

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Restored Fortunes”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 30—October 28, 2018

Lessons: Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52

The Psalmist proclaims in the 126th Psalm:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

The psalm looks back on the time when God led the people of Israel out of captivity and back to the Promised Land. We can imagine how that felt: returning home to all that was sacred; returning home to life as it should be. Looking back on that restoration of fortune, the Psalmist prays that God might do it again, restoring the fortunes of the people in another time of need. All through history, God has been about the work of restoring our fortunes, of restoring broken humanity to life.

The fortunes of Job are restored and he is provided new children and sheep and camels and oxen and donkeys, who can't take the place of the old ones, but provide a kind of comfort and he died old and full of days. All of us like a happy ending, although some of us have trouble with this ending of Job because all the loose ends seem to be tied up so simply, and our experience of life has not been so simple. Yet part of the message is that God is able to restore our fortunes. God is able to bring us back into that Promised Land of peace and justice, of grace and mercy. God is able to bring new life into our midst. God restores our fortunes.

Our Gospel lesson offers another example of restored fortunes. Bartimaeus was a blind beggar who sat by the road in Jericho. Maybe he had a cardboard sign that said: “Please Help. Blind and Hungry. God Bless You.” I suspect he was a fixture for the people in that neighborhood. They passed by, as we often do, trying not to notice, keeping our eyes on the road. Then Jesus came through town. He was leading the disciples to Jerusalem, and the road to Jerusalem went right through Jericho. He had been teaching the disciples that in Jerusalem he would be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and condemned to death; then they would hand him over to the Gentiles who would mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him; and after three days he would rise again. To that, James and John had a question and Jesus answered: What do you want me to do for you? And they asked if they could have the best front row seats in the kingdom and Jesus had to teach them all that whoever wants to become great, must become servant of all. And that's when they arrive in Jericho.

Almost immediately they are accosted by the shouts of the blind beggar. The locals are embarrassed and try their best to quiet this annoyance. They don't want Jesus' visit to Jericho to be marred by some nobody making a scene. But the more they tried to quiet him, the more loudly he shouted. We've been there: accosted by beggars. We've tried to ignore them as well. Jesus doesn't. He calls Bartimaeus to him and asks: “What do you want me to do for you?” It is the same question he asked of James and John. The irony here is that the disciples, the insiders, who think they see, turn out to be blind, asking for something which Jesus does not give, whereas Bartimaeus, the ultimate outsider, wants vision and gains real sight. The idea of the first being last and the last first is already coming true. From God's perspective the world looks a little different. When we call on each other to see the world as God sees it, we all will discover a world where so often the weak turn out to be strong, to poor turn out to be rich, the nobodies turn out to be somebodies, and frankly, sometimes the

somebodies turn out to be nobodies. Jesus' question remains to be answered by everyone who would be a disciple: "What do you want me to do for you?" Our answers say a great deal about whether we are seeking special status or whether we are ready to follow the way of Christ and to find the fortunes of our very lives restored.

Many of us know the story of John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, which Thom will play on the bagpipes at the end of the service today. According to LindaJo McKim, in the *Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*, he was born in 1725 in London, and, "at age eleven went to sea with his father. His mother had died when he was six. By age seventeen he was in the British Royal Navy assigned to a man-of-war. After serving as a sailor on a slave ship, he became captain, transporting Africans to port where they could be sold for the best price. In 1748 he was caught in a storm at sea and experienced a spiritual awakening. [He began to see the world as God sees it.] Later he left the sea and became responsible for checking incoming ships for contraband. At age forty Newton was ordained in the Church of England despite his lack of formal education. [He wrote hymns including *Amazing Grace*.] Newton wrote his own epitaph which reads: John Newton, Clerk, Once an infidel and libertine, A servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy."¹ Much of the world saw nothing wrong with his work in the slave trade, yet after his spiritual awakening, he could write: "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." Newton came to see the world, and especially the Africans he had carried into slavery, in a new light. He began to see the world as God sees it. God restored his sight and fortune.

