

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 2, 2011
Lessons: Deuteronomy 7:7-13 and Mark 10:46-52

WHERE I?

A year ends, and a new year begins, and this time as once in every ten, we start a new decade. Being creatures of time, we notice — even those of us who wish and perhaps pretend not to notice. We feel the cycles of measured time, especially of years because throughout each new year, we experience anniversaries of life events joyous or painful. We welcome the new year gleefully and call it happy, or at least that's the official form of New Year's celebration, and we humans are the celebrating creature, whether our jubilation is real or artificial. Animals express joy, but they do not celebrate as we do simply because the calendar says a day for celebration has come. When I fill our bird feeders, there is joy in our backyard and sometimes noisy appreciation, almost like that of the robins when the snow melts giving them puddles to splash in. A bird may sing for the rising or setting of the sun or for the urges of spring but not for a date on the calendar. Only we mark anniversaries, just as we alone measure our lives against our own expectations and those of other people. I don't believe animals can be truly optimistic or pessimistic. Their expectations rise with stimuli that suggest to them something good is coming, as with the dog that hears the can opener, but the dog will not deny pain with an optimistic outlook or refrain from pleasure to avoid future disappointment.

The trouble with sermons or any attempts to "listen for God's word to us" is that they call upon us to think about our lives in ways that crack the surface. For the new year, we put on a happy face, but God's word questions us, which I suppose is the reason some seek churches which encourage without questioning. It is tempting to want churches of optimism, of endless celebration, always seeing the bright side. Even the darkest cloud has a silver lining, and tragedy is called a blessing.

I saw a movie the other night in which a well-meaning physician tried to comfort young parents whose daughter with one of the many fatal genetic disorders was in crisis and seemed to be dying. The doctor suggested the parents see their daughter's death as a blessing because she would suffer no more. After the girl had rallied, and the doctor was able to deliver the good news that she would live, the father replied, "So, I guess we dodged that blessing." The doctor showed on his face that he got the message: do not call love's heartbreak a blessing. To give encouragement that is real, our faith must face the realities of people's lives, not gloss them over with platitudes.

The 2011 Dilbert calendar begins with Dilbert's saying, "I want my unwarranted optimism back." The trouble with sermons and any other attempts to listen for the word of God is that they are compelled to probe beneath our unwarranted optimism to find hope that is real and joy in living that is not superficial celebration. We have questions for God, not all of them polite or reverent. And God has questions for us, not all of them soothing or meant to encourage us to keep on with the ways we have been thinking and living. God's word is neither pacifier nor pep talk, and God's Spirit is not a way to get high.

Jesus asks the blind beggar Bartimaeus what seems a strange and almost stupid question: "What do you want me to do for you?" Duh! He's blind. It is not a stupid question at all but one that challenges the man to a choice. Does he really want his life changed? Is he ready to give up begging and crying out for help? Much more will be required of him if Jesus gives him the gift of sight, and Jesus respects his right to make the choice. He respects that right in us, also. It is one thing to sit by the road calling for help but quite another to be empowered to help himself and others. Which do we want?

I think it's time for me to explain the strangely stilted title I have given this sermon: "Where I?" I mean it to ask where I am in time and place. Where have I been (in my past)? Where am I now (in my present)? Where am I going, and where would I want to go if I could? Bartimaeus the blind beggar has not been going anywhere but to more days of the same, but is he willing to have his life changed? And are we?

Much of church life right now in the United States is driven by a desire to recover the past, if only in pretense. Indeed, pretense is the only way to recover the past, whether in church life or personal life. God is quite willing to help us redeem our past, not by changing the events and experiences themselves which would require magic, but by transforming their meaning for us and so changing their influence upon us. Redemption of the past requires grace not magic. Simon Peter denied Jesus three times to save his own skin as his friend and teacher was being beaten and condemned to death. How could the man live with such an act of cowardice? He could live with it only in shame, even if Jesus merely forgave him. In fact, I wonder, would forgiveness alone not just make Peter's shame even worse? But Jesus' forgiveness is no mere excuse but a real confrontation and a painful one, because it must be painful. They must go through the pain of reliving it together, but in the end, Peter's weakness and failure are transformed into the qualifications he needs for leadership. If he knew in himself only strength, faith, and success, he would not be fit to lead because he would lack empathy and compassion for those who in their own weakness fail. That's what I mean by redemption of our past.

Questions. Am I fated to life as it has been going for me? Am I bound by the choices I have made or by those which have been imposed upon me? Am I supposed to accept

whatever life does to me as somehow right for me (no matter how wrong it feels), or am I justified in protesting? The world does not like protest. The blind man's friends try to silence him so he does not annoy the teacher, Jesus. Let me suggest to you that we need to follow that man's example and annoy Jesus more. We need to ask more honest and pointed questions of God and of life. What do we want Jesus Christ to do for us? Understand, protests made to God come back to us as questions about ourselves and our own lives, but surely life is more than sameness undisturbed and faith more than acceptance of the way things are going. Bartimaeus could have asked Jesus for money and had a good day begging.

More questions. Do I really have control over my life? Our American optimism insists the answer must be, "Yes!" but that's false, and that false answer is being exploited to replace compassion with blame and so to justify both the luxury of the successful and the misery of those falling behind. Life is not all choice, and much of success is not skill at the game but the luck of the draw. Do I have such control over my life that I am to blame for everything that has gone wrong? That is the question of guilt, and the truth is mixed. Was Bartimaeus to blame for the blindness that forced him to beg? No, but Jesus offers him more than a pat on the head with assurance it's not his fault. No one wants to be pitied. Pity can be as shaming and cruel as blame.

Am I a reject? Shame. Is there no more to life than this? Disappointment. Will it (good or bad) last? Fear. Am I weird? Shame again. We hide from such questions understandably. Who wants to ask them unless there is hope and someone to share them without judgment? That's where the gospel enters. There is hope, and it is not just unwarranted optimism, but neither is it just all blessed assurance. To listen for God's word is to question God honestly which, if we persist like Bartimaeus, will open us to Jesus' question about what we want.

Where and what I have been can be changed, not in its facts but in their meaning and influence upon me and my life. *Where I am now* can be either closed or opened to God's grace. *Where I am going* is the question that emerges from other two. Will I see my life in the new light of God's love for me and, at the same time, of God's love for other people? If I will, then I will see all three "Where I?" questions transformed and find myself redirected toward life that has meaning, that matters, that is worth all the effort I must make to live it as fully as I can and all the joy I can find and share in the living of it. "Happy new year" can be a wish that is also a challenge to open our eyes and look at our lives in light of God's love for us and for all the other people around us. That possibility, that challenge, that calling, does not answer all our questions; rather it gives us better questions worth pursuing. Happy new year. Amen.