

What It Takes to Open Your Eyes
Reformation Sunday & Stewardship Sunday
October 25, 2009
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Job 42.1-6, 10-17;
 Psalm 34.1-8, 19-22;
 Hebrews 7.23-28;
 Mark 10.46-52

Have you ever noticed how many of the most significant turning points in life and in history are born out of crisis? We are celebrating Reformation Sunday today and for the young Augustinian monk named Martin Luther, the crisis was the sudden death of classmate and a brush with death himself. It led it him into a profound crisis of faith where he struggled with an overwhelming sense of his own sinfulness and an anxiety about his salvation that reflected the religious tenor of his day¹ Luther's eyes were opened when his confessor pressed him to see that the love of God and not fear of God's punishment was at the center of salvation. We don't know as much about the turning point in John Calvin's life but something occurred early in his academic career that he would later describe as a "sudden conversion" in which Calvin felt God pushing him in a new direction, softening what he described as his hardened heart.²

Certainly the story of Job which we have been reading these last weeks has centered around a crisis of epic proportions: the death of all his children, the loss of everything he owned, and the devastation of his health. Like Luther and Calvin, the precipitating crisis pushed Job to question the traditions and theology he had received. This was no abstract intellectual pursuit, though. This was a struggle of his soul with the Truth about God. If you've ever seen the movie *Luther* that came out several years ago about the person of Martin Luther and the start of the Protestant Reformation, you get a visceral sense of what that kind of struggling can be like as you watch Joseph Fiennes portray those struggles in Luther's life. Or maybe

¹ Walker, Williston, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 422.

² Walker, 473.

you've been there yourself and you know firsthand what it was like for Job and Luther to wrestle with God and be laid bare as Jes described it in her sermon two weeks ago. As the book of Job comes to a close one thing is clear: Job is transformed by the experience.

Where his faith in the beginning was grounded in the things he had heard from others about God (*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear* – verse 5), now his faith is grounded in his own direct experience of God (*now my eyes have seen you*). Something changed for him through the horror of his suffering. I don't mean to imply that God caused this suffering so that he could learn some important lesson as if the suffering was for his own good. That would be a very cruel God who robs a man of his children and inflicts bodily harm in order to enact some kind of teachable moment. People endure all kinds of unspeakable, undeserved suffering and are left desolate, empty, angry and bitter. Job experienced all of those things and God never rebukes him for giving voice to his anger or his sorrow. Job was not transformed because he accepted in some passive way the fate of his life. We see this very same quality in Bartimaeus in the gospel of Mark today.

What changed Job was his refusal to accept the narrow explanations of his tradition whose theology described a God who was much too small and much too cruel. What changed Job was his encounter with the whirlwind – as we read of it last week. Whatever happened in that whirlwind, Job walked away believing he had seen God....this was nothing less than a face to face – eye to eye – “I have seen the Lord” kind of experience. It wasn't based on the things he had heard about God from well meaning friends or long winded theologians. What opened his eyes was coming face to face with the mystery and majesty of God. There was something in that conversation that shook Job loose from the paralyzing grief and suffering of his past and made it possible for him to look up and to look forward. I heard one person say “in the end it isn't about where the suffering comes from but about where it can go.”³

³ I have lost track of the person who said this but I read it in some commentary about this passage of Job.

I suspect it is no coincidence that the way God shook Job loose was to relocate his point of reference from his personal suffering to the vastness of God's creation. Tom Boogaart spoke at Hope Church last spring on the theme "Caring for the Creation that Cares for Us." What stayed with me from our conversation that night was Tom's assertion that there is a correlation between the suffering of mind and soul (the depression and anxiety that seems to run rampant among us today) and our modern disconnection from creation. There is a healing power that comes when we reconnect to the earth; to the dirt beneath our feet and the air of the sky, the sun and trees, the rivers, the woods, and notice our place among the creatures.⁴ Go back and read again the passage from Job last Sunday. What God says to Job is that the creation, for all its majesty and mystery, is also a place of abundance and provision - a place of incredible resilience - that can bounce back after devastation and be reborn. He relocates Job in the vastness of creation and from that position Job's eyes are opened to a different way of seeing God and experiencing his relationship with God.