Today we also celebrate the Reformation and our protestant forebears who protested the "blindness" of a church that had become unjust, seeking special status, and forgetting too often the nobodies that Jesus came to serve. Luther and Calvin and their descendants have helped the church to reform its ways and have left us the incredible notion that the church is not simply reformed, but always, also, reforming or being reformed. We are always open to reformation; we are always open to new ways of seeing the world, for we Protestants have long recognized our tendency to get off track, to be idolatrous, to lose our sight. That can be scary. That means that we "old dogs" need constantly to be open to learning new tricks. Professor John Leith, one of the great scholars of the Reformation said, near the end of his life: "As heirs of the Reformation we must keep alive the task of the Reformation. No creed," he said, "no polity, no institution, no social conscience is ever final, absolute, or irreformable."² Today, we give thanks for the clear vision of our Protestant forbears, and we ask God to help us understand where we continue to be blind in the church today. Where is it in the church that we continue to desire an exalted seat in glory instead of learning from the nobodies who turn out to be somebodies? How might we position ourselves in the best way for God to restore our fortunes?

We might also say today that we have lost something of our sight as a nation. Yesterday, our sisters and brothers in Pittsburgh experienced what no one should experience: a shooting in a house of worship. Days before that there were assassination attempts on two former presidents and members of congress and other public figures, including two bombs sent right here to Delaware. Every one of us recognizes that this is wrong. We are in a fragile place right now. How might God restore our sight? How might we in the church demonstrate for our fellow citizens what faithful living looks like? Maybe we need to be stronger and clearer in our Gospel understanding that our neighbors on the left and on the right, on the south and on the north, frankly every single human being, no matter where they are from or what they look like is created in the image of God and is precious, honored and loved by God,

¹ LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*. Westminster/John Knox Press. © 1993.

² John H. Leith and Charles E. Raynal, *Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian*. Geneva Press © 2001.

of infinite worth. Maybe we can help remind the nation that sometimes the nobodies are actually somebodies. Maybe we can demonstrate in our own lives that if we really want to become great, then we must become a servant. How might we in the community of faith help our nation regain its sight?

Annie Dillard writes about *seeing* and quotes in particular from a book by Marius von Senden, called *Space and Sight*. “When Western surgeons discovered how to perform safe cataract operations, they ranged across Europe and America operating on dozens of men and women of all ages who had been blinded by cataracts since birth. Von Senden collected accounts of such cases.” People see the same way a newborn sees for the very first time. “Of a patient just after her bandages were removed, her doctor writes: ‘The first things to attract her attention were her own hands: she looked at them very closely, moved them repeatedly to and fro, bent and stretched the fingers and seemed greatly astonished at the sight.’ One girl was...astounded to discover that her every visitor had an utterly different face. Finally a twenty-two [year] old girl was dazzled by the world’s brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When at the end of that time she opened her eyes again, she did not recognize any objects, but, ‘the more she now directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of gratification and astonishment overspread her features; she repeatedly exclaimed: ‘Oh God! How beautiful!’” But not everything was beautiful. It is also oppressive for these newly sighted people. “It oppresses them to realize...the tremendous size of the world, which they had previously conceived of as something touchingly manageable. It oppresses them to realize that they have been visible to people all along, perhaps unattractively so, without their knowledge or consent. A disheartening number of them refuse to use their new vision....A fifteen-year-old boy, who was also in love with a girl at the asylum for the blind, finally blurted out, ‘No, really, I can’t stand it any more; I want to be sent back to the asylum again. If things aren’t altered, I’ll tear my eyes out.’”³ In their former blindness the world was smaller, more manageable; many preferred being blind.

That is part of our problem. It is so much easier to remain in our blindness in all the forms that blindness takes. Do things the ways we’ve always done them. See things the ways we’ve always seen them. We don’t like seeing human suffering. We would prefer to remain blind to the shadows cast across our world. Yet Jesus invites us to something new. Jesus invites us to see the world both as it is and as God will have it be. The road that Jesus invites us to follow is a road that leads to Jerusalem, amongst cheering crowds that turn away, into a garden, onto a cross, and finally to an empty tomb. Sometimes it is extraordinarily beautiful, and sometimes it is equally horrendous. But wait till you see who is waiting for you at the end of the road: One who knows your name and has the time--every time--in the midst of carrying the burdens of the world, to stop for you. Take heart. He is calling you.

Let us pray: Restore our fortunes O God, that we who sow in tears may reap with shouts of joy. In the midst of so much ugliness and suffering in our world today that we would rather not see, restore our sight that we might learn to travel along your way, serving your people, and celebrating your healing presence and your amazing grace that enables us, blind as we are, to see. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

³ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Harper Collins © 1974.