

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for October 25, 2015 ~ Proper 25B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

In just a few minutes, we will recognize those who serve in the ministry of acolyte in this church, including ten new ones. The office of acolyte is not something new; there are texts that describe those who tended the lamps and candles of churches as far back as the second and third centuries of the Common Era. For centuries, acolytes were ordained and ranked just beneath the order of Subdeacon. While we no longer follow that practice, acolytes continue to have a distinguished and honored place in the life of Episcopal churches.

Today, we take light for granted. We typically worship in the daytime and have plenty of electric lights, so the candles and lamps in our houses of worship are more symbolic than functional. Acolytes light the candles on the altar and carry the lighted processional torches. In the early Church, which often worshiped at night or in dark, secret places, there were no electric lights and few if any windows. So lamps and candles were necessary so that worshipers could see. Today, these primitive forms of light we use in our liturgy call us to let God open our eyes to see what God is doing so that we can join in that mission.

That brings us to today's gospel. Jesus and his followers were passing through Jericho, traveling from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. Sitting beside the road was a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. He must have been something of a nuisance to the residents of Jericho who passed by him day after day and had to put up with his begging. He also might have been bad for tourism. Many probably just ignored him and pretended that he wasn't there. That is always easier than to actually look into the face of misery and poverty and need, even for us.

As Jesus and the crowd that was following him passed by, Bartimaeus must have been curious to know what was the cause of all the commotion. When he found out that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" He must have heard of Jesus. Maybe he'd been told how Jesus had healed people who were blind like him.

When the bystanders heard his voice, they couldn't ignore him. They told Bartimaeus to be quiet. Jesus was something of a celebrity and Bartimaeus was something of an embarrassment.

But Bartimaeus ignored them and persisted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me." The sound of his voice stopped Jesus in his tracks. He told his followers to bring the blind man to him. It may remind you of the incident just a few miles back when people were trying to prevent children from coming to Jesus and he had to tell them to let the children come. Seems like people often tried to keep others from getting too close to Jesus. In fact, the gospels are full of examples.

Bartimaeus jumped up, threw off his cloak, and blindly approached Jesus. Talk about blind faith! Jesus asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Bartimaeus knew exactly what he wanted. "My master, let me see again." Jesus didn't appoint a committee, inquire into the man's doctrinal perspective or economic situation. He just gave Bartimaeus what he asked for. "Go; your

faith has made you well.” And immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus. He might have said with Job, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5).

This incident is about the power of Jesus to give eyesight to the blind. But it is also about the power of Jesus to reveal whatever is hidden in darkness, the power of Jesus to help us see things that have been hidden from us or that we have hidden from ourselves.

St. John was referring to Jesus when he wrote, “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. . . The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:4, 5, 9).

The light came to the eyes of Bartimaeus. Evidently, he had not been born blind like another man Jesus healed. The experience of the other man would have been quite different from that of Bartimaeus. He had the gift of sight for the first time in his life. I can’t even imagine what it must have been like for him. Maybe John Newton knew.

In the mid-eighteenth century, John Newton was the captain of ships transporting African slaves. As he commanded those ships, hundreds of slaves suffered in agony beneath the deck. But he was blind to all of that and to the slave trade from which he profited. Then, one day, all of that changed. He recognized what was happening and his part in it. He became an Anglican cleric and worked for the abolition of the slave trade in Briton. But you know him best because of the description of his experience he bequeathed to future generations, “I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.” It was the grace of Jesus Christ at work in him that opened his eyes for the first time. Once he could see, he followed Jesus and helped change the world.

Bartimaeus had once been able to see but something had caused him to lose that ability. Jesus gave him back something he thought he had lost forever. Maybe Saul of Tarsus knew what that was like.

Saul of Tarsus was a believer in God, a devout Jew. He saw those early Christians as heretics and participated in their persecution. Then, one day as he was traveling along the road to Damascus, he was blinded. He heard a voice calling to him, “Saul. Saul. Why are you persecuting me?” Saul said, “Who are you, Lord.” And the response was, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what to do.” He had to be led into the city and was blind for three days, exactly the right amount of time for him to recognize the blindness of his heart and the value of the enlightenment he was about to receive. And, as we all know, Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. This devout believer in God now had a new vision of God as expressed in Jesus, God’s Messiah.

So, some of us come to faith as people for whom things suddenly become clearer. And, some of us come to faith after having lost our faith for a time. In either case, it is as if our eyes have been opened to see reality in a new light.

There is one more dimension to the miracle that took place that day in Jericho. If you read the story carefully, you will realize that it was really the people in the crowd who were the first to receive the gift of sight. When Jesus said, “Call him here,” all of a sudden they couldn’t ignore him anymore. And right before their very eyes, this blind beggar, this nuisance, this nobody was the object of the

concern of Jesus, the celebrity who was passing through their town. They saw, perhaps for the first time, that one blind man was as worthy of Jesus' attention as the entire crowd.

Jericho was something of a resort town. Like Jackson, people had second residences there and came there for vacation. The highway through Jericho connected other places so lots of people passed through there.

Two Sundays ago, after our Consecration Sunday service, I was at the door saying goodbye to friends who had attended our service and were about to return to Texas. Most of you were already in Hansen Hall enjoying the brunch. I looked up and saw a man coming toward me and his appearance suggested to me that he was going to ask me for assistance. I thought, "This is really an inconvenient time." How wrong I was! He had a bouquet of flowers in his hand. He said, "My wife and I have been visiting Jackson for the past week. She's in a cancer survivor and is out in the car. We've come here every day to pray and give thanks for her healing. If it weren't for St. John's, our visit would have been incomplete. Before we leave town, we wanted to bring these flowers as a way of expressing our gratitude. May I place them in the church?"

When I looked at that man, I didn't really see him. When he spoke, my eyes were opened and I realized he was someone entirely different than who I thought he was. My impulse was to close my eyes and not really see him – in other words, to ignore him. I had been writing and preaching about gratitude and generosity for weeks and here, before my very eyes, stood the incarnation of gratitude and generosity.

Jesus has that effect on people. He opens the eyes of the blind, allowing them to see things and people in new light and with greater clarity. He liberates people from spiritual blindness. Sometimes you and I are the blind ones. And when we see as God sees, nothing looks the same again.