

“To See or Not to See - That is the question”

Rev. Janet Scott

Mark 10: 46-52

October 25, 2009

Imagine that you are a disciple, any disciple, walking up to Jericho with a knot in your stomach. You did not sleep well; all thirteen of you were bedded down on the same rough pallet and the fellow to your right turned over every twenty minutes all night long. He knows what you know; that Jerusalem is just fifteen miles down the road and, unless you are waylaid, you will be there by dark. You are not sure what will happen there, but from what Jesus has said it sounds grim.

Not that you understand half of what he says. There are a lot of times that you just don't have a clue. It is harder than you thought, this disciple business. When he asked you to follow him, you thought he was headed for the top - for high political office, at first, and then - if he is who you think he is - for the very throne of Israel. But lately he has been talking crazy, talking about dying and rising and being a servant. It is not what you expected, and you have thought more than once about going back home. But you love him, and the way he seems to love everyone he meets, never seeing crowds but always seeing people and reaching out to touch them, to heal them, make them whole. You just can't tear yourself away.

Well, it is not long before he is at it again. On your way out of Jericho, with half the town tagging along behind you, you see a blind beggar by the side of the road, rocking back and forth on his heels. Someone groans and says, "It's Bartimaeus again," by which you gather that he is well known, at least by those who support him with their alms.

Not to worry, you are thinking, the poor are with us always, when suddenly Bartimaeus' head jerks up and he shouts, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Several of the disciples, you included, stop dead in your tracks and look at one another. It is the first time anyone but a demon or disciple has called Jesus by the title, son of David. How in the world does that blind beggar recognize what no one else can see, that the man on the road in front of him is indeed the Messiah?

But your puzzlement is cut short by the shushing of the crowd. "Be quiet, beggar," someone hisses. Somebody tell him to shut up." But he will not shut up. "Son of David," he cries again, "Have mercy on me!" Jesus hears him this time and stops. "Call him," he says, and the crowd changes its mind about Bartimaeus, scolding him no longer but congratulating him instead, encouraging him to his feet. "Take heart," someone says, "rise up, Bartimaeus, he is calling you! Today must be your lucky day!" But Bartimaeus does not merely rise; he flings off his cloak and springs to his feet, rushing toward the remembered sound of Jesus' voice. He misjudges by a foot or so and plants himself in front of you, his big round eyes rolling in their separate orbits, a look of great expectation on his sunburned face. Someone takes him by the shoulders and turns him slightly, until he is facing Jesus. He is nodding his thanks when Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Now there is a rhetorical question if you have ever heard one. What does Jesus think he wants, a pair of sunglasses? But no, you know better than that. He is not playing to the crowd; he just wants to hear Bartimaeus say it, say exactly what he wants, exactly how much he believes Jesus can do. So the blind man sums up his heart's desire in six words: "Teacher," he says, "let me receive my sight," he says, and Jesus replies, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." Just like that, just words-no mud, no spittle, not even a touch - still and all, it is enough.

Bartimaeus closes his eyes and when he opens them again they work. "Go your way," Jesus tells him, but he does not go his way, or else he decides on the spot that his way is Jesus' way, because that is the way he chooses, without any way of knowing where it will lead. Still blinking, he chooses the road to Jerusalem in the company of Jesus.

Now this is a splendid story. It is one in which there is no ambivalence; all the verbs are strong and clean - Bartimaeus cries out, springs up, and speaks straight from his heart. His faith is impeccable, and as soon as Jesus says so out loud his eyes are opened and he becomes a disciple, following Jesus on his way as if there is no other way once he can really see. It is a perfect story, full of courage and compassion, complete with a happy ending. It is a story about the kingdom of God, and we want it for our own - to encounter Jesus, to be called to him by name, to find the words to tell him what we want and to be healed, illumined, made whole.

That is what we want, isn't it? To trade in whatever blindness each of us has, to trade it in on sight, so that we can see, see ourselves, see our world, see Jesus clearly, without cloud or shadow. That is what we want, isn't it?

It is a metaphorical question, of course, and a good one, but real blindness is something else again. Most of us cannot imagine what it would be like to live in darkness or, having learned to do that, what it would be like suddenly to see, to have to make sense out of color, depth, distance, perspective - all those things we figured out years ago and now take for granted.

