

WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

“Open my eyes, that I may see ... Open my eyes, illumine me ... Spirit Divine”

For some of us it takes a crisis to push us to glimpse the truth God has for us. To open our hearts to the steadfast love of God – the Amazing Grace of God – that really is from everlasting to everlasting.

For John Newton, author of that beloved hymn “Amazing Grace” (which we will sing together in just a few moments), the crisis that pushed him to see more clearly was a near shipwreck off the coast of Donegal, Ireland, in 1748. A violent storm had swept away a fellow crew member from the exact spot where Newton had been standing on the deck of his ship just moments before. In his fear, Newton prayed and sang and sang and prayed – the wave notes falling on his ear – the deep wells of God’s transforming love penetrating his soul.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see ...”

The song, itself, is almost a sacrament.

Do you have any idea how much God loves you? The song says. Do you have any idea how much God loves the ones who suffer most, the hymn writer says. Do you have any *idea* how much *God loves every one of us*?!

It took a crisis for John Newton’s to know, beyond a shadow of doubt, the grace of God that would always lead him home. But that moment of crisis was just the beginning of Newton’s “eye-opening” experience. Because at the time of this crisis, in his moment of awakening, John Newton was also a slave trader.

It took another six years for Newton to see more clearly the horror of this way of life. To comprehend the grace of God compelling him to a different way. To leave the slave trade altogether. But once he did, once that moment of personal insight widened to a vision of global insight, Newton wrote an eloquent, heart-breaking inside-view treatise on the repugnant conditions of the Middle Passage. And that treatise played an essential role in ending the slave trade in Britain.

“I once was blind,” Newton admits. “But now I see.”

The question for us this Sunday, at Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church and beyond, entering our second week of social distancing in response to the crisis of the novel coronavirus, is whether or not we will follow in the footsteps of John Newton in his moment of crisis and its aftermath: begging God to “open our eyes, that we may see.”

It is natural, in a crisis, to focus first and foremost on our own survival, as Newton did. To pray and sing and sing and pray for the peace that passes understanding to dwell in us richly. We can – and we should – do everything we can to help one another dwell in the deep wells of God’s transforming love penetrating our soul, through these many dangers, toils, and snares.

But I hope it does not take us six years to open our eyes more broadly to what this crisis has laid bare: wealth inequality so drastic – in a nation founded by *Christian* pilgrims! – that some of us experience “sheltering in place” as a long-term “stay-cation” while others of us literally wonder if we will have enough to eat before the virus itself takes our life.

And, on the flip side, according to space.com, satellite images have been able to verify that the dramatic shifts away from modern modes of transportation and production as a result of our “social distancing” has led to a “30% decrease in surface particulate matter over huge swaths of China” alongside “a significant reduction of nitrogen dioxide levels.” Both of which cause significant air pollution.

It is not hard, from this perspective, to imagine the coronavirus as Mother Nature “fighting back.”

Do we have eyes to see, do we have ears to hear what the coronavirus crisis has laid bare: our way of life is literally killing us!

The Rev. Lis Theoharis says the same in her March 18th article for *Sojourners Magazine*. “In the biblical tradition, she writes, “plagues expose the foundations of injustice” in a given society, in order to shake the people into action. “Plague in the Bible,” Theoharis continues, “is not a storm weathered before a return to normalcy. It’s a call to come together in new ways in order to survive. ... and rebuild on foundations of love and justice.”

We call that foundation of love and justice “The Beloved Community” in the biblical tradition. “The New Creation” in the Christian context. “The Year of God’s Favor.” The “Jubilee” in which the blind recover their sight and the oppressed are set free.

Building that foundation of love and justice is what Jesus is up to in the lesson from John’s Gospel that is before us today.

In first century Judea the only vocation for a blind man is to beg. He is poor, outcast, “deserving of his fate,” as the question the disciples ask about his guilt would suggest. At the mercy of the whims of others.

But Jesus makes a clay paste from the dust of the earth – mimicking the act of creation in the second chapter of Genesis, where God takes clay and water and breathes into the very first human – and rubs the paste on the blind man’s eyes. And the man washes – baptismal grace – and the man *sees*! And in the process, he becomes a living embodiment of “The New Creation.”

Restoring the sight of the man born blind has, in a sense, served as a “job re-training” program. He lives now without fear. Fully equipped to make his way in the world. Evidence of the reign of God drawing near: releasing those who are captive in body and soul to a way of life that is literally destroying our planet; inviting all of us to change our hearts and minds and live as if “The New Creation” were already here.

The question is ... will we join him?

For some of us it takes a crisis to push us to glimpse the truth God has for us. To open our hearts to the steadfast love of God – the Amazing Grace of God – that really is from everlasting to everlasting.

For some us it takes a crisis to see the vision of God: the foundation of love and justice; the Beloved Community; and our failure to live as the New Creation in Christ we have said we want to be.

But there is still light shining in the darkness of what this crisis has laid bare. And this darkness will not ever overcome it, as long as we continue to sing and to pray and to pray and to sing: "Open my eyes, that I may see ..."

"I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day," Jesus says, as this chapter in John's gospel draws to a close, "making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind."

May we who are lost, in the face of this novel coronavirus, know the grace of being found. And may we who have been blind have the courage to see.

Amen.