3rd Sunday in Lent

10 A. M. Worship for Sunday, March 12, 2023

First Memorial Presbyterian Church of Dover, New Jersey

***Gathering and Focusing during Prelude***

*(During which we prepare our hearts to worship God.)*

***Reading of Call to Annual Meeting* - Jeanette Felch, Clerk of Session**

 ***and One Great Hour of Sharing Reminder***

***The Call to Worship:*** **- Rachel Persenaire**

One: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

 All: **Amen.**

One: Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God.

 All: **Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.**

One: Who keeps faith forever who executes justice for the oppressed.

 All: **Who gives food to the hungry.**

One: The Lord sets the prisoners free;

 All: **The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.**

One: The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.

 All: **The Lord watches over the sojourners;**

One: He upholds the widow and the fatherless.

 All: **But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.**

One: The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations.

 All: **Praise the Lord!**

**2023 Amazing Grace Theme Verse for 3rd Sunday in Lent:**

***One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.*** *John 9:24*

***Praise Song: (See last page)* - Rachel Persenaire**

“Broken Vessels (Amazing Grace)” - Houston/Myrin

***Confession and Absolution:***

One: Jesus showed grace to the blind man and restored his sight.

 Trusting in God’s compassion and saving love,

 we confess our sins and ask his forgiveness for Jesus’ sake.

 All: **Almighty God, although we claim to see and know so much,**

 **all too often we are lost in the blindness of our sins.**

 **We follow tempting pathways instead of walking in your commandments.**

 **We act according to our own desires**

 **instead of obeying the guidance of your holy Word.**

 **Have mercy on us and forgive our sins.**

 **Open our eyes so that, by faith, we will see the wonders of your love and grace.**

One: God has had mercy on us.

 He sent his Son to be our Savior.

 The Lord and Messiah, who opened the eyes of the blind,

 came to lay down his life as the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

 I announce to you that your sins are forgiven

 in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

 All: **The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.**

***Prayer of the Day:***

One: Almighty God, we pray that by your Spirit you would grant us the clear sight of faith

 to see the wonders of your love and power in our lives.

 Through Jesus’ redeeming death, we have forgiveness and eternal life.

 As the blind man told others about the miracle that had been accomplished in his life,

 help us to witness boldly to your amazing grace

 and tell others of the hope and peace that can be theirs through faith in Jesus.

 As the man who was healed worshiped Jesus,

 we too worship Jesus as our Messiah and Lord.

 Hear our prayer and accept our praise in his holy name. Amen.

***Children’s Message*** **- Megan Berg**

***Sung Prayer for Illumination:***  - Harry D. Clarke, 1924

“Into My Heart”

Into my heart, into my heart, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus;

Come in today, come in to stay, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.

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***Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 35: 4 - 10***

Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God.

He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf leap like a deer,

 and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;

 in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;

 the unclean shall not pass over it.

It shall belong to those who walk on the way;

 even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.

No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;

 they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing;

 everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

 they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

***Gospel Lesson: According to John 9: 1 – 7, 24 - 38***

As he passed by, (Jesus) saw a man blind from birth.

And his disciples asked him,

 “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents,

 but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day;

 night is coming, when no one can work.

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva.

Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him,

 “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent).

So he went and washed and came back seeing …

So for the second time [the Pharisees] called the man who had been blind and said to him,

 “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.”

He answered, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know.

One thing I DO know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

They said to him, “What did he do to you?

How did he open your eyes?”

He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen.

Why do you want to hear it again?

Do you also want to become his disciples?”

And they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.

We know that God has spoken to Moses,

 but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”

The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing thing!

You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.

We know that God does not listen to sinners,

 but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.

Never since the world began has it been heard

 that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.

If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?”

And they cast him out.

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said,

 “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”

Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.”

He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

This is the Word of the Lord…

 All: **Thanks be to God!**

***Meditation: “Grace for the Blind”***

One: One of the longest narratives we have in the gospels

 tells us the story of a man whom Jesus healed from blindness.

 This man’s story compels us to look more closely at our own stories of blindness in fear,

 and how we too come to trust the healing grace that Jesus brings for our lives

 and for the lives of all people everywhere.

