

Don't let them keep you blind

A sermon on John 9:1-41 & Psalm 23 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 March 2023

© LaughingBird.net

Message

There are forces conspiring to keep us in the dark, but Jesus opens our eyes so that we can see that our deepest yearnings are satisfied only in God.

Sermon

Do you ever feel like the proverbial mushroom; kept in the dark and fed nothing but bullshit? There may be good reasons for that, and not just that you're a bit paranoid. Even if you are a bit paranoid, it doesn't mean that there isn't a conspiracy to keep you in the dark! There are some very powerful forces at work in the world, and often it is in their best interests to treat us like mushrooms. Sometimes we become aware of what they are doing, but still struggle to get our eyes open and see the truth.

It has been proven repeatedly that the powerful tobacco industry deliberately sought to conceal evidence about the harm their products cause. There seems to be evidence emerging that the manufactured stone bench top industry has been doing the same as their workers have been dying. As Australia stumbles from one ill-fated submarine purchase contract to another, you can be sure that our political leaders continue to keep us in the dark over just what's going on.

It is also pretty obvious that one of the main reasons why Australia's immigration detention centres are located in obscure remote or off-shore locations is to make it harder for us to see them and to see what goes on in them and who's locked up in them. Making it easy for the public to see children peering out through the barbed wire and razor ribbon would not be conducive to maintaining support for government policy. Powerful vested interests devise and implement strategies to keep us in the dark.

Among the truths about which there is an effort to keep us in the dark are some of the most important truths about what life is all about and where we can find the source of true fulfilment and purpose; where we can find the things which will begin to satisfy our deepest hungers and hopes. There are powerful vested interests who need to keep us in the dark about this because not only can they not commodify and sell the real answers, but there are entire industries, in fact entire economies, built on keeping us hungry and unsatisfied and ready to spend spend spend in an effort to keep our hunger pangs at bay.

Our gospel reading tonight gave us a fascinating story of the lengths to which they will go to keep us in the dark, and the furious rage that is evoked when the lights go on for someone, when their eyes are opened and they begin to see what is really going on. Such enlightenment, such an alternative view of who's in charge and where the truth comes from cannot be tolerated, and the forces of darkness strike back with naked hostility.

We'll come back to that though, because we don't often focus on the psalm in our preaching, and I reckon that the psalm provides us with some fascinating material to reflect on all this with too. The Lord is my shepherd. The twenty third psalm is, surely, the best known passage in the whole Bible. And like most of the really well known passages, its very familiarity strips it of any surprise value and it just kind of slides through our consciousness almost unheard.

Perhaps the huge popularity of this psalm is due to the way it gives expression, so beautifully and succinctly, to our deepest yearnings. Who would not swoon at the thought of our spirits being revived as we lay restfully on lush grass surrounded by ferns beside a crystal clear stream? After a week full of unpaid overtime and oppressive deadlines, such an image can reduce many people to tears.

In a world of uncertainty with too many options and more information than we can process, who doesn't long for a trustworthy guide who can show us the sure paths and whose presence takes away fear even in the dark and threatening places?

And doesn't your stomach start rumbling at the thought of a gracious host welcoming us to a banquet table, laden with the finest fruits, carefully prepared delicacies of every kind, and wine waiters who never let your glass run empty?

How much time do we spend feeling that we're running harder and harder, always pursued by demands and stresses and pressures? Don't we crave the day when all that pursues us is kindness and faithful love – pursuers to whom we could gladly surrender and take our rest as a guest of the one who lovingly revives our souls?

Even our less than admirable wishes get a mention: the desire to see our enemies – those who scoffed at us, insulted us, opposed us – to see the looks on their faces as they see us vindicated and rewarded for our faithfulness and endurance.

This psalm is one person's prayer of gratitude to the one in whom they found the doorway to life. It doesn't offer simplistic promises like "Go to church and all this will be yours!" but its popularity tells us that many people have, like the writer, found that it is as they journeyed into deep communion with God, as they learned to allow God to shepherd them, that they found the source of real life, of life in all its fullness, of food for our deepest hungers and hopes.

But if you turn on your television for a few hours and watch the commercials, you will see a concerted and well-resourced campaign to persuade you to look elsewhere. You will see commercial after commercial using images like those in the psalm, and variations on them, to lure us into associating various consumer products with expectations of happiness and fulfilment, with finding rest and safety and satisfaction. Advertisers are the experts at knowing how to hook into the deepest yearnings of the human soul.

