

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: The Lord our God, creator of night and day, calls us to come.
All: **Our Lord and Master, Jesus the Christ, invites us to join in the song.**
One: Our Guide and Sustainer, the Holy Spirit, beckons us to listen and rejoice.
All: **So come, let us worship in song and praise, in prayer and thanksgiving.**
Unison: **Come, let us worship the Lord.**

***OPENING HYMN** "O Day of Radiant Gladness" (*Verses 1, 2, & 4*) [*Tune 393*]

1. **O day of radiant gladness,
O day of joy and light,
O balm of care and sadness,
most beautiful, most bright;
this day the high and lowly,
through ages joined in tune,
sing "Holy, holy, holy"
to the great God triune.**
2. **This day at the creation
the light first had its birth;
this day for our salvation
Christ rose from depths of earth;
this day our Lord victorious
the Spirit sent from heaven,
and thus this day most glorious
a triple light was given.**
4. **That light our hope sustaining,
we walk the pilgrim way,
at length our rest attaining,
our endless Sabbath day.**

(continued...)

**We sing to you our praises,
O Father, Spirit, Son;
the church its voice upraises
to you, blest Three in One.**

Music: Memmingen ms., 17th century
Harm. George Ratcliffe Woodward, 1904
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Gracious God,
we are people who still love darkness rather than light.
We keep shameful deeds secret,
but flaunt our occasional acts of virtue.
We see ourselves as blameless,
but pass judgment on others.
We do not stand firmly enough with those who are vulnerable,
but step back, protecting ourselves.
Forgive us, we pray.
Bring us into your light that we may
see ourselves rightly.
Bring us into your light that we may
know ourselves loved.
Bring us into your light that we may
live more fruitful lives.
Keep raising us, we pray, from the deadness of sin,
and shine upon us with your grace.
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,
the light of the world. Amen.**

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from I Timothy 1 & I Peter 2)*

One: Hear the good news! The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,
that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
All: **He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be
dead to sin, and alive to all that is good.**
One: I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.
All: **Alleluia! Amen.**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING John 9:1-41

JOHN 9:1-41 (Common English Bible+)

¹ *As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. ² Jesus' disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?"*

³ *Jesus answered,*

"Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him. ⁴ While it is daytime, we must do the works of the one who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

⁶ *After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's eyes. ⁷ Jesus said to him,*

"Go, wash in the pool of Siloam"

(this word means sent). So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see.

⁸ *The man's neighbors and those who used to see him when he was a beggar said,*

"Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?"

⁹ *Some said,*

"It is,"

and others said,

"No, it is someone who looks like him."

But the man said,

"Yes, it is I!"

¹⁰ *So they asked him,*

"Then how were your eyes opened?"

¹¹ *He answered,*

"The man they call Jesus made mud, smeared it on my eyes, and said, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and then I could see."

¹² *They asked,*

"Where is this man?"

He replied,

"I do not know."

¹³ *Then they led the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ So the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.*

The man told them,

“He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see.”

¹⁶ *Some Pharisees said,*

“This man is not from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law.”

Others said,

“How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?”

So they were divided. ¹⁷ *So they said again to the blind man,*

“What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

He replied,

“He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ *The Jewish leaders did not believe the man had been blind and received his sight until they called for his parents* ¹⁹ *and asked them,*

“Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”

²⁰ *His parents answered,*

“We know he is our son. We know he was born blind. ²¹ But we do not know how he now sees, and we do not know who opened his eyes. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself.”

²² *His parents said this because they feared the Jewish authorities. This is because the Jewish authorities had already decided that whoever confessed Jesus to be the Christ would be expelled from the synagogue.* ²³ *That is why his parents said,*

“He is old enough. Ask him.”

²⁴ *Therefore, they called a second time for the man who had been born blind and said to him,*

“Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner.”

²⁵ *The man answered,*

“I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

²⁶ *They questioned him:*

“What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

²⁷ *He replied,*

“I already told you, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

²⁸ *They insulted him:*

“You are his disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples. ²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this man is from.”

³⁰ *The man answered,*

“This is incredible! You do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes.

³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God’s will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man was not from God, he could do nothing.”

³⁴ *They responded,*

“You were born completely in sin! How is it that you dare to teach us?”

Then they expelled him.

³⁵ *Jesus heard they had expelled the man born blind. Finding him, Jesus said,*

“Do you believe in the Son of Humankind?”