 The contrast in the story is between seeing and being blind,

 between living in the light as opposed to walking in darkness.

 When we are blind, we are mired in the darkness of our unbelief and fear.

 But believing in Jesus means seeing with eyes of faith,

 trusting his healing grace which sets us free to confess him as Lord

 over all the threats of fear and death.

 Seeing is believing.

 Jesus’ own disciples were themselves blind to the very need of the man born blind,

 focusing their attention only on his sin.

 They assumed that if he was blind,

 perhaps he or his parents did something wrong to bring about this illness.

 While WE generally don’t make that strong a connection between sickness and sin,

 nevertheless, like these disciples,

 we too often make critical judgments about other people’s struggles in life.

 We are less aware of how such critical judgments

 point only to our own blindness and sin toward others.

 This blindness is our Lenten confession.

 We are blind to the multitude of sins from what we do or from what we leave undone.

 We can only confess

 that we are blind sinners in need of God’s gracious mercy and sight.

 God is merciful to those who confess this blindness of sin,

 giving them the sight, the faith, that makes them well through Christ.

 Jesus sees this moment of encounter with a person in blindness

 not as an occasion for judgment,

 but as an occasion for shining God’s amazing grace upon those in darkness.

 The blind person did not even ask for this grace that Jesus gives.

 But he clearly does become the beneficiary of that grace.

 And as his story progresses, he will see and believe how this moment of encounter

 links him with Christ’s promise forever.

 All: **I am the man.**

One: The blind man’s first confession is to make public that he is, indeed,

 the same blind beggar who used to sit on the street.

 Luther said, on his deathbed, “We are all beggars.”

 Yet how many of us are inclined to point out

 this mortifying truth of our own spiritual poverty.

 The people before whom the man formerly blind makes his confession

 had trouble recognizing him.

 Isn’t that also our own problem?

 Our failure to recognize and accept others?

 There is so much that divides us from people.

 Fear, not faith, controls our lives and keeps us from this recognition and acceptance.

 We fail to see how so many others in our world

 live with many of the same kinds of struggles and fears that haunt our own lives.

 We are blind to all of this.

 Moreover, we cannot seem to move beyond this blindness,

 let alone have a clue as to where to find the healing that we so desperately need.

 But grace comes to us through Jesus the Christ, even without our asking,

 freeing us to confess before others the truth of our beggarly blind lives,

 and to grasp the promise that we may now stand up before others

 and confess publicly, “I am the man.”

 I am the person who has been so blind in life,

 unable to recognize anyone, even as I am unrecognizable.

 But grace has nonetheless come to my life in all the truth of my being a blind beggar.

 All:  **The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me,**

 **“Go to Siloam and wash.”**

 **Then I went and washed and received my sight.”**

One: The man now makes his confession even more clear

 to those who are still blind and still walk in darkness.

 His reason for seeing, from being called out of the darkness into the light,

 is credited to the “Man called Jesus”

 who touched his life with healing and washed away his darkness.

 They will be forever linked.

 In our own baptism, we receive this washing away of sin and guilt,

 of blindness and darkness.

 We come to this new vision that through Christ

 we may be enough to make

 not only the confession of what is already sinfully true in our own lives,

 but also the joy of faith and new life we get through Christ.

 We once walked in darkness and sin,

 but now we get to live in the newness of light and grace in Christ.

 Our lives are forever linked with Jesus the Christ.

 All: **I do not know.**

One: Seeing is believing. Seeing is trusting.

 Faith and trust means grasping the promise and grace

 that is less tangible to the naked eye.

 Where is the One who healed you?

 The man is given a forum to confess his faith,

 but in his weakness he only says what he does not know.

 But a much bolder witness will eventually be called forth from this man soon enough.

 He will face his time of trial,

 not only before the public, but before the religious authorities.

 Jesus encouraged us to pray that we may be spared this critical ordeal.

 “Save us from the time of trial.”

 But times of trial, when they come, can also be times for confessing.

 And confessing our faith means confessing what we DO know

 —that Jesus the Christ and his gospel of grace

 even become bold enough to assert that our own healed and forgiven lives

 through Christ are already living proof of God’s amazing grace.

 All: **He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.**

One: So the man who was formerly blind is brought to trial.

