

Seeing in the Darkness

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Mark 10:46-52

It is probably a good thing there are no high stakes tests for our confirmands this morning by which they are expected to give correct answers to specific questions. It is probably even a better thing that the salary of their pastor is not tied to the outcome of those high stakes tests. If you have an opportunity to read the faith statements drafted by our confirmands after a year of study together, one thing that is apparent, is that they have as many questions as answers. Some have more doubts and questions than answers.

Ella Biehn, our former member and host participant in Atlanta writes, “I do not know exactly what I believe about my religion. However, I do know that faith is a journey that never ends”. Franklin says, “God - real or not real? True or not true? Believe or not believe? Currently, I do not completely believe”. Kaia writes, “My faith is still evolving.” Sophie says, “I believe that the Holy Spirit is the constant presence of God. I understand that it works in ways that I, nor anyone else, can understand”. Nate writes, “I don't know if I had a life before this one, or if my soul was created when I was born. If my soul had a beginning, will it have an end? There are so many explanations of eternal life and one, many or none of them could be correct.”

Duncan insists any conclusions about Christianity must be tempered by what others believe. “As Christians” he writes, “we need to realize that some people have different beliefs than us and that even though we don’t agree with them, we need to be respectful”. If the Pastor’s salary were tied to confirmands getting the right answers, I would be in serious trouble with Audrey’s closing statement. “In conclusion, there is no conclusion of God”.

Those responses are all a long way from the type of answers expected from much earlier years when on Confirmation Sunday confirmands were expected to know the answer to questions found in the shorter Presbyterian Westminster Catechism like “What is the chief end of man?” For a pastor worth his pay, the confirmands would all be responding in one voice with the correct answer: “A Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

If you are wondering what we have been doing for the past year, besides downing pizzas with some regularity, the best response might be we have been practicing seeing in the dark. In her newest book, “Learning to Walk in the Dark”, Barbara Brown Taylor says this, “After so many years of trying to cobble together a way of thinking about God that makes sense so that I can safely settle down with it, it all turns to *nada*. There is no permanently safe place to settle. I will always be at sea, steering by the stars. Yet as dark as this sounds, it provides great relief, because it now sounds truer than any-thing that came before.”

One way to look at our confirmation study is that Episcopalian Priest, esteemed preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor, took a life time to arrive at a place that Audrey and the other confirmands have embraced after only a year in confirmation, “In conclusion there is no conclusion of God.” It may be a little late in the game for me, but perhaps the pastor deserves a raise. It took a great deal of suffering and loss before Job comes to this same basic realization, acknowledging that what he thinks he knew about God, pales in comparison to what he does not know. If Job can see God at all, it is in the dark.

Admittedly, darkness often gets a bad rap, including in Scripture where as Taylor notes it is frequently considered bad news, with light standing for life and darkness for death. This negative association is further complicated by our much later racializing of darkness, with dark skin identified as a marker of inferiority and white skin a marker of superiority. Yet, Taylor goes on to point out this negative association of darkness is only part of the story. According to Genesis the dark night sky was a key player in “Abraham’s decision to trust God”. So too was “night vision a key player in Jacob’s decision to believe God”. Although Moses first encounters God as bright light, it is in a cloud of darkness that Moses comes closest to God.

Drawing upon this story of Moses as a key metaphor for our spiritual life, a fourteenth century mystic wrote a small book called the “Cloud of Unknowing” that remains in print today. A sixteenth-century

mystic, John of the Cross wrote a book which is still a Christian classic, called “Dark Night of the Soul.” The fundamental insight of these stories and these mystics is essentially “there is no conclusion of God.” What we see of God, we see in the darkness.

For our confirmands, for all of us, the capacity to see in the dark, living with questions and doubts, is an essential spiritual orientation, especially in times of uncertainty. For many people old certainties about God, doctrines and assertions about belief, no longer work as they once did. This applies to all the world’s main religious traditions. Contemporary theologians assert we have entered a critical time in the history of human kind in which one of the most vital spiritual skills needed is the capacity to see in the darkness, willing to live with uncertainty and doubt.

