

Out of My Darkness

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost (Reformation Sunday) October 27, 1985. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:7-9, Psalm 126, Hebrews 5:1-6, *Mark 10:46-52*.

A couple weeks ago my eyes were bothering me. I've had excellent eye-sight all my life but have always worn glasses to read. But now I discovered I was having a hard time focusing on things close to me. My distance vision was tremendous but when I came to read a book I'd have to hold it at arm length. I either had to get longer arms or a new pair of glasses. I got a new pair of glasses.

I don't suppose any of us realise what a blessing eye-sight is until we begin to lose it. Last year I stood at the bedside of an elderly shut-in. She was bitterly weeping. She'd been confined to a nursing home for years but at least she'd been able to see. But now her eyes were wearing out. She wept and talked of the encroaching darkness and the encircling gloom. She just couldn't imagine life without sight. A few months later she died. How horrible it would be to live in the dark.

The people of Jericho had lived in darkness for thousands of years. Jericho is first mentioned in the OT. Every child knows that "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumblin' down". But not many people realise that after its destruction, Joshua pronounced a curse against the city. Jesus came to lift Jericho's ancient curse and bring it out of its darkness. On his way out of the city his disciples and a great many pilgrims followed him. With such a crowd I doubt if anybody noticed Bartimæus sitting by the side of the road with his dark glasses, white cane, and tin cup.

Bartimæus was blind but he had sharp ears and heard that Jesus was coming. He began crying out, "Son of David, have mercy upon me." This is

the first time in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus is publicly recognised as the Messiah, the Son of David. A blind beggar is the first to hail Jesus as Son of David. The crowd told him to shut up but he cried all the louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood and called him. Bartimaeus dropped his tin cup, threw off his garment and rushed to Jesus. He didn't want a hand out from Jesus. He wanted to see. Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you." Bartimaeus received his sight and immediately began to follow Jesus on the way to the cross.

In the Gospels we see two kinds of people. We see people like Bartimaeus, perhaps physically blind, lepers, and all sorts of outcasts who recognise Jesus. On the other hand, we see people who have good physical eyesight and great knowledge of the Scriptures but they're blind concerning Christ and therefore never really see God.

The theme of my sermon is this: *Christ alone opens our eyes to see God. We're saved through faith in him alone.* We're in the dark about God until we come to Christ. This is the great truth that Martin Luther rediscovered over 400 years ago. Today is Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses denouncing church abuses to the church doors in Wittenburg, Germany. That event marks the beginning of the Reformation of the medieval European church. So many traditions had grown up in the medieval church that actually kept people from seeing Jesus as their great high-priest and savior. Luther wanted to reform the church so that people might see Jesus more clearly. . We're called a reformed church because we trace our religious heritage to Luther and Calvin, the fathers of the Reformation.

Let's briefly review some events in the life of Martin Luther that led to the Reformation. For years Luther groped in darkness trying to find a

gracious God. He was an Augustinian monk, a priest, a deeply religious man but he was in the dark about God. He felt a terrible weight of guilt. He was anxious about his salvation day and night. He spent hours in prayer confessing his sins and begging God's forgiveness. He sought peace in doing penance and feverishly threw himself into all sorts of religious activities. And yet he still felt God was angry with him. He felt he could do nothing to please God.

But Luther had a wise and saintly confessor priest who encouraged him to teach the Bible in the university. Luther dug deeply into the Scriptures. His studies led him eventually to lecture on St. Paul's letter to the Romans and there his eyes were open to see God in Christ. He saw clearly that God freely justifies sinners, apart from our works, through faith in Christ alone. Like Blind Bartimæus, his eyes were opened, he heard Jesus say to him, "Your faith has saved you".

I can see something of myself in Luther. Though raised in an independent Bible believing church *I must have been blind*. I didn't see much of Christ there. The Gospel came across to me as bad news rather than good news. I heard it preached as a threat rather than as God's promise. I heard the church preaching, "Believe that God loves you or he'll send you to hell. Believe in the deity of Christ or you'll go to hell. Receive Christ as your savior or else go to hell." I felt like Alice in Wonderland when the Queen of Hearts says, "Don't be nervous or I'll chop off your head." I heard the love and grace of God preached as Law and I couldn't see the beauty and grace of Jesus very well.

