

**“Restoring Sight”**  
**Sermon preached by Anne Ledbetter**  
**March 8, 2009**  
**Scripture – Mark 8: 22-26**

Our story today seems like a simple healing story of Jesus – told succinctly in Mark’s unique style. Jesus and his disciples arrive in a village, the people bring him a blind man to touch; Jesus takes the man apart from the village and with some spit and laying on of hands, Jesus heals him. (Mark also includes this bizarre tidbit of Jesus’ two-step process, since the first try didn’t quite do the trick.) Essentially Mark’s story signals Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, yet it also points to Christ’s everlasting power to restore sight – not just 2,000 years ago, but also in our world today.

In the other two synoptic gospels Jesus declares that he came to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah. That is, he came to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Already in the first 8 chapters of Mark, Jesus has been healing people, casting out demons, debating with the Pharisees, teaching in parables, and performing miracles such as the feeding of the 5000. The multitudes turn out for Jesus and sense that he is either a great prophet or perhaps the long-awaited one – the Messiah of whom Isaiah spoke. For Jesus embodies God’s particular concern for the poor. Jesus frees people from all that would enslave them. Jesus restores sight to the blind. We rarely see ourselves in any of these categories – in comparison with the world’s population we are not poor. We live in a country of great freedom. By and large most of us can see better than 20/20, even if we require corrective lenses.

But let’s consider more carefully this gospel reality: Jesus comes to restore sight to the blind. Where is this evident in our world today? Perhaps there are still people with impaired eyesight who are healed miraculously by itinerant Christian preachers, but we are more likely to witness the miracles of modern medicine in healing people who are blind – and miracles there are such as the bionic eye implanted in just a handful of patients worldwide. Cheri Robertson of St. Louis, who lost both her eyes in an accident several years ago, was flown to Portugal by her local Lions Club to receive this new medical wonder. Cheri received a pair of glasses not unlike those worn by Geordi LaForg in Star Trek. One lens has a small but powerful camera which sends images to a computer fastened to her shoulder. This computer sends messages to her brain through two wires doctors planted into either side of her brain. The brain processes these messages and voila! Cheri can’t exactly see like you and I, but she can see lights, dots really which outline an object in front of her. As the power is increased she will be able to see more clearly. Scientists are hopeful that the device can be reduced to the size of a cell phone, and manufactured so that many more people may have their sight restored. Certainly, this bionic eye celebrates the realm of God where all shall see the salvation of God.

But vision problems run the gamut - there are many forms of sight impairment – everything from lazy eye to cataracts, from near sightedness to far-sightedness, glaucoma to astigmatism, from double vision to macular degeneration.

Another invention recently making its worldwide debut are the tunable eyeglasses invented by Dr. Joshua Silver, an ophthalmologist in Oxford, England. Dr. Silver's glasses enable a person to "set" or adjust the lens using small pumps on either side of the frames. These pumps push liquid between the lens affecting the curvature which varies in need from person to person. The US military has been one of Dr. Silver's first clients, purchasing 10,000 pairs of these glasses to hand out to needy people in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries. Dr. Silver's goal is simply to the world's poor with these glasses. While the original model is anything but sleek, there is hope to cut the cost and streamline the design. Of course, a number of companies have tried to buy the patent from the good doctor, but he refuses to sell, suspecting that industry's aim and his own are not the same. While there is undoubtedly great profit to be made, Dr. Silver dreams of a world where every person needing eyeglasses may have them. Dr. Silver believes these glasses can eventually be made for \$1 a pair, and that giving sight to visually impaired people will make the world a better place. What a glorious gift to the children of God! What a tremendous advancement toward the fulfillment of God's realm!

Perhaps one of the most common eye problems is something we Presbyterians come by naturally: presbyopia (which literally means, old eyes) Sometimes described as tired eyes, it's a condition which generally comes with aging, in which the crystalline lens loses its elasticity, or perhaps becomes hardened. As we reach our 40's and 50's many of us battle presbyopia – aging eyes, old eyes, tired eyesight

One does not have to be Presbyterian to have presbyopia, but admittedly we Presbyterians undoubtedly suffer a higher incidence of old eyes, and tired vision, than most. We Presbies have a tendency to see the world through old eyes, as evidenced by our frequent explanation, "but we always do it this way."