There is no question that the unknown of darkness generates fear to some degree in all of us and to a considerable degree in many. Barbara Brown Taylor says that growing up; darkness was shorthand for anything that scares her, which could range widely from dementia to melting polar ice caps, from gun violence to personal loss and the reality of my own mortality.

It was in the growing darkness of one of our first backpacking trips together that Michele and I heard a voice yelling out filled with panic and fear. We were in the Shenandoah National Park. With our meal finished, we were beginning to get settled down for the evening when

the night's silence was suddenly broken by a sound growing louder and louder, "**John, John, John.**" There was no mistaking the fear in his voice. We climbed out of our tent and with flashlight in hand, yelled back, "Over hear, over hear." In a short while a young man came stumbling through the woods to the safety of our tent. We invited him to come inside. Apparently he had gone out looking for water, had gotten turned around and with the growing darkness had no idea where he was or how to find his camp site and camping companions.

Nothing is said about the emotional state of Bartimeaus calling out to Jesus. But, there is every reason to believe he had the same urgency, fear and anxiety that was felt by the lost camper we encountered in the Shenandoah. Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Mark says, "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "**Son of David, have mercy on me!**"

Bartimeaus is in his own darkness. There were no schools for the blind, guide dogs, safety net or any of the societal resources on which we rely. Bartimeaus is on his own in the darkness and so when he is told that Jesus is nearby he begins to yell out as if his very life depends on it. He will not be silenced, "**Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.**"

In her book "Learning to Walk in the Darkness" Taylor tells the story about a blind French resistance fighter by the name of Jacques Lusseyran, who wrote about his experience in a memoir called "And

There Was Light”. Thanks to his parents, who encouraged him to approach his blindness with a sense of discovery, he never saw his blindness as something to be pitied. He writes, “I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there. I had only to receive it...The light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves.” “He learned very quickly that the best way to see the inner light and remain in its presence was to love.”

According to Mark, Bartimeaus already had the capacity to see in the dark. Even in the darkness of his blindness, Bartimeaus knew what others were failing to grasp. Bartimeaus knew, Bartimeaus recognized, Bartimeaus saw, that love was drawing near to him and so he yells out **“Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.”** With the invitation of Jesus, Bartimeaus calls upon the power of love to make him whole. Jesus replies, “Go, your faith has made you well.”

The young man who came stumbling out of the woods with fear and panic in his voice only needed the reassurance that he was not alone in the dark. Taylor puts it this way, “Even when light fades and darkness falls – as it does every day, in every single life – God does not turn the world over to some other deity....There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid....here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day.”

“In conclusion there is no conclusion of God.” Mark never says Bartimeaus had all his theology worked about who God is and what he believes about God. What Bartimeaus does trust and the presence that Bartimeaus is willing to follow all the way to the cross is the presence of love in the human one known as Jesus, the presence we now call Christ.

Our confirmands drew close to this love when in a foodshelf in Atlanta they gave food to the hungry with respect. Our confirmands drew close to this love when they spent time with children in a summer camp for youth, recognizing that these youth have the light of God’s love within them. Our confirmands drew close to love as they provided manicures and gift bags for those experiencing homelessness. Drawing close to love means giving, sharing, caring, standing up for justice even when there are no guarantees of outcome and the cross looms large.

What does it mean to see in the darkness? If it means getting all the answers right on some final exam, all of us would be in trouble. If, however, seeing in the dark means remaining open to and following the presence of love, than each of us has the capacity to see in the dark.

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Our first lesson comes toward the conclusion of the book of Job. The story of Job is considered a part of the wisdom tradition and addresses the question of whether God blesses the good and punishes the bad. Part of the answer comes in this closing confession of Job who has come to realize that no one can fully understand or define God.

Then Job answered the Lord: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Mark 10:46-52

Our Gospel lesson this morning tells the story of Bartimeaus who is blind and left to a life of begging. Bartimeaus becomes aware that Jesus is drawing near and in spite of the crowds efforts to keep him silence, Bartimeaus begins yelling out to Jesus with hope that Jesus is a source of healing.

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimeaus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then 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." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.