I remember being afraid to go to sleep at night for fear I might die in my sleep and go to hell. I was haunted by the horrible thought that I was not among the elect, that God had predestined me to hell, or that I had

committed the unforgiveable sin. As a high school student I would get up early every morning and confess my sins and beg God to forgive me for Christ's sake. I would come home from school, do my homework and spend the rest of the evening reading the Bible along with commentaries searching for assurance of salvation. I groped and searched for a gracious God.

I was continually asking myself, "Have I had the right kind of experience? Do I have saving faith? Am I trying to earn my salvation through getting up early for daily devotions and going to church so often? Do I believe correctly? Do I belong to the right church? Have I been baptized the correct way?" Although God sealed me as his own in baptism as an infant, I got myself rebaptized by immersion. I responded to altar calls at evangelistic rallies. I prayed for Christ to come into my heart hundreds of times. I threw myself into religious exercises of this sort with the hope of finding a gracious God and assurance of salvation.

I believe that even then I had a seed of true faith in Christ but I was caught up in a religion of fear and legalism that kept me from seeing the love of God clearly. Even then, as I read the Gospel on my own from time to time I felt my heart strangely warmed by the vision of Christ. And I would say to myself, "Could it be that in Jesus I see what God is like?" It was a thrilling, heart warming, eye-opening thought.

I continued to read and study the Bible. Eventually I went off to seminary still lacking assurance of salvation. But as I continued to read and talk and call out to God for mercy, I began to experience more and more the thought that in Jesus I was seeing what God is really like. I began to see the truth of the doctrine of the deity of Christ. I began to see it as good news. I began to see that I must not look anywhere else than to

Christ to see who God is. *Christ alone opens our eyes to see God. We are saved through faith in him alone.* What an eye opening experience that's been for me. So, as a first year seminary student, I went down to the First Presbyterian Church in Princeton and requested membership upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It's something that's still opening my eyes. When I look at Christ I see God.

In Christ I see the wrath of God in a completely new way. In Christ I see a God whose anger is directed not to sinners or doubters but to the religious. I see God angry with those who have all the answers, who know the Bible backwards and forwards, who cross land and sea to make one convert, but who don't recognise their own blindness. *Above all, I see the wrath of God on the cross.* I see God taking upon himself the awful wrath and curse of sin. On the cross, I see the austere Judge as my faithful Savior, who at the cost of his own blood fully paid for all my sins and completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; who protects me and assures me of eternal life and makes me willing to live for him.

In Christ I also see the love of God for sinners. I see God eating and drinking with sinners, actually enjoying their company, forgiving them and calling forth their love, trust and obedience. I see a laughing God, changing water to wine in the celebration of life and love. I see a crying God, stretching out his arms to Jerusalem and to Kenmore. I see that the God who chose us from before the foundation of the world to be heirs of his kingdom is not a far away, capricious God who plays dice with our eternal destiny, but is the very one who came to us in Christ and who cried out on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Christ alone opens our eyes to see God. We are saved through

faith in him alone. That is the message of the Bible. It's the message of the Reformation, of Calvin and Luther. It reminds me of an little known painting that comes to us from the time of Luther. It's a small altar picture that is still in a little village church in Germany. A person entering the church doesn't see it on the altar very easily: the candles and the flowers and the altar cross stand in front of it. It's called, *Luther Preaching*. I'll explain it briefly to you. A pulpit juts out from the wall and Luther stands in it. On the other side are men and women, standing or kneeling and listening. In the middle stands a cross, and on the cross hangs Jesus Christ. And as Luther preaches, he points to the cross; and the people listen to his words, but they look at the cross. There in a picture you are shown where Luther's concern lay. It's as though he's saying, "My name doesn't matter; but the man on the cross is the one who can help you. It is to him you must look." And so my prayer for each one of you this morning is that you, like Blind Bartimoeus of old, will see God in Jesus Christ and be saved through faith in him alone and that you will then follow him in grateful obedience day by day. To those of you who are anxious about your salvation and lack assurance, look away from yourselves, and look to Christ and in him see that God is a gracious God. To those of you who stand on the periphery of the church and Christian faith, who are turned off by the faults and sins of the church, may you also look to Christ and see that God is gracious to you and seeks to have you serve him in his Kingdom.

Let us pray: Day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day, by day, by day.