I picked up a book years ago called *Parables of the Forest*⁵ I was astounded in looking through it again this week how the author Pamela Reeve had a very similar experience. The book is essentially a journal of photography and written reflections by a woman who hiked her way toward healing after a personal crisis that left her feeling empty and unsettled. On one of those hikes along the Pacific Crest Trail she came across this wide swath of wildflowers growing down the side of a mountain. She realized that this was once the path of an avalanche. Total destruction and devastation had come through these parts, leaving the mountainside in ruins. Slowly over time these wildflowers had begun to grow and what was before her now was a scene of breathtaking beauty. The earth before her, below her, and around her spoke of the abundance and grace of God that can transform something that was totally destroyed into some else of great beauty. She can trace the healing of her soul and the restoration of her hope to that moment on the mountainside.

⁴ Tom Boogaart wrote an article that touches on some of these themes that can be found online at <http://images.rca.org/docs/c4c/Caring4Creation1105.pdf>

⁵ Reeves, Pamela, *Parables of the Forest* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1989).

The epilogue of Job describes a similar movement in Job's life. What Job discovers in his wrestling with God is that grace abounds. What we read in the closing verses of the book of Job is a description of God's grace unfolding over time as Job reenters the community of his faith. That reentry begins with his prayers for those well-meaning but wrong-minded friends of his. It continues as his family rallies around him, no longer accusing him or trying to explain away his suffering but coming to break bread with him and to give what they can to help him recover.

Stewardship themes run through these closing verses. The narrator credits God as the one who restores Job's fortunes but the means of that restoration begins with the generosity of Job's family. The stewardship thread continues as Job responds to the overwhelming abundance of his later years by giving away his wealth for the benefit of the next generation. Job responds to the mercy and faithfulness of God with a generosity and faithfulness of his own. But I want to be clear that the turning point for Job does not come **from** this restoration of his fortunes that is described in verse 10 and forward. The turning point comes **as his eyes are opened** in verse 5 to the mercy and majesty of God.

The turning point for Bartimaeus comes in a similar way. Like Job, Bartimaeus does not accept in some passive manner his fate as a man born blind. He demands attention as Jesus passes by much to the embarrassment of the crowds around him. Mark is not exactly subtle with his symbolism here. We've read a whole string of stories in Mark chapter 10 about all the people who do not see Jesus for who he is: from the Pharisees and their legalistic questions about divorce, to the rich man who cannot give up the security of the wealth, to the disciples who jostle for positions of power. Ironically, it's the blind man who sees Jesus for who he really is. And this is evidenced not just when Bartimaeus calls Jesus by the name *Son of David*, but by understanding what he could expect from Jesus. He expected that Jesus would be filled with mercy – that Jesus would see him – that Jesus would want to know him. It's a tender moment when Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He doesn't presume to know what Bartimaeus needs. He gives to him a sense of dignity with that question. And interestingly what Jesus does in that moment is relocate Bartimaeus from being on the sidelines where he is ignored and displaced to being in

the center of the crowd. Bartimaeus goes from being shoved **out** of the way to being one of Jesus' followers **on** the way. And, like Job, he discovered that it is not possible to receive the mercy of God without having that mercy utterly transform the place from which you stand and the ways in which you see.

Calvin felt God pushing him in a new direction, Luther discovered a sense of security that eluded him before, Job regained his place in his community, Bartimaeus found his sight. I wonder where those turning points have been in your life. I wonder if you are at one right now or if any one of us will stumble into one tomorrow. And when those turning points come, I wonder what it will take for us to open our eyes.

I do know this. The psalmists' words are true: "I sought the Lord and God answered me and delivered me from all my fears. The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those of who take refuge in God will ever be condemned."

This is the Word of the Lord....thanks be to God.