 When they asked for details on how the healing took place,

 the man confirmed what he had already said on public record.

 But the authorities seemed less concerned with the healing of this man

 than with the fact that his healing took place on a sabbath.

 In fact, these authorities in their blindness insisted that to be healed on a sabbath

 was an act that made Jesus a sinner in their eyes.

 But some of them were able to see and uphold the miracle of God’s grace and healing.

 Notice how this man’s testimony, as brief as it is, leads to a division of the house.

 This division is not a result of the act of this man or his healing.

 What they are divided about now

 is whether or not Jesus the Christ is an agent of God’s grace and healing.

 THEIR DIVISION IS ABOUT THE VERY GOSPEL ITSELF!

 In their blindness,

 they are afraid that their own law may be overturned by this gospel of grace.

 Indeed, they pressed the man to witness to his faith.

 “What do YOU say about him?

 It was your eyes he opened.”

 Even they notice that he and Jesus are forever linked.

 All: **He is a prophet.**

One: Saying that Jesus is a prophet is hardly the boldest confession of faith.

 Many people may affirm that Jesus was a prophet

 But he is so much more than that.

 He is the one who overcomes the blindness and darkness of our age,

 and gives us the faithful sight and grace in God’s mercy.

 As this man’s trial progresses, so will his faith deepen

 as he becomes bolder in denouncing that darkness

 and embrace more firmly the light of Christ.

 But for the moment, the trial now turns to the parents of the man.

 They ask him, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind?

 How then does he now see?”

 The parents do not even have the faith or courage of their son to face this time of trial.

 Nor do they affirm their son’s testimony.

 They say, “We know that this is our son, and that he WAS born blind;

 but we do not know how it is that now he sees,

 nor do we know who opened his eyes.

 Ask HIM; he is of age.

 He will speak for himself.”

 They lived on the fear that anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ,

 would be put out of the synagogue.

 And being cast out of religious life meant also being cast out of social life

 as a scandal.

 But their fear already leads them to deny their own son and to treat him as a scandal.

 Who wants THAT label of scandal attached to their lives?
 We will find our answer to that question very soon,

 even as the authorities again call the man who had been blind

 to testify a second time.

 They say, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.”

 The man now offers a bolder witness to his faith.

 All:  **I do not know whether he is a sinner,**

 **one thing I DO know, that though I WAS blind, now I see.**

One: Notice, now, how the scandal is now put on its head.

 The man does not denounce the scandal of his own life, that he had been blind.

 Consider that blindness as a confession of the truth of our blind sinfulness.

 But he adds, “Now I see.”

 He will not put any distance between himself and Jesus

 who is regarded as a scandalous sinner.

 Indeed, when Jesus associates with scandals like us,

 he takes that scandal of our sins upon himself as his very own.

 The cross is sometimes called a “stumbling block,”

 a “scandal” to those who are too blind to see its merits for our good.

 But Jesus accepts the curse of his death on the cross

 in order to heal the lives of all of us who are blind in our sins,

 giving us instead the grace of his healing and love.

 Jesus and the man, even in all scandal, are forever linked.

 The blind authorities cannot understand.

 They thrash about in their darkness,

 repeating questions that the man had already answered earlier.

 “What did he do to you? How did he open YOUR eyes?”

 All:  **I have told you already, and you would not listen.**

 **Why do you want to hear it again?**

 **Do you also want to become his disciples?”**

One: This confession now puts the authorities on the stand:

 testify to YOUR source, YOUR grounding.

 And so they do. “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.

 We know that God has spoken to Moses,

 but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”

 They choose the law.

 But that only leads us further to fear in the blindness of our sins.

 The law always accuses us, telling us what we are not.

 But even in his accusation, it may also point us to the gospel of grace,

 where the law is finally overcome!

 The man who has regained his sight, whose faith shines the bright light in this moment,

 stands on this solid ground of this gospel of God’s grace in Jesus the Christ,

 even as he witnesses one last time before these legalistic authorities.

 All: **Here is an astonishing thing!**

 **You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.**

 **We know that God does not listen to sinners,**

 **but he DOES listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.**

 **Never since the world began has it been heard**

 **that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.**

 **If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.**

One: The boldness of this man will not be silenced, for his answer is too good to go unspoken.