You see, blindness as an impairment does not always refer to eyesight. We are blinded by ambition, by worry or disaster, by prejudice or fear or greed. This kind of ailment can corrode our souls and deaden our lives. The great thinker and philosopher Helen Keller said, "The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but no vision." How many of us see, but do not see? Surely this was the kind of blindness John Newton imagined in writing his hymn "Amazing Grace." As a slave trader he experienced a conversion, a transformation if you will, and realized that he had "once been lost but now was found, was blind but now he could see."

Thankfully, Christ continues to lay hands on our lives, heal our blindness and restore sight in the world today. Jesus is forever adjusting, or correcting our vision, and helping us regain perspective on life and discern our place in God's realm.

This seems to be the experience of Tony Dungy who recently retired at age 53, after 7 years as head coach of the Indianapolis Colts. Dungy has always considered faith, family and football to be his priorities. But in the last year he grew aware that he was spending 90% of his wakeful time on his coaching. A veil was lifted, or scales fell off the eyes of his heart as he realized he wanted to live out other priorities – spending time with his family and volunteering in his church and community.

Even tragic events may be redeemed by God who can use misfortune to help us see the divine plan more clearly. In a recent article in the *Times Picayune* New Orleans Episcopal Bishop Charlie Jenkins describes the despair and the spiritual healing he experienced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Jenkins acknowledges that before Katrina he was focused more on the well-being of his predominantly upper middle class white church than on his predominantly poor black city.<sup>1</sup> Since Katrina Jenkins has embarked on a personal re-education in which he seeks to see the city through the eyes of the poor. His transformation began just a few days after Katrina hit, when New Orleans filled with water and the plight of tens of thousands of stranded citizens horrified the world. He explains that what he saw stabbed his heart, tormented his conscience, and drove him to his knees in prayer. He confesses that what he saw was sin itself: malignant, writhing evil, freshly unearthed from the soil of his city – social sin, which, even with his theological sensitivity, he had until then neglected to notice. Like most of New Orleans’ residents Jenkins is being treated for post traumatic stress. He now spends his energies mobilizing the clergy in his city for racial reconciliation and a revolution of values – so that their community will more truly reflect the realm of God, the fullness of God’s justice and peace. Through the tragedy of Katrina, God has transformed the life and ministry of this Episcopal bishop, charging and challenging him with a renewed vision of God’s shalom – a community where people are not judged by the color of their skin and where every person is afforded dignity as a child of God.

Likewise, maybe God is using our economic crisis to challenge us to re-consider what really are the most valuable commodities in life? Is true prosperity made up of our stock portfolios and bank accounts? Or is wealth about relationships, partnerships, friendships and community? What could be more essential in life than love and compassion, family and faith?

Friends, Jesus mercifully helped the deaf to hear, the lame to walk and the blind to see, but Jesus also came to correct our distorted view of the world and to clarify the meaning of life. Thanks be to God who continues to work in our lives to peel off the cultural cataracts of materialism, success, and personal indulgence, so that our eyesight may be restored and we may see what truly leads to an abundant life.

Jesus came to open the eyes of our hearts and remove the scales from our souls. How does Jesus seek to heal our blindness? By abiding in our hearts, by whispering in our ears, by asking us to look for and discern his face in each and every person we meet.

How can we avail ourselves of Jesus’ healing touch? By practicing some simple spiritual disciplines such as attending worship, engaging in daily prayer, serving breakfast to the homeless, tutoring a disadvantaged child, observing Sabbath time for rest and God’s recreative work in us.

How’s your eyesight? You may think you need a vision test, but God may actually be calling you to a vision quest. Do you have a vision of God’s realm among us? Can you discern God’s path for your life? It begins with following this itinerant Jewish rabbi named Jesus. But watch out! If he lays his hands on you, you’ll never see things the same. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd, G. Andrew “Episcopal Bishop Charles Jenkins Charts a New Course” *Times Picayune*, January 17, 2009