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Pentecost 25B, Reformation
Peace, Seattle
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Jeremiah 31:7-9, Mark 10:46-52

FROM NO WAY TO NEW WAY

Brother Martin called it "The little book of comfort." Four chapters that feel like an oasis in the otherwise withering desert landscape which is the book of the prophet Jeremiah.

And the upshot of those four chapters?
- The 50 years of Babylonian captivity would end, wounds would be healed, fortunes restored,
- God would change hats from judge to doting father and lead the exiled people home.

This morning, three verses give us a close-up view of that oasis. And what do we see?
- God on a search to all points of the compass, sifting through the nations like a garage-sale veteran hunting for treasure, gathering the scattered remnants of his disbursed people.

And who qualifies as treasure here? Four kinds of folk are mentioned.
- The blind.
- The lame.
- Pregnant women.
- And those about to give birth.

A collection of the community's most vulnerable ones. The folk who, before exile, were never given the time of day, much less a place at the head of the parade!

For before the exile, God's law decreed that no one who was blind or lame or had some other impediment that made them less than perfect would be allowed to come into the presence of God.[1]

But *here* in this new place, at this new time, the prophet tells us, these last and least, these most vulnerable ones, will be in the front as God leads the procession back home.

See the shift? The prophet forecasts a fundamental change in God's strategy for the human race.

The part that particularly catches my attention is the language about pregnant women and those about to give birth, and I guess that's because we have had and continue to have several women in that category these days!

Three births in the course of three months, last spring—Will, Anneliese, Brennan—and now three more expected births in coming months.

Nothing conveys hope within a community quite like the expectation and birth of a new baby. Think for a moment of the hopes that are incubated in your heart when you or someone close to you is expecting a child.

The hope that Jeremiah is getting at here, I think, is that God is preparing to open up the future in a way that is at once familiar and at the same time new and fresh and unprecedented.

[1] "No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. [18]For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, [19]or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, [20]or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles." [Leviticus 21:13-23, NRSV]

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In recent months a number of people have commented to me about the number of kids coming up for the children's message. In the absence of children, congregations struggle with what the future will mean; but when we see the kids, and welcome new babies, we breathe a collective sigh of relief; we know the church has a future.

The pregnant language caught my eye today, but the gospel picks up on another cue from Jeremiah, the language around blindness and sight.

Over the past two months we have been hearing readings from the central section of Mark's gospel—the journey section, chapters 8-10—as we've followed Jesus on his journey from Caesarea Philippi in the north, to the city of Jerusalem in the south.

This journey section in Mark is framed with the healings of two blind men:
The blind man at Bethsaida (8:22ff) and blind Bartimaeus who we meet today.

In between these two stories Jesus foretells his death and resurrection three times and each time his disciples respond to that foretelling they demonstrate their ignorance of where this journey is taking them.

- When Jesus frames his role as suffering servant, Peter rebukes him.
- When Jesus speaks of the betrayal and rejection, the disciples argue over who is the greatest.
- When Jesus goes into detail about the humiliation and death that await him in Jerusalem, James and John file their applications for positions of power.

In spite of everything they've heard and seen the disciples remain spiritually blind.
And in contrast, the two men who are physically blind come to see.

Today's story takes place in Jericho. Jericho was the last stop for pilgrims en route to the city of David; the road out of town and the final fifteen-mile leg of the pilgrim's journey, would have been the standard beat for much of that city's beggar population. And odds were good that pilgrims would have both the mood and the means to give alms.

It is here that Jesus, the disciples, and a great crowd of pilgrims meet Bartimaeus, the destitute blind man sitting on the side of the road.

How Bartimaeus knew about Jesus Mark doesn't say, but something deep in him calls out shouting, JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME!

And in spite of the fact that people keep trying to shut him up, he keeps on shouting ever more loudly until Jesus finally stops and tells his disciples: **CALL HIM HERE.**

When Bartimaeus comes, Jesus asks him a question:
WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU? In other words, **what is your deepest desire?**
James and John wanted positions of power and the perks that go with it.

But blind Bartimaeus wants his vision restored...he wants to see. Thanks to Jesus, he gets what he desires. And, immediately, having regained his sight, he follows Jesus on the way.

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Bartimaeus is no longer by the side of the road, he is on the road for he has encountered the way, the truth, and the life. The future, God's future, is open, and he will be among the last who will be first.

Why are we here this Reformation Sunday? Are we not here, at least in part, because we, too, want to meet Jesus, to be healed of what ails us, to have our eyes opened, to be on the Way?

Sisters and brothers, wherever we find ourselves along the path of life, whatever shape our faith takes, Jesus meets us there.

He restores our vision, reorients our compass, re-formulates our community, and gives us bread for the journey so that, transformed by his self-giving, we might become his body in the world.

Like Bartimaeus don't always know exactly where we're going, but we know we don't journey alone, for we go with each other, and we go with our Lord. Amen.

PRAYER:
Lord God, you have called your servant to ventures of which we cannot see the ending
Through paths untrodden and perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage. Knowing that your hand is leading us, your love is support us and your Spirit is guiding us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.