

“What We See”  
July 24, 2022

Mark 10:46-52

In a book that's no longer in print, entitled *Space and Sight*, author Marius von Senden describes what it was like for the first people in the world to undergo successful cataract surgery. All of them born blind, they received their sight in the wake of their procedures and were subsequently interviewed for the book about what they saw.

I wish I could find a copy of the book, especially given the stories these newly sighted people told. They described seeing the world the way a newborn might see the world or the way a space alien might view the earth if they were suddenly dropped on our planet.

In the wake of her surgery, one girl was shown a batch of photographs and then some paintings done by her mother. “Why do they put those dark marks all over them?” she asked. “Those aren't dark marks,” her mother replied, “they're actually shadows.

“Shadows?” the little girl responded. And her mother nodded. “That is one of the ways the eye knows that things have shape. If it weren't for shadows, many things would look flat.”

“Well, that's how things do look,” her daughter clarified. “Everything looks flat with some dark patches.”

Meanwhile, a second girl was so stunned by the vivid radiance of the world around her that she actually kept her eyes closed for two whole weeks. And when she finally opened them what she mainly saw was a field of light and a whole bunch of things in frenzied motion. She could not pick out the objects and identify them, but she gazed panoramically at the things around her and couldn't stop repeating herself. “Oh God! How beautiful...!”

You might assume that everyone who had their cataracts removed would react similarly. But lo and behold, not everything was beautiful for every patient. Unable to judge distances and assess perspective, a few of the patients would occasionally reach out for things they assumed were almost in their grasp. Only to realize that the object they wanted was way across the room.

Other patients would be walking through the living room or the dining room in their home convinced they had a clear path and plenty of room to navigate the space. When all of a sudden, they would bang their shin against a coffee table or a chair they didn't realize was much closer than anticipated. The world a number of patients figured would be manageable when they started seeing turned out to be more complex and more frustrating and more dangerous than they ever imagined.

Meanwhile, some others finished their cataract surgery and looked at themselves in the mirror for the very first time. Where it dawned on them the way in which the public had likely seen them for years and years. That realization led to a profound sense of self-consciousness which caused some people to avoid human interaction as much as possible.

One distraught father wrote to the surgeon and confessed that his daughter had taken to shutting her eyes when she walked around the house. In her self-imposed blindness, she actually returned to a much happier mood. Around the same time, a fifteen-year-old boy demanded he be returned to the local home for the blind where he had left his girlfriend behind. “I can’t stand it anymore,” he ranted, “if things don’t change, I will tear my eyes out!”

These stories are hard to comprehend for those who have always had vision. After spending a lifetime in darkness with no light and no color and no visual motion and no sense of depth or space, can you imagine being given the gift of sight? And then wanting to tear your eyes out? Because somehow, it’s easier, safer, smaller, quieter, more controllable to be blind?

With Marius von Senden’s stories in mind, we turn to this morning’s Scripture lesson. A lesson which is as applicable to people who have sight as it is to people who cannot see...

While we don’t know from the story whether Bartimaeus had been blind for his whole life, it’s safe to assume he was blind for a long time. Long enough to fall into a daily routine begging by the roadside outside the city of Jericho.

As the story unfolded, Jesus had a crowd of people following behind him when he left the Jericho city limits. But the moment the crowd of followers heard a familiar voice cry out to Jesus, they knew exactly who it was. Bartimaeus...the same guy who always sat out there by the roadside. Same spot. Same lack of decorum.

The crowd tried hard to shut Bartimaeus up. Knowing how much they were bothered by Bartimaeus loudly pleading his case, they figured Jesus didn’t need the hassle. “You shameless beggar,” they spoke through gritted teeth. “Leave Jesus alone. He’s got more important things to do today than listen to a blind man.”

Bartimaeus, however, would not be quieted. He had been waiting for this moment to encounter Jesus and he wasn’t going to let the opportunity or the man he referred to as “the Son of David” pass him by.

When Jesus stopped and called for Bartimaeus to come, I suspect the crowd reluctantly relayed the message to Bartimaeus and parted to create a pathway. Whereupon Bartimaeus immediately stood up, threw off his cloak, and almost jumped over to the place where he heard Jesus speaking.

Bartimaeus wound up close enough to reach out and touch Jesus. And when Jesus opened his mouth, Bartimaeus turned slightly so that he was facing Jesus directly. In that moment, the question Jesus asked Bartimaeus seemed so obvious you wonder why Jesus had to ask it. “What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus answered in six simple words. “My teacher, let me see again.” And without hesitating Jesus fulfilled the request. “Go, your faith has made you well.” Nothing fancy about this miracle. No holy saliva. No laying on of hands. No prayers spoken to God. Just a simple, straightforward, “go.” And Bartimaeus instantly fell in step with the rest of the crowd...another follower on the way to Jerusalem with Jesus...

In a Bible filled with nuances and mixed messages and sometimes contradictions, there is nothing ambiguous about today’s story. (1) Bartimaeus knew what he wanted and went after it. Jesus knew what Bartimaeus wanted and granted Bartimaeus’ wish. It’s a win-win, happily ever after story. Able to see for the first time, Bartimaeus left the face to face encounter with Jesus as a new man. New eyesight. New outlook. New faith. New life. While coincidentally, Jesus gained a new convert and a new follower.

With immense help from Jesus, Bartimaeus went from a safe, small, quiet, controllable life to a life filled with vivid color and bright light and striking beauty. I have to believe it was overwhelming for Bartimaeus, even if it was everything he had been yearning for. Yet even though his life was transformed instantaneously, Bartimaeus refused to be frightened. And he refused to spend even one more minute than necessary in the darkness...

The truth is sometimes it’s easier to play it safely. To stick to what we know. To live in the small, safe cocoons we build for ourselves where we can keep things under control and we don’t have to see what we don’t want to see.

The moment we fully open our eyes, we have no choice but to take it all in. The beauty and the brokenness. The hope and the horror. The delightful and the distressing. The magnificent and the maleficent.

Not to mention the fact that when we open our eyes, we may think we have something in our grasp and it’s actually far away. And sometimes we think we have a clear path in front of us and we wind up banging our shins on obstacles we didn’t see coming.

But if we have a chance to see, it’s worth opening our eyes. And embracing the opportunity. Especially if Jesus is the one giving us the go ahead. Amen.

(1) Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1986) pg. 27.



