

Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25B)

October 25, 2009

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Hebrews 7:23-28

Psalms 126

Mark 10:46-52

### Seeing with new eyes

*Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Mark 10:51*

My mind is full of images of yesterday's wonderful climate rally on the Town Common, in which many of you participated. The core group that organized the event was a mix of Episcopalians, Quakers, Unitarians, and Congregationalists. Friends and strangers in this town came together around a shared concern: the desire to protect life as we know it on this planet. And this little group was a microcosm of what is happening around the world. The event here in Amherst was one of more than five thousand similar actions that were carried out yesterday in 181 countries, in dozens of languages, in every time zone and on every continent, in heat and in cold, under sun and clouds and snow, and yes -- as we discovered yesterday -- in the pouring rain. According to the event organizer, Bill McKibben, as far as anyone can tell, this was "the single most widespread day of political action that the earth has ever seen."<sup>1</sup>

In just six weeks, world leaders will meet in Copenhagen to negotiate a new treaty to cut global warming pollution, and the message that millions of people around the world were lifting up yesterday, and will keep lifting up in the weeks ahead, is the urgent need to reduce the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to no more than 350 parts per million. 350 is the number that represents safety, and that's why a 350 banner has been hanging from our steeple for a while, and why we are pressing our political leaders -- both internationally and here at home -- to set us quickly on a path to energy efficiency and to clean, safe, renewable energy before the load of carbon in our atmosphere triggers irreversible and catastrophic effects.

If you take a look at the pictures now being posted on the Website 350.org [<http://www.350.org/media-photos>], you will see photographs from every corner of

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<sup>1</sup> From Bill McKibben's "Final Organizer Update" email, sent out the day before the International Day of Climate Action

the Earth -- Ethiopia and India, Australia and Afghanistan, Botswana and Peru, the Maldives and Mongolia, Syracuse and Spain. Every picture includes the number 350, and one of the most striking series of photographs is from the Middle East, where the waters of the Dead Sea are rapidly dwindling. In one picture you can see people forming the number 3 on the Jordanian shore. In a second picture taken further down the beach, in Palestine, another group of people forms the number 5. In a third picture, the zero is formed by people who stand on the Israeli coast. As the caption says, "If there's any image that illustrates the ability of people to come together across political boundaries, this should be it."

In the context of yesterday's global events, I can think of no better passage to consider this morning than the joyful, hope-filled words that we heard from the prophet Jeremiah. Today's passage is part of the so-called "book of consolation" that Jeremiah wrote during the long dark years of his people's exile, which began in 587 BCE. It was a bitter time, a time of fear and loss, a time of dislocation and death. The Babylonian empire had destroyed Jerusalem and taken the people captive. People had died or had been scattered, ripped from their homeland. No hope was in sight. Yet Jeremiah was fired with a holy vision. He burned with a vision of restoration and homecoming. Our God, he says, is a saving God, a God whose deepest desire is to gather God's people "from the farthest parts of the earth," to bring them back, all of them, even and especially the very weakest of them, "the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here" [Jeremiah 31:8].

Jeremiah anticipated and foresaw and prayed his people into the great homecoming that did in fact take place some fifty years after he wrote these words, when his beloved people were at last set free to reclaim their home. Long before that day, Jeremiah could see it up ahead in his mind's eye. He could feel it in his bones, for he was filled with confidence in the saving purposes of God, a God who "with consolations" would lead God's people home along a road that was smooth and where there would be plenty of water to drink. "I will let them walk," God says through Jeremiah, "by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born" [Jeremiah 31:9].

If you know what it is like to be in a hopeless place, in a desperate place, whether you are worrying about global climate change or any of the other troubles that beset us, you might want to sit for a while with this passage in prayer, and to let yourself know what it feels like to have God seek out all the scattered parts of yourself, to gather up all those far-flung bits, and to lead you home with consolation beside a stream of clear water. In the last line of the text, you might want to replace the words "Israel" and "Ephraim" with your own name, so that you can hear in your depths that God has become a father to you, a mother to you. *You*

are the first-born; *you* are the one whom God cherishes to the utmost. When we can pray our way into these words, we may sense again within us the divine Source who is always luring us to life, always blessing us with love, always reaching out to whatever within us is most lost or lonesome or cast away, and coaxing us back to wholeness, urging us to come home. Like those, as the psalm says, who “go out weeping carrying the seed,” we, too, may find that we “will come again with joy, shouldering [our] sheaves” [Psalm 126:7]. These two readings -- from Jeremiah and Psalm 126 -- speak to us words of hope in a desperate time.