 But these blind authorities cannot see the light of his answer.

 Instead, they denounce him, just as they did Jesus, in their final judgment.

 “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us” And they cast him out.

 But even in being cast out, this man is forever linked with Jesus.

 He stands unafraid, filled with the promise of faithful sight.

 He trusts that his real appeal

 is to an authority much greater than all these secular authorities.

 His faithful appeal is to the authority of God in Jesus the Christ.

 Fear is conquered when we place our trust in Jesus and his cross.

 Indeed, this trial was never really about this man who was formerly blind,

 but about Jesus the Christ and his amazing grace.

 This grace of Christ holds this man firm.

 Christ will be with him always,

 not only in this moment, but in all the moments of his life.

 Even cast out, we are not alone,

 for Jesus was cast out upon the cross and is with us still to grace us in his mercy.

 “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man will answer.

 All:  **And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.**

One: Jesus will answer, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”

 And this man follows with his firmest confession of faith in Jesus the Christ.

 All: **Lord, I believe.**

One: Lord, I believe.

 Lord, through the faith that you have brought me from being a blind beggar

 to one who is healed in your grace.

 Lord, you have given me the courage to stand up and witness to your grace.

 Lord, you have comforted me that even when all others cast me aside and deny me,

 you are still with me.

 Lord, you have freed me now to stand with all who are cast aside in this world

 blinded by sin and fear.

 Seeing is believing.

 Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgement

 so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

 The critical authorities who founded their lives on the law

 think of themselves more nobly than they should.

 They say, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

 But Jesus responds, “If you were blind, you would not have sin.

 But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

 But confessing our darkness and blindness

 means turning to the grace of Jesus’ healing and light.

***Call for the Offering and Prayer of Dedication***

***Choir Anthem:*** “Kum-Ba-Yah” - Hopson

***Joys and Concerns***

***Prayers of and for the People and Lord’s Prayer:***

One: Almighty God… … Gracious Lord.

 All: **Have mercy on us and hear our prayer…**

One: Almighty God… … Gracious Lord.

 All: **Have mercy on us and hear our prayer…**

One: Almighty God… … Gracious Lord.

 All: **Have mercy on us and hear our prayer…**

One: Almighty God… … Gracious Lord.

 All: **Have mercy on us and hear our prayer…**

One: Amen.

 All: **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name…**

***Standing Hymn of Humility:***  - John Newton, 1779

 “Amazing Grace”

1. ***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.***

1. **‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved;**

**How precious did that grace appear The hour I first believed!**

1. **Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;**

**‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.**

1. **The Lord has promised good to me, His word my hope secures**

**He will my shield and portion be As long as life endures.**

1. **When we’ve been there ten thousand years, Bright shining as the sun.**

**We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise Than when we’d first begun.**

***Responsive Benediction:***

One: So we are always of good courage.

 All: **We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord,**

 **for we walk by faith, not by sight.**

One: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God

 and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

 All: **Amen.**

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* The majority of the liturgy is by Carol Geisler and the entirety of the Meditation is by Michael Hoy. All are ©2023 by CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS FOR THE PARISH, a division of Bayard, Inc., 1564 Fencorp Dr., Fenton, MO 630All rights reserved. Re-printed with permission granted by the purchase of “Amazing Grace” for Lent 2023.



**THE NEXT LORD’S DAY CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION WILL BE ON PALM SUNDAY APRIL 2, 2023.**

**PRAISE SONG**

**“BROKEN VESSELS (AMAZING GRACE)” -**Houston/Myrin

**Verse 1**

All these pieces
Broken and scattered
In mercy gathered
Mended and whole
Empty handed
But not forsaken
I've been set free
I've been set free

**Pre-Chorus**

Amazing grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
Oh I once was lost
But now I am found
Was blind but now I see

**Chorus**

Oh I can see You now
Oh I can see the love in Your eyes
Laying Yourself down
Raising up the broken to life

**Verse 2**

You take our failure
You take our weakness
You set Your treasure
In jars of clay
So take this heart Lord
I'll be Your vessel
The world to see Your life in me

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