³⁶ *He answered,*

“Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”

³⁷ *Jesus said,*

“You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

³⁸ *The man said,*

“Lord, I believe.”

And he worshipped Jesus.

³⁹ *Jesus said,*

“I have come into the world to exercise judgment so that those who do not see can see and those who see will become blind.”

⁴⁰ *Some Pharisees who were with him heard what he said and asked,*

“Surely we are not blind, are we?”

⁴¹ *Jesus said to them,*

“If you were blind, you would not have any sin, but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

SUNG PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION “Open Our Eyes” StF 2086

**Open our eyes, Lord,
we want to see Jesus,
to reach out and touch him,
and say that we love him.
Open our ears, Lord,
and help us to listen.
Open our eyes, Lord,
we want to see Jesus.**

Words and Music by Bob Cull.

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SERMON “Faith Mirror” by Pastor Bill Vincent

This sign seems fairly simple and straightforward: Jesus – light of the world – opens the eyes of a man born blind. So now he sees.

But this is John. So he may use simple language, but often with uncharacteristically subtle meaning.

So Paul Redditt writes,

The function of light, of course, is to illuminate things, but illumination can be physical or spiritual; it can have to do with eyesight or insight. To see the man Jesus was a function of eyesight; to see Jesus as the light of the world was a matter of insight. (Paul L. Redditt, “Exegesis,” March 2002 Lectionary Homiletics, p.8a)

The man sees. Great!
Do we see? Maybe?
Do we need our eyes opened?
If so, how might that happen?
And what insight can we glean from the story to answer that question?

The first thing that comes to mind – seems rather obvious – for us to see, we need to wash away all the crud from our eyes.

But, you say, “Didn’t Jesus smear the mud on his eyes?”

Yes, he did.

But I wonder: do we not also smudge and dirty and cover our eyes with all sorts of stuff?

We look at life through rose-colored glasses because we don’t want to see the dirty, seedy side of life.

We can’t begin to fathom that life could be anything other than how we view it, so we put blinders on so that’s all we see.

It seems the religious leaders were stuck in their ways. They couldn’t conceive of any other experience of truth than what they knew or what they experienced or what they had constructed. They couldn’t hear Jesus, they couldn’t see Jesus because he did not fit their categories and expectations and assumptions.

Are we willing to let go of some of our ‘stuckness’?

Are we willing to wash away the dirt and grime and crud from our inner eye?

Are we willing to let go of our nicely worked out categories, and our long-held expectations, and our deeply ingrained assumptions about how God will act and where God will act and in whom God will act?

Are we willing to do that, all in order to see?

It is clearly obvious that, in many ways, the only way we will see is because of Jesus.

The disciples asked the initial question, but Jesus took the initiative to make the mud, smear it on the man’s eyes, and tell him to wash. The man didn’t ask for any of that.

And at the end, when the man had been expelled from the synagogue, Jesus sought him out and found him.

Jesus must restore our sight. For we cannot do this on our own. In fact, we may be so blind to our true condition that we may not even know we need restoration of our sight.

So we must not dismiss him from our presence.

Except that all too often, we do.

He will call himself the Truth.

But how many times have we faced this Truth and, in all honesty, called it a lie by the way we live, because his truth was inconvenient to us?

He will call himself the Way.

But we have stood at the beginning of that Way...and walked away; and even discouraged others from exploring that Way by our silence.

He will call himself the Life.

And we will nail that Life to a cross. For when confronted by its demands, his word and his way made us uncomfortable, and we were determined to live life our way, and not his.

But he alone can reveal to us his Truth.
He alone can direct us in his Way.
He alone can offer us his Life.
Will we let him?

By now it will be painfully obvious that the religious leaders are not the only ones who are blind.

In fact, this designation of ‘religious leader’ is not so much an identification of a particular people or person, but of a place in life, a way of being in life.

We are all, at one time or another, a religious leader; we are all sometimes at that place in life.

And remember, this story is far less about eyesight, and far more about insight.

But what is interesting is that everyone in this story grapples with their insight (or lack thereof) by way of conversation and interaction with each other.

The restoration of physical sight takes place fairly immediately upon the man’s washing at Siloam.

But his spiritual insight came about not quite so easily. But it does come about in his conversation with others.

It appears we can clear away some of the crud from our inner eye and gain insight by sharing our experience, by talking about it.

