

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – October 25, 2015
Pilgrimage to the Manger
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 10:46-52

REFLECTION

"Where there is no vision, there is no hope."
- George Washington Carver, American Scientist (1864-1943)

Seeing Our Way Forward

The son of Timaeus – Bar-Timaeus – is blind. There aren't many employment options in Jericho at that time for blind men – so he works as a roadside beggar. But all of this changes on this particular day. The son of David – Jesus Bar-David – is in town. He is surrounded by a crowd of followers – moving through the streets on the way to the town gate – with much hubbub – so it is hard to miss him, even when you're blind.

Bar-Timaeus decides to make a radical change in his life and move on from his roadside business. He shouts at Jesus and continues to shout – even when people are trying to shush him. He shouts as if he's trying to reach the ears of G-d with his own hubbub.

And Jesus comes to a halt – with those behind him barely able to stop in time – before running him over. Jesus not only stops walking, he "stands still." He stands still. In the middle of the road, the crowd, the noise, the dust, the heat, the commerce – he stands still. Listening to one voice. Waiting for someone's son to defy those who would silence him – to throw off his old life – and move toward hope. He stands still. He waits. And then he invites. "Call him here."

Bar-Timaeus, without hesitation, sheds his beggar's uniform and leaps toward Bar-David. Not unlike Santa with a child on his lap, Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" What do you want for Christmas, son? And Bar-Timaeus, not unlike a child at Santa's Village, says, "My teacher, let me see again." He claims Jesus as his rabbi and, in one last moment of beggary, asks for vision.

His wish is granted.

His physical ability now matches his inner ability – to see his way forward.

And his new life begins – on the road – on pilgrimage with his rabbi.

It is interesting that Bar-Timaeus doesn't even ask where Jesus is going. Once he can see, he trusts that the journey and the destination will be worth it. Whatever happens, it's got to be better than sitting blind in Jericho begging for a living. And the evidence of G-d's presence is clear. Bar-Tim has been called, he has heard the call in spite of the din in the street – and he answers.

So, if we take this a step further, having vision doesn't mean we have a clue about where we are going. Seeing our way forward is a matter of having the courage to get up, ask for what we need, choose our teacher(s) and take the next step with her or him or them. It means taking the next step in a direction we trust with people we trust. It means sensing the presence and call of the One Who Made Us – and making the changes necessary to move on.

Nate Lewis, a member of Pasadena UCC for my entire life, worked for FEMA. When the Midwest experienced massive flooding in the 1990's Nate was at a rural relief center working at a table with a local representative. The rep looked up as a farmer came over to the table looking haggard.

He asked, "How are you doing, Sam?"

And the farmer replied, "Well, I'm standing up and I'm facing in the right direction." Sometimes, that's all you can ask for. "I'm standing up and I'm facing in the right direction."

We may be hearing stories like this out of Mexico in the next few days – in the wake of Hurricane Patricia. May they stand and begin again.

Seeing our way forward is not only taking that first next step – but it includes a process of ongoing discernment. When I got here two years ago I was asked to help in that discernment process. You were standing up but weren't sure you were facing in the right direction.

So we had those Congregational Conversations.

We experimented with a plethora of worship forms.

We couldn't decide on a particular social issue – but found enthusiasm and focus around creating quality Public Service Announcements for social media – which would allow us to pick up any or all of our social concerns – hoping to create culture shift and increase compassion in the world.

Fred experimented with a Teen Tent and found new ways to keep our young people engaged with church – an experiment carried forward by Mary, Carol and Carolyn.

We are experimenting with new forms of leadership and organization and funding and special projects – with some success and some failure – hoping to improve as we move forward.

And we continue to evaluate and discern next steps
by reflecting together on texts and stories,
by engaging in unusual projects,
by inviting a host of interesting guest speakers to expand our thinking and increase our
creativity and self-compassion,
by using tools like SoulCollage® and interchurch collaboration and varieties of online
communication to strengthen our forward movement.

In many ways, right now, we are renewing our decision to continue on this Pilgrimage
together – wherever it may lead us.

This is the season in which we renew financial pledges and decide how best to serve
and lead this community for the coming year.

This is the time of year in which we intensify our care for those in our neighborhoods
who face exposure to darker days and colder temperatures and incontinent weather.

This is the time in our lives when we reevaluate our vocational trajectories, tweek and
reestablish our core values, add to and reprioritize our bucket lists, light more candles
and focus on hope.

If Bar-Timaeus had had no hope, he wouldn't have called out, leapt up or asked for
vision.

If that Midwestern famer had had no hope, he wouldn't have approached the FEMA
table to see how he might work his way out of that disaster.

If Mt. Hollywood had had no hope, this congregation would never have sold its
building, found a new place to gather, hired a minister and begun to plan for a new
future.

With no hope, dictators remain in power and elections are handed over to corporations.
With no hope, we settle for low wages and endure chronic suffering and offer no
resistance to creeping social ills.

With no hope, we self-medicate and give up on relationships and resist change in any
form.

With no hope, there is no vision and the people perish.

And we can't have that.

So as we seek our way forward, let's cultivate hope.

In this oncoming season of darkness, let's increase light.

On this pilgrimage to the manger and beyond, let's recognize each other's courage and share our insights with one another and piece together a shared vision for the future.

Let's lean on G-d when we need to and partner with G-d when we can.

And let's remember that G-d is not just a cosmic force to be reckoned with...
G-d is also that rabbi – standing still in the roadway –
listening for our voice – ready to respond – when we ask for direction.

Scripture Reading for Sunday October 25, 2015 – Pentecost 22

Mark 10:46-52

46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

49 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." 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

51 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." 52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.