

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, April 17, 2016
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Open Eyes

If I were to invite you to close your eyes now, what do you imagine might happen? I know that given the busyness of our lives – and this week beginning yesterday through next Sunday is one of the busiest non Holy Weeks for the church (especially for our choir). For myself – if I were in a relaxed state and was invited to close my eyes - I might likely fall asleep within a very short time. However, we do close our eyes often for prayer and yet, generally, I think remain awake. I have also had very powerful experiences with meditations – with my eyes closed – journeying into deep and powerful spiritual experiences.

Guided imagery is a powerful healing technique that I learned about, experienced, and eventually taught when I was working at Pathways. When I began to learn the technique, I often said that I did not see images and felt as though I was not good at guided imagery. When I was teaching the technique, I often heard many others profess that they were incapable of seeing images with their eyes closed. For myself, and later for others, I learned however, by a simple experiment. The experiment was to close my eyes and imagine a room in my home – maybe my bedroom. I was able to easily see the bedroom - the furniture that is there, the colors of the walls, the bed coverings, the clothes on the floor or neatly put away; etc. This little experiment at least shifted my attitude enough to give guided imagery a try.

Let me give one quick example of a successful guided imagery experience for me. There was a time when I was in a group meditation. The facilitator – after getting us into a relaxed state - led us through a guided imagery that invited us to go down to the river or a lake, take off our shoes and socks, sit down, and feel the cold water washing over our bare feet. She suggested that we return to normal awareness feeling refreshed by this experience. When I opened my eyes, I truly felt refreshed. A friend who was in the group, suggested to me that it was also powerful for him. So much so, that he wanted us to go down to the river and put off feet into the water for real. My great realization was that I told him I had no need to do that since I had already had the full experience of refreshment in my imagination.

I propose that we open our eyes now to the familiar Psalm 23 and maybe see it in different ways. One way is to think of it as a most powerful guided imagery. As I wrote in the introduction to today's Old Testament text from Psalm 23, we recognize this psalm of comfort from its dominant use in funeral services. Through the centuries that it has been read, people throughout the ages have received great comfort by its words. In the more familiar King James Version, we recall verse 4:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” In the Inclusive Language version, verse 4

reads: *“Even if I’m surrounded by shadows of Death, I fear no danger, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff – they give me courage.”*

However, I suggest to you that there is more power in the Psalm than comfort alone. I believe, in some ways, because of its familiarity, we tend to shut our eyes to deeper meaning. Also, as mentioned in the introduction to scripture that Donella Read, some commentators even see Psalm 23 as having political meaning. It was not unusual for early “followers of the Way” to say Jesus Christ is my shepherd, and not whoever was the political ruler of the day. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want can be understood as a statement of protest.

Two words of this Psalm that vary in the two Biblical translations that I have referenced – the familiar King James Version and the less familiar Inclusive Language version that we have read today – strike me as important in understanding a deeper meaning for Psalm 23. In the Inclusive Language version, the first significant word is the substitution of the word danger for evil. The second is the substitution of the word courage for comfort. These slight differing interpretations highlight for me that the comforting and encouraging words – that God is with us – apply more universally in life and not just at times when we grieve the loss of loved ones.

I also have some difficulty with the use of the word evil since it seems to imply – and has been used throughout much of Christian history - to refer to a cosmic battle between God and Satan or between forces of good and evil. I prefer the use of the word danger in the Inclusive language version. It implies our need to be vigilant and to turn to God for God’s rod and God’s staff in all the dangers we face in life – the danger of the illness of depression; the danger of other chronic or life-threatening illnesses; the danger of temptation toward lust, greed or covetousness; or the danger of anything else that keeps us from living as God intended us to live; or anything else that leads us away from God presence; or anything else that inhibits us from being a follower of Jesus in our lives today.

The use of the word courage also implies something – to me – possibly of greater use than the word comfort. Yes, there are times of grief and other times of despair or discouragement, when our greatest need may be words of comfort. However, courage that comes from having our eyes open to the loving presence of God empowers us to grow in our lives, to overcome challenges, and to move even closer to a right relationship with our God who loves us unconditionally.

The title for this sermon: “Open Eyes”, actually came from today’s New Testament text. I was struck by the detailed description of the miracle performed by Peter. Hear again the description of Peter’s raising Tabitha from the dead. First we are told that he has those who gathered around Tabitha to leave the room. He then began to pray. As he was praying Tabitha opened her eyes. We are told that – with her eyes open – she now saw Peter. After seeing Peter, she sat up. Peter gave her his hand and helped her to get up. Peter called for the saints and widows who had left the room to return and, finally, he showed her to be alive.

I found myself pondering what it means that Tabitha opened her eyes. What if she had not chosen to open them? Would Peter have forced her eyes open? What if she had not seen Peter, would she have sat up? What if she had not sat up, would Peter have given her his hand to get up? All of this implies to me that the author of the Book of Acts is implying that Tabitha, in some way, seems to be an active participant in her miraculous resurrection. It is also interesting to note the role that prayer played. Commentators note that Peter did not call out in the name of Jesus that Tabitha be raised from the dead. He knelt and he prayed. Even the statement, “He showed her to be alive” seems to not be calling attention to himself as a miracle worker.

Another eye-opening aspect of these verses is the role of women in the early church. Biblical Commentator Stephen D. Jones, says: *“Tabitha was a beloved saint. Her ministry was apparently to serve among the widows, making them tunics and other articles of clothing, as she supported them with her love and devotion. ‘She was devoted to good works and acts of charity’ (v. 36b). The women in this text do not seem to be professional mourners called in to weep over the loss of a stranger. They are crying over the loss of a beloved friend, a saintly and charitable leader. The fact that we are told her Aramaic name (as she was likely known within the faith community) and her Greek name (as she may have been known in the wider community) may suggest that her good works and acts of charity were widely and publicly practiced.”*¹

Jones goes on to suggest that the account of resurrection speaks powerfully to us today. He says: *“Christians today are more aware than ever of the power of holistic healing—the intersection of prayer, hopeful attitude, and the resources of medicine. We are more aware than ever that no one should face disease alone. Prayer partners and spiritual advocates can support us, complementing medical treatment. Communities are powerful healing partners in helping us overcome illness and brokenness. This was true for Tabitha, and it remains true for us today.”*²

Even though we learned from guided imagery that there is much to see with our eyes closed, with eyes open to the metaphorical message of our texts, there is even to deeper meaning to see. Our text provide us with a model for ministry here at Edina Morningside Church as we continue along in our Interim Ministry Time and as you look forward to living into your Mission and Vision with a new settled Pastor. Yes, we are called to comfort, but we are also called to empower and encourage people to be transformed when they are faced with dangers and challenges. We are called to have our eyes open – to know that God is with us in any danger that we face - and not to limit God’s power to heal, to resurrect and to guide us into a future as followers of Jesus in our community and in a world of need. May it be so. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.