

## The Light of Life

*Holy God, you give light to those who sit in darkness.<sup>1</sup> Show us how to walk in the light of life,<sup>2</sup> that your grace may shine through all that we do, for the sake of this world You so love.<sup>3</sup> May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

They followed Jesus. But they did not understand.

Thronged of people surged around him,  
eager to be healed,  
longing to be fed,  
desperate to glimpse the power of God!

They'd watched him teach, ever since that dramatic moment when he stood up in the Nazareth synagogue and read from the scroll of Isaiah. Remember? He said he would liberate those who were incarcerated and let the oppressed go free—and that congregation practically threw him off a cliff!

Revolutionary stuff. He was incendiary—just like his mother Mary.  
She used to sing about God's mercy like it was  
not just forgiveness but some kind of subversive thing,  
God "bringing down the powerful from their thrones."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus had that same spirit.  
He taught with a bold authority<sup>5</sup> that drew people to him.

And he healed people!  
Man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue: healed, at a word from Jesus!<sup>6</sup>  
Simon's mother-in-law, so sick, burning up with fever: healed!

People were coming to Jesus from all over,  
some weak from disease, others grimacing from terrible injuries,  
a few with pathologies that were demonic.

And "he laid his hands on each of them and cured them"<sup>7</sup>  
He healed a man who was paralyzed!

That man stood up and walked home, the joy on his face like nothing you've ever seen.

After that, people thronged Jesus everywhere he went. They were desperate to hear him talk about God's kingdom—words of hope they had never heard in quite that way before! They followed him ... but they did not understand. Some must have thought all they had to do was push their way close to him—you know, be visible—and he would heal them.

So there was some jostling, some shoving—and, it must be said, there was some meanness  
as people tried to get close to this miracle-worker.

Now, word was that Jesus had said some esoteric things—strange, frightening stuff about how he'd be mocked and insulted, maybe worse. But that didn't matter. The crowds needed him to work his magic on all the things that caused them pain and kept them mired in despair. Oh, they followed him eagerly! Maybe soon he'd be treated like an outcast, *despised and rejected*,<sup>8</sup> you know, like those criminals executed by the side of the road. But even his closest disciples were baffled—"they understood nothing about all [those] things." Better not to think about it. Just try to get to the front.

For the folks who had followed Jesus for many days, it was becoming a point of pride to walk near him. Every day they'd push to the front in their best synagogue clothes, hoping he'd notice. So it was disturbing when some raggedy man by the side of the road heard them passing and started to yell. Poor guy had lost his sight—had to beg for food. Some were saying he must have been *punished by God* with an *affliction* like that, so most folks steered clear of him. Now there he was, making a commotion! So awkward! Good Lord, couldn't he just keep quiet?

But he kept on yelling: "Have mercy! Jesus, have mercy!  
Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped ... and a hush fell over the crowd.  
Most of the people couldn't hear what was happening.  
After a few moments, everyone started moving again,  
and that's when they saw it.

There was the man, his eyes wide open and a radiant smile on his face,  
walking with Jesus.  
That beggar had been healed!  
That man whom they had *reckoned of no account*,  
marked by *infirmity, from whom others hid their faces*—  
HE had been healed!

And the crowd finally saw.<sup>9</sup>  
It was as if the light had changed on that dusty road to Jericho,  
and the crowd saw Jesus—and the blind man—for the first time.

Their vision healed,  
they finally comprehended the words of a hymn they'd sung their whole lives:  
"in Your light we see light."<sup>10</sup>  
They finally understood the One they'd been following:  
they saw his love for those excluded, mocked, left by the side of the road.

Released from their incarceration in brutality,<sup>11</sup>  
liberated from their poverty of spirit,

each of them could move forward with joy,  
whether or not their illness was healed that day, or the next day, or never.

Looking at Jesus with new eyes,  
 they finally saw that his spiritual authority was based on mercy.

His teaching, his exorcisms and healings: all about God's mercy!

