVID-19 situation or whose clear sightedness is surely severely obscured during this time of fear and uncertainty.

When Jesus healed those two blind men, we read that it was through the intervention of Jesus they *regained* their sight. That they regained it implies that their blindness was not a congenital

condition—they were not born blind, but rather their blindness was the result of something in their lives that had led to their losing their eyesight.

This can and does happen to us along the life of faith. When there is clear sailing ahead, it's like we can see forever—at least all the way to the horizon, and maybe even beyond. When the travails of life are small and manageable, we can see past them to that which lies ahead. And it's during the times that we call good times that our clear sightedness is something that we can take for granted. Sometimes it can even lead to a complacency where we fail to see our lives through the lens of faith.

One of the places in the Bible where we encounter the wide range of faith experiences—strong and weak and in between—is in the book of Psalms. From mighty and joyful psalms of praise for God's mighty greatness, to psalms of lament that cry out in the void of the seeming absence of God. And then there are psalms of comfort that serve as a profound and powerful reminder of the steadfast, enduring love and presence of God through it all—good, bad, and in between. There is no more beloved psalm in this category than the 23rd Psalm—the psalm that Jody read for us earlier in the service today. It is this psalm that is perhaps recited more than any other in a time of crisis or at the time of death or during a funeral or memorial service, reminding us of God's loving companionship. In just six short verses we encounter amazing words of comfort and assurance.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.*

Words of comfort for the ways that God has guided us in the past.

*He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

Words of assurance of God's guidance in our daily living.

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

Perhaps the most comforting words of this psalm and among the most comforting in all of the Bible, reminding us of God's ongoing and continuous presence through the most difficult times.

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

Another reminder of the over-the-top abundance of God's love for us.

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

The closing words that bring us full circle to God's loving presence from beginning to end.

My friends, as people of faith, we have been given the gift of sight–hindsight, insight, and foresight–to carry us through this time indeed and all time to come. As people of faith though, we have been given a responsibility as well.

When those blind men on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem encountered Jesus, and when after imploring Jesus for his intervention; and after Jesus caused them to regain their sight, something happened that is somewhat different than earlier events of Jesus curing blindness. In earlier stories of Jesus' miracles, he often would tell the one who had been cured or made whole to return to the community or sometimes even instructing them to tell no one of what had happened. In this case of the blind men being healed on the road outside Jericho–again among the last miracles Jesus performed, the blind men after having regained their sight chose to fall in with the others and follow Jesus for the remainder of his journey.

My dear friends in Christ, as our faith is bolstered in this time, as we are reminded of God's incessant and continuous love and presence with us, it is for us to fall in line and follow Jesus, follow in his way that leads all the way to the end that is not physical death, but glorious resurrection with Jesus.

May we live in that confidence in these uncertain times, bearing witness to the one who came that we might receive life in all of its abundance: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.