

Be Thou Our Wisdom

Our second lesson for this morning is from the ninth chapter of the gospel of John. As you may recall, John has a different take on the life of Jesus than the other three gospels. One of the troubling aspects of John’s gospel is the writer’s distrust of and disdain for the Jewish leaders. Throughout the text, John’s gospel speaks of “the Jews” as the opposition, as the bad guys. As you well know, texts like ours have been misused and abused as excuses for horrific rhetoric and violence against our Jewish siblings. It helps to remember that the writer of John, John’s original audience, the disciples, and Jesus himself are all Jews. Scholars believe that John’s own community has been expelled from the synagogue because they profess Jesus as Messiah and Lord. So, this is not a story of us versus them. It is instead a tender and painful account of a faith community that is deeply divided about how to be faithful while Rome breathes down their necks.

This story in John’s gospel involves seeing and not seeing, a man who was born blind, and others whose vision is limited in other ways. If you would like to experiment with listening in a different and perhaps deeper way, I invite you to close your eyes and imagine yourself in the story. And if you drift off, I hope you wake up rested and renewed. It is a day for Sabbath rest, after all. [Read John 9, selected verses, Common English Bible]

Our final hymn from our final four favorites is “Be Thou My Vision.” As I wrote earlier this week, I imagine that many if not all of us begin humming it in our minds whenever this hymn is mentioned. So, I’m sorry and/or you’re welcome for the earworm, beloved as it may be. We’re

not the only ones who love this hymn; it is one of the 100 most frequently featured hymns on the BBC's series "Songs of Praise."¹ The hymn tune,

SLANE is named for a hill in County Meath, Ireland, where St. Patrick's lighting of an Easter fire—an act of defiance against the pagan King Loegaire (fifth century)—led to his unlimited freedom to preach the gospel in Ireland.²

The text was translated from an Old Irish poem echoing a prayer often known as St. Patrick's breastplate which includes the following words:

I arise today, through
God's strength to pilot me,
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me...³

This prayer centers the one praying on our utter dependence on God. These words serve to reorient the one speaking them, reminding me that it is God's strength, God's wisdom, and God's vision that enable me to make my way in the world.

The man born blind can speak to dependence in a way that I cannot. For the entirety of his life, he has relied on others to help him get where he needs to go and to enable him to have food and shelter. And throughout his life there have been whispers and assumptions about why he cannot see as others do. The disciples say these quiet things out loud, "Who is to blame, Jesus? Who caused this? Where can we point our fingers and perhaps control our own fate?" At

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5631YF2bXcw38YRnjzLm681/more-about-the-hymns>

² <https://hymnary.org/tune/slane>

³ <https://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/st-patricks-breastplate.html>

least the disciples have the courtesy to ask. Defensive and feeling backed into a corner by this Jesus and his startling ways, the religious leaders point and accuse and dismiss. They are quick to insist that they know what is and is not faithful. The man, however, readily admits what he does not know and demonstrates an openness to changing his mind. The religious leaders grow increasingly hostile, drawing divisions between disciples of Moses and disciples of Jesus, while the man moves from calling Jesus a prophet to worshiping him as Lord and seeing Jesus as the Son of Man.

One of you cautioned me to skip the last few verses of this chapter of John, proving that I may not be quite as wise as I like to think. The notion that Jesus comes to give sight to the blind and to take sight away from those who can already see sounds cruel and arbitrary, spiteful even. And yet, in this moment in human history I'm not sure we can shy away from these strong words from this one we are called to worship and serve. As I said moments ago, the healed man can speak more eloquently about being dependent than I can. I have been given the finest education and I have been challenged to think for myself. Yes, I have been encouraged to be thoughtful, kind, and generous. I have also been counseled to be savvy and smart. What I have come to realize is that smart does not always equal wise. Yes, I have had wonderful teachers, mentors, and professors who have taught me to reason, question, and think. By the grace of God, they and others have also shown me what it means to be wise.

When Jesus speaks of blinding those who already see, I do not believe that he is bent zapping anyone or determined to cruelly take away literal sight. Jesus is not Zeus. I do believe he is calling the stubborn leaders—and others—beyond what they insist they know. Throughout John's gospel, the gravest sin is not seeing Jesus for who he is. The man receives his sight fairly

quickly, but it takes a bit for him to see Jesus fully for who he is. And the man does not seem to flinch at that. He has had years of practice at being dependent on others and realizing there is a lot he does not know. He does not hesitate to say, “I don’t know.” His understanding changes over the course of the story. He gains insight in the midst of being grilled by the authorities. In his evolving understanding and in his willingness to say, “I don’t know,” he displays a profound humility and an openness to learning and having his mind and his vision altered.

In stark contrast, the religious leaders, the most insider of insiders stand resistant to having their vision altered, refusing to have their understanding changed. And when the man begins to perceive just who this Jesus is—and how unseeing the leaders are— and asks them whether they want to become Jesus’ disciples too, they respond by driving him out of the community. Rather than celebrate healing in their midst and embrace this man who has now been restored along with the One who is the source of his healing, the leaders cling to what they know—or what they think they know and send him away. They would rather kick him out than risk having their minds and hearts changed.

We talked earlier this summer about putting on our God goggles and doing our faithful best to see the world and our neighbors as God sees them. Today’s beloved hymn is a prayer for this very thing. “Be *thou* my vision, O Lord of my heart.” On my own with my biases and fears, I cannot see as I should; I need God’s vision to help me see. In the second verse, we pray, “Be thou my wisdom and thou my true word.” We do not know it all, and we are dependent on the God we meet in Jesus Christ for life and for wisdom. I don’t have all the answers, and, if I am honest, many of my answers I do claim to have are born of my personal opinions and preferences about what I think I know to be good and right, with very little humility or wisdom

in the mix. The truth is that not one of us has all the answers; no one group has the corner on wisdom, or on God's favor, for that matter. All fall short of what God intends, and Jesus comes to save all, too. In Proverbs we are reminded, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."⁴ This fear is less about terror and more about awe, a recognition that God is God, and we are not. That is where faithful vision and true wisdom begin, with humility and reverence for this One who creates, redeems, and sustains all of us and all of them in love.

This story is ancient, as is the hymn. It seems that the human family has long wrestled with being tempted to shape God in our image rather than allowing God to shape us into God's image. We think we want a God who fits into our boxes and follows our rules. Throughout the ages God has tried to show us another way, to help us see, to help us be wise. The God we meet in Jesus does not want to blind us. God wants and has always wanted us to see more clearly and to understand more fully. We want that too. Or at least in our better moments we want to want that, and so we continue to sing and pray this beloved hymn.

The rhetoric around what is good, what is right, who and what is worthy, and who and what is pleasing in God's sight is swirling frantically around us right now. That rhetoric will reach a fever pitch in the coming months. It is my hope and my prayer that we will remain ever mindful of all that we don't know and ever humbled by the amazing saving grace God offers us in Jesus Christ. It is also my hope and prayer that this hymn will be our constant plea and persistent earworm in here and out there as we live and serve and love in God's beloved and battered world:

⁴ Proverbs 9:10, NRSVue

Be THOU our vision...

be THOU our wisdom and THOU our true word...

first in our hearts, now and always.

In the name of the only wise God⁵, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ From the closing of Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 16:27)