This man who was born blind has this wondrous encounter with Jesus. And his insight – about life, about Jesus, about himself, about the truth – became progressively clearer. It was not a “one and done” sort of experience.

He went from understanding Jesus as

-simply “*the man they call Jesus*” (v.11), to...

-“*He is a prophet*” (v.17), to...

-a “*man...from God*” (v.33), to...

-“*Lord*” (v.38), and worshiping him.

And he makes this progression – he grows down this path – through interaction with others.

He is asked by others, and he responds.

He is challenged by others, and he responds.

In the end, he himself asks a question: “*Who is he, sir?*” And he gets a response...that changes his life.

This interaction, this encounter, this sharing back and forth is crucial to the restoration of his sight.

It took time. It was not all at once. And he did not get it completely, or fully, right at the start.

But just because he didn’t have it completely right to begin with, just because his understanding was only partial, just because he wasn’t entirely sure right off the bat – and I suspect he knew that – that didn’t stop him from telling his story...as he understood it, as he saw it at that point in his life.

It strikes me we're talking here about 'witnessing'. A word that is pretty on target...even though we all too often misunderstand it.

For typically what comes to mind when we think of witnessing is being able to lay out a perfect story and flawless theology that will persuade and convince any- and every-one.

But remember: when a witness takes the stand in a courtroom, they are not there to convince everyone, to persuade everyone – in spite of what courtroom dramas may imply.

Fundamentally what a witness is called to do is simply this: to say, "This is what I saw. This is what I heard. This is what I experienced. This is what I know."

Convincing others of the bigger picture of the truth is someone else's responsibility – in this case, God's.

But telling my story? That's my responsibility.

Anna Carter Florence speaks of a "before and after" experience. She writes,

Once I saw the world like this; now I see it like this. Once I believed this; now I believe this. Once I lived in a place that I now see was blind to certain things. Now my eyes are opened, and here is what I see and know! (Anna Carter Florence, "Homiletical Perspective," Feasting on the Word, p.121)

My responsibility as a witness is simply to say: "This is what I have experienced in my life. This is how I see and understand Jesus Christ. This is what he has done for me. This is what he means to me. This is the impact he has had on my life (not everybody else's!). This is how I understand him...here, now, today." That's my witness.

And this is how the man grew in his insight.

Yes, as we share our witness, our witness may serve as a tool for others to gain clarity in their insight.

But notice: the man's sharing of his witness is just as helpful for him as it is for others. For remember, it is as this man shares his witness that he grows in his understanding.

And in all of this – this growth, this insight – in all of this, if we look, we can indeed discern grace at work.

The grace of the light shining in the world.

The grace of the light that illumines my life and enlightens my heart.

The grace of the God who finds me and claims me, and opens my eyes...and my insight.

Why are the religious leaders so blind?

Why do some get it and some don't?

Why are there those who, at least at this time, do not see?

Why does it seem there is that experience of light and grace for some, and not for others?

I do not know.

It is a mystery of life far beyond me: a mystery that may very well not be mine to know.

But there is something I do know.

I know he has touched me and blessed me.

I know he has made a difference in my life.

I know I see clearer now because of him.

For “*One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.*”
And that’s a story I can share.
And perhaps as I share my story, that might reflect the light to illuminate someone else’s
story...and life.

***HYMN** “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” GtG 649 (*Verses 1-4*)

1. **Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.**
2. **'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!**
3. **Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come.
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.**
4. **The Lord has promised good to me;
his word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.**

Words: Stanzas 1-4, John Newton, 1772

Music: *Columbian Harmony*, 1829; arr. Edwin O Excell, 1910, alt.
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. (*continued...*)**

**Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: God of light and life...

All: ...enlighten our lives with your grace and presence.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Contemporary)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**For your grace to us, we give you thanks, O Lord. For your shining
your light into our lives, we give you thanks. Accept these offerings we bring.
Use them, and us, to share your love and shine your glory into your world.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Open My Eyes, That I May See” GtG 451

1. **Open my eyes, that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes; illumine me, Spirit divine!**

2. **Open my ears, that I may hear
voices of truth thou sendest clear.
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
everything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my ears; illumine me, Spirit divine!**

3. **Open my mouth, and let me bear
gladly the warm truth everywhere.
Open my heart, and let me prepare
love with thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my heart; illumine me, Spirit divine!**

Words and Music: Clara H. Scott, 1895
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...**Amen.**

POSTLUDE

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