Oh, how they sang praises to God then!  
 They praised God as they followed Jesus to Jericho,  
 dancing in the light of life!<sup>12</sup>  
 They praised God joyfully as Jesus rode into Jerusalem,  
 their hearts overflowing with love for their King of Glory!<sup>13</sup>

Soon enough, dark times would come.  
 Their praise would turn to wailing on Calvary.<sup>14</sup>  
 But as of that moment on the road to Jericho, everything would be different.  
The light had changed.

Friends, healing is like that, when we come to Jesus.  
 We may struggle—cry out, rage against the darkness—  
 but through God's mercy,  
 we can come to see everything differently,  
 live everything differently,  
 whether our illness is cured or not,  
 whether we are freed from pain or carry woundedness with us the rest of our days.

We follow One who is the light of all creation,  
 in whom we live, and move, and have our being—  
 and his mercy has conquered the world!  
 His mercy is stronger than anything that could afflict us.  
 "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"<sup>15</sup>

You know, there's a poem by Elizabeth Bishop about when the light changes.  
 The poem, "Sandpiper," describes the perspective of a little shorebird  
 running to and fro at the edge of the surf.

"The world is a mist. And then the world is  
 minute and vast and clear."<sup>16</sup>

Beloved, when you preach, when you minister, when you struggle:  
 pray Jesus to clear away the mist  
 so you can see the world in its gorgeous incarnational minuteness,  
 vast and clear,  
 radiant with the light of God's mercy!

In the Name of the One who is the Light of the World: Jesus Christ,  
 to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

7 June 2021

Daily Office Year 1, Proper 5

Deuteronomy 30:1–10; Psalm 56; 2 Corinthians 10:1–18; Luke 18:31–43

Preached at the 2021 conference of *Deep Calls to Deep: A Program to Strengthen Episcopal Preaching*, an initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment and hosted by Virginia Theological Seminary.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:79. This sermon was designed to be paired instructively with my lecture the same evening, “The Treasure of Biblical Allusions: Intertextual Preaching as Healing Speech.” In the lecture, I configure the homiletical praxis of biblical allusiveness by means of three “treasure” metaphors: gemstone, crystal chalice, and golden chain. To demonstrate the golden chain, I embed in the sermon a catena of biblical references to light, taking as my warrant the image of light in the final clause of Psalm 56, one of the lectionary texts for this worship service.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 56:13. This petition proleptically positions our June 7 worshipping community within the “crowd” in the Lukan story: those who will come to see Jesus and the blind man differently and who will praise God, walking on with Jesus in the light of their new understanding.

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>4</sup> See the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), which brims with images of reversals of power first articulated in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10). Regarding our story in Luke 18:35–43, John T. Carroll poses this query about those at the front of the crowd who rebuke the blind man: “Does the spatial designation ‘in the front’ also function metaphorically, hinting at a status inversion so typical of Luke, with a blind beggar besting persons who are ‘first,’ that is, preeminent?” (*Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012], 370). In my sermonic interpretation, the people’s failure to understand Jesus’ emancipatory mission (Isa 61:1–2 via Luke 4:14–21) is linked to their misapprehension of the Messiah’s solidarity with and love for those who suffer. I find significant Luke’s juxtaposition of 18:31–34 with our story in vv. 35–43 and his thunderous emphasis in v. 34 on how the disciples utterly failed to comprehend “everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets.”

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:32.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 4:33–36.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 4:40–41.

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<sup>8</sup> Alluding to Isaiah 53:3, in the fourth Servant Song. In his commentary, *The Gospel of Luke* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Joel Green gestures toward the third Servant Song: “In the background of this contemptuous catalogue one may hear echoes of Isa 50:6—a reference to the Servant of [YHWH] whose divine vocation entailed a paradigmatic move from repudiation to vindication” (660). Here and in what follows, I am imagining the blind man in terms (italicized in the sermon text) drawn from the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah 52–53, to dramatize the normative biases that could have prompted some to order a blind person “sternly” to be quiet instead of assisting him. We are to be conformed to Christ (Phil 2:5–11; Rom 8:29). Since New Testament times, the Servant Songs in Isaiah have been read christologically as a further amplification of the several potential meanings and identifications already at play in Deutero-Isaiah for the Servant. In the sermon, I suggest we should understand those who are vulnerable and despised in every community as teaching us about Christ. Indeed, there are rich hagiographical narratives and theological traditions in Christianity about seeing the face of Christ in those who live in poverty or experience marginalization. Deploying the fourth Servant Song to portray the blind man, rather than Christ, is one of two moves I make in this sermon to illustrate my “gemstone” metaphor for homiletical praxis (see note 1 above): turning a phrase or image to see an unexpected facet or fresh angle.