Fly with us and relax in quiet luxury as we refresh your spirit.
Eat here, fresh mouth watering food, all you can eat and a bottomless coffee.
Drive this car and see how jealous your snooty neighbours will be.

They lie, of course. At best these goods and services satisfy very superficial needs. The day after our purchase we don't feel any more whole or fulfilled as human beings. One more promise has come to nothing. An itch has been scratched, and someone else has profited from it, but true satisfaction is as elusive as ever. And we remain in the dark, groping for answers, because they need us to believe that satisfaction is still within reach, just another purchase away. They cannot afford to have us all deciding that the pathway to satisfying our deepest

hungers and hopes might lie in putting an end to the orgy of consumption and investing in the treasures of the spirit which money can't buy.

That's why Jesus was such a dangerous figure. He openly proclaimed that his mission was to open the eyes of the blind and to set free those who were held captive in the darkness. No wonder they had to have him bumped off.

In the gospel story we saw what they will do when people start to have their eyes opened so that they can see the truth. Immediately there was a vicious smear campaign. They tried to discredit the man whose eyes had been opened. He was a liar and a fake they said, he was a sinner and he knew nothing. They tried to threaten his parents in order to get them to pressure him to pull his head in. And of course they tried to discredit Jesus as well. He is not from God, he is a lawbreaker, a sinner, a deceiver.

But when people have really seen the light for themselves, it is almost impossible to get them to shut up and go back to sitting in the darkness. Life in the light is too beautiful, and more than makes up for the hostility it provokes. Among the early generations of Christians, conversion was often called illumination, or enlightenment, just as it is among the Buddhists. In conversion our blindness is healed, our eyes are opened, and we see the light.

This liturgy which we participate in together each week seeks to do what Jesus was doing, to open our eyes and enable us to see clearly what is really going on. At this time of year, in this season of Lent, there is an even stronger focus on approaching Jesus and asking him to convert us, to transform us, to break us free from the powers of darkness. Historically that is because this season of Lent developed as part of the final preparation of new followers of Jesus for their baptism into the membership of the church at Easter. So in solidarity with all those who are new to this journey, whether they be in our congregation or another, we call on God to open the eyes of those who are searching and lead them out of darkness into the light of truth and love and grace.

You will notice those emphases all through our current liturgy, but perhaps especially in the intercessory prayers for ourselves and for the world that God loves that come up in a few minutes. You will notice that they focus more than usual on asking God to transform our hearts, to open our eyes, to keep us humble, to empower us to love, and to help us turn from evil and embrace the good.

These prayers have their origin in the prayerful preparation of the candidates for baptism, but this Lenten season calls us all back to them, to pray them again that this work of conversion might continue to go deeper and deeper into us, transforming us more and more in the image of Christ.

And these prayers do not shy away from this darker reality that we are talking about tonight, our ensnarement in the lies and delusions that are pushed on us constantly by the powers and empires of this world. We even break from our singing of the Lord's Prayer at the point where it asks God to deliver us from evil, and in the pause, we stare into that abyss and place ourselves prayerfully before God that our eyes might be opened to the truth and that the demonic influence of darkness might be driven out of our hearts and minds.

These prayers are prayers that are full of yearning for the light of truth to shine into our hearts, into our communities, into our world, and do the work of conversion in and through us, that the world might be set free from the powers and empires that flourish and profit from our blindness. They are prayers that are full of yearning for the day when the Lord will shepherd us all safely out of the valley of the shadow of death and into the promised land of lush pastures and still waters and sure paths and a rich banquet spread before us.

When we come together to the Lord's table in a few moments, it won't look much like a banquet spread before us to satisfy our every desire. And it isn't. But it is taste, a doorway inviting you into the real banqueting room. You can choose to go no further than the doorway and then walk away – go back to shopping for the goods and services that falsely promise the world – or you can go through the doorway and begin to have your eyes opened to the light of God.

It is no quick fix. The healed man in the story didn't immediately find his life becoming a bed of roses. In fact all hell broke loose for him for a while there. But it is only in God, with your eyes opened, that you will discover what it is you were really hungering for. Those images in the psalm are no more than windows, no more than glimpses of what fulfilment might look like. It is only on the journey into God, the journey of truth, the journey of prayer, that we will ever know what the psalmist meant about how our deepest yearnings find their answer in God and how with the Lord as our shepherd we need nothing more.