But what if we did not? What if we had never learned from experience that the sailboat looks small because it is far out on the water? What if we believed we could reach out and take it in our hands, a sailboat just as tiny as it looks? What would it be like to reach out to that exact spot on the horizon right in front of you expecting to touch a toy boat but to close your hands on air, just air? With that tiny sailboat still bobbing there before your eyes, tantalizing you but becoming insubstantial every time your fingers curl around the place where it seems to be? Can you imagine?

In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, in a chapter titled "Seeing," Annie Dillard quotes at length from a text called *Space and Sight* by Marius von Senden. What the text is about are the first people in the world to undergo successful cataract surgery. All blind from birth, they suddenly received their sight and were interviewed about what they saw. Their stories are strange and moving; they describe a world we no longer see, describe it like a newborn or an alien might describe it upon seeing it for the first time.

One newly sighted girl was shown a batch of photographs and then some paintings by her mother. "Why do they put those dark marks all over them?" she asked. "Those aren't dark marks," her mother explained, "They're shadows."

"Shadows?" the girl asked, and her mother said yes. "That is one of the ways the eye knows that things have shape," she said. "If it weren't for shadows many things would look flat." "Well that's how things do look," her daughter answered. "Everything looks flat with dark patches." A second girl was so stunned by the radiance of the world that she kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When she finally opened them she saw only a field of light against which everything seemed to be in motion. She could not distinguish objects, but gazed at everything around her, saying over and over again, "Oh God! How beautiful!"

But not everything was beautiful for these patients. Unable to judge distances, they reached out for things a mile away, or cracked their shins on pieces of furniture they perceived only as patches of color. The world turned out to be much bigger than they had thought, bigger and infinitely more complex. Unable to control it, many fell into depression. Others, having seen themselves for the first time in a mirror, realized how often others had seen them without their awareness or assent. Some became terribly self-conscious about their appearance while others soon refused to go out at all.

The distressed father of one young woman wrote her surgeon that his daughter had taken to shutting her eyes when she walked around the house, and that she never seemed happier than when she pretended to be blind again. A fifteen year old boy finally demanded to be taken back to the local home for the blind, where he had left his girlfriend behind. "No, really, I can't stand it anymore," he said. "If things aren't altered, I'll tear my eyes out."

Tear your eyes out? After being rescued from a life in the dark, after being hauled into the light and presented with a world full of color, depth, movement, space, sights? Tear your eyes out? For God's sake why?

It's just too much. Too much what?

Too much to see, do, be. It was better before.

Better! How?

Smaller. Quieter. Safer.

But this is what you were made for; you were meant to see.

I would rather not. Besides, the sun hurts my eyes. If you will excuse me I think I will go lie down now.

Lie down? Take heart! Rise, he is calling you!

What will you do? What will any of us do? Because that is what this is all about: to see or not to see - how will we have it? You can stay where you are. You can sit in your familiar dark, where all the edges are rounded off so that you will not hurt yourself, where you need only concern yourself with what is within your reach. You do not want to make a spectacle of yourself, after all, and it probably will not work anyway. No sense getting your hopes up; no sense thinking of yourself as a person who might see. Stay with what you know.

Or you can cry out, spring up, and ask for your heart's desire. Damn the torpedoes and good riddance to caution, to propriety, to the fear that keeps you in the dark. Lie down? Take heart! Rise, he is calling you! Are you willing to see or not? And if you are willing, are you willing to see everything there is, the good along with the awful, the lovely along with the monstrous - in yourself, in everyone you meet, in the world?

Are you willing to bruise your shins, to learn your way around the obstacles, through the newness of it all, into the mysteries? Are you willing to bruise your heart? Then go your way, because your faith has made you well. Go your way seeing as if for the first time.

Or if, having gained your sight, your own way does not look so appealing anymore, then try another way. It leads to Jerusalem, through a garden, past a cross, to an empty tomb. It is not always scenic, but wait until you see what is there at the end, or should I say who. What? You have not been invited? Take heart! Rise up, he is calling you!