Today’s Gospel story also gives us a powerful passage to ponder. The blind beggar Bartimaeus is sitting at the side of the road. He is washed up, at the end of his rope, at the end of the line, without recourse, with no backup plan. He is a beggar and he is blind, the very image of someone who has nothing to offer and nothing to claim as his own. Like the people in exile in our first reading, this man is helpless and he is desperate. If you know what that’s like, then I invite you to sit with Bartimaeus for a while. So many of us try so hard to be self-sufficient, to hold it together, to look good and get the job done, that it may come as a surprise and a relief to remember that Jesus is particularly attuned not to the powerful but to the weak, to those who know their need. And who among us does not feel weak and in need sometimes when we look squarely at the daunting issues that face humanity today, from climate change to species extinction, to say nothing of our own personal challenges? Often enough we can’t see a way forward. We can’t see our way clear.

So let us sit for a moment with Bartimaeus at the side of the road. He hears that Jesus is approaching, and he begins to cry out, in an appeal that nothing and nobody can stop, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” This is a man who knows his need, and can name it. He even shouts it. He is yearning for mercy, hungry for healing, totally convinced of his need to be made whole and that Jesus can heal him.

The disciples and members of the crowd try to stop him. We can imagine what they say. “Oh, be quiet. We’re in a hurry. We’ve got places to go. Jesus is much too important to be concerned with the likes of you. You’re not worth his time. Don’t make such a fool of yourself. Buck up. Settle down. Quit complaining.” But Bartimaeus will have none of that. He knows what he needs and he knows where help can come, so he cries out even more loudly, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And here comes something amazing. Jesus stops. Jesus stands still. In the Gospel stories, Jesus is often on the move, traveling from one place to another, and now he is heading to Jerusalem to accomplish and complete the work that he was sent on earth to do. He has every reason to keep going. Yet he stops. Out of the welter of voices in the crowd, he can hear the beggar’s cry. He hears the man’s

deep longing for healing. He hears the ring of sincerity in the man's voice, the note of urgency, the desperate plea. And he stops. I dare say that Jesus always stops when we are that honest with him. He always listens when we name our need with all the simplicity and candor that is in our hearts.

Jesus says to the disciples, "Call him here." So they call the blind man, saying, "Take heart; get up; he is calling you," and the man springs up, throwing off his cloak. That cloak was apparently the man's only possession, and he may have needed it not only for warmth but also to drape over his legs as he sat begging, to let it catch the coins.<sup>2</sup> But in his eagerness to meet Jesus, Bartimaeus throws the cloak aside. Unlike the rich man whom we met earlier in the chapter [Mk 10:17-22] who could not relinquish his riches to follow Jesus, the blind man clings to nothing. He lets go what he has and gives it all away, in order to come to the Lord.

Then Jesus asks him the same question that he had just asked James and John, in almost exactly the same words, "What do you want me to do for you?" [Mk 10:51; cf. Mk 10:36]. It is a piercing question, a probing question that reaches deep into the man's heart. What is his deepest desire? Unlike James and John, it is not power that the man wants, not self-seeking glory. He wants simply to see, to have his sight restored. As one commentator points out, this fellow may be blind, but it seems that already he has better sight than the members of Jesus' inner circle!<sup>3</sup> He names his need: "My teacher, let me see again." And Jesus says to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."

So may it be for us, for all of us who feel caught in the dark sometimes, who can't see our way forward, who feel overcome sometimes by forces and situations that leave us feeling helpless by the side of the road. Jesus is willing to stop for us, to listen to us, and he is eager to learn how we would name our deepest need. Are we willing to do that? Are we willing to acknowledge our helplessness to him, and our longing for to be healed? For then we can regain our sight, and maybe we will be given eyes to see as Jesus sees, so that, when we look into one another's faces, we see our brothers and sisters, and when we look at the glorious Creation that surrounds us, we see the face of God.

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<sup>2</sup> *Synthesis*; A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship following the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, October 25, 2009

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*