<sup>9</sup> By means of the phrases “the crowd saw,” “the crowd saw Jesus, and the blind man, for the first time,” “their vision healed,” and “looking at Jesus with new eyes, they finally saw,” I enact a second move in the metaphorical realm of “gemstone” for homiletical praxis. While I do narrate the miraculous healing of the man’s ocular impairment, I focus far more on the healing of the crowd’s intransigence and failure to understand who Jesus is, supplying a new angle of perspective on this story. I am persuaded that the crowd’s change of heart is at the center of Luke’s storytelling here. The dramatic detail about those at the front of the crowd callously seeking to silence the importunate man would otherwise be extraneous.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 36:9.

<sup>11</sup> As Mary had sung prophetically in her Magnificat (see esp. Luke 1:51–53), Jesus reverses the conditions of status that elevate the rich and powerful at the expense of those who are vulnerable and disempowered. Carroll describes ways in which Greco-Roman culture correlated physical challenges with character deficiencies, and writes of the blind man in 18:35–43, “he proves remarkably perceptive (he calls out to Jesus as the son of David, who can extend mercy to him), persistent and assertive (overcoming the crowd’s resistance), and ready to assume a faithful disciple’s posture, glorifying God and following Jesus.... Again and again, Luke makes contact with cultural assumptions that infer moral character from physical appearance, but not so as to endorse them—instead, to challenge and undermine them. This rhetorical interest of Luke’s narrative is of a piece with a larger concern for boundary-transgressing social integration and inclusion.” See Carroll, “Disability and Dis-ease: Body, Restoration, and Ethics of Reading in Luke’s Gospel,” in *Anatomies of the Gospels and Beyond: Essays in Honor of R. Alan Culpepper*, Biblical Interpretation 164 (ed. Mikeal C. Parsons, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, and Paul N. Anderson; Boston: Brill, 2018), 211–225 (217).

<sup>12</sup> Again, Psalm 56:13.

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<sup>13</sup> See George Herbert's poem "Praise (2)," in *George Herbert: The Complete English Works* (edited and introduced by Ann Pasternak Slater; Everyman's Library; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 142. The fuller line, "King of Glory, King of Peace," artfully revises the people's (mis)understanding of Jesus' "royal" entry into Jerusalem as narrated in the Gospels. I draw on two other Herbert poems in my lecture; this citation, albeit subtle, was meant to evoke further the riches of his poetry for homiletical praxis.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 23:27. Luke is the only evangelist who expressly notes that "a great number of the people" mourned and lamented for Jesus as he walked toward his execution. Green offers that Luke's "foremost concern is in indicating how short-lived was the solidarity of the Jewish people with their Jerusalem leaders in opposition to Jesus" (*Gospel of Luke*, 813). In the sermon, I suggest that the healing of this crowd's understanding was enduring, not simply a fickle moment that would yield to hostility when Jesus is brought before Pilate. The characterization of the people—including individuals such as Joseph of Arimathea—is complex in Luke and should not be treated in a reductive manner, as may be glimpsed e.g. in the comment of François Bovon on Luke 23:18–19 that Luke "is distancing himself from Judaism and wants to defame it" (*Luke 3*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012], 282).

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 27:1. See also Psalm 56:4, 11.

<sup>16</sup> From Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Sandpiper," in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters* (The Library of America; New York: Penguin Putnam, 2008), 125. Bishop portrays the sandpiper as "preoccupied," "focused," then "obsessed" with finding food. The shifting perspective depicted in the poem, as the sandpiper experiences the surf foaming in and ebbing away, suggests to me that preoccupation with a specific material need, such as might be inscribed in an narrow theological view of what should count as healing, can keep us from seeing the vast and magnificent larger landscape within which Christ is at work healing the cosmos.