

04-06-2025 Words of Worship

Morning Prayer - Gracious and loving God, we bow this morning with hearts and minds that are full. There are lots of moving parts in our lives. And so, we come, wanting and needing a space in which we can set it all down for a bit, breathe deeply and be rejuvenated. We thank you for this place, for this congregation, for your love and presence with us.

As we worship, help us be attentive to the ways we read and understand the words and the stories within the pages of the Bible. Help us to dig deeply, to read holistically, to remove whatever's keeping us from seeing your truths and to lean into the challenges you have for us through Mitch's message this morning. Bless him as he preaches and shares your word for us.

We pray for our elders, those whose shoulders we stand on in our faith and our lives. We thank you, God, for the ways they've guided and taught us and we ask for your care and presence with them through the aging process. Give them grace and peace.

We pray also for our students who are learning and working hard to gather the tools and skills that they need. We pray for their parents, their teachers, coaches and others who guide them.

O God, we pray especially, this morning for Antonina, Vova, Sasha and Max as they navigate the current confusion and frustration. Be with their fellow Ukrainians – wherever they may be, as the future of their country is so fragile.

We pray for those who are, again, experiencing the results of severe storms, in the Midwest and the south where there's been flooding, power outages and people have been killed and injured. Be with those folks as they try to put their lives back together again.

We pray for leaders – those who currently hold positions of power in this world. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers. We pray also for those who are leading movements of people who want to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly – in our churches, our communities, our state, our nation and throughout this world. Amen.

Offering prayer – To you who give abundantly, all that we need, we return a portion with grateful hearts. We pray your blessing on these and all the gifts we give in your honor. Amen.

Benediction – May our eyes and ears be opened to see and hear God's truth amidst the clamor. May our mouths and hearts be opened to share God's love amidst the fear. I invite you – just for today – to be seated and quiet as Marcia plays.

Christ Collides with Our Blinders – Mitch Stutzman

Jesus predicts his death and resurrection

³¹ Jesus took the Twelve aside and said, "Look, we're going up to Jerusalem, and everything written about the Human One^[a] by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² He will be handed over to the Gentiles. He will be ridiculed, mistreated, and spit on. ³³ After torturing him, they will kill him. On the third day, he will rise

up.”³⁴ But the Twelve understood none of these words. The meaning of this message was hidden from them and they didn’t grasp what he was saying.

A blind man is healed

³⁵ As Jesus came to Jericho, a certain blind man was sitting beside the road begging. ³⁶ When the man heard the crowd passing by, he asked what was happening. ³⁷ They told him, “Jesus the Nazarene is passing by.”

³⁸ The blind man shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy.” ³⁹ Those leading the procession scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, “Son of David, show me mercy.”

⁴⁰ Jesus stopped and called for the man to be brought to him. When he was present Jesus asked, ⁴¹ “What do you want me to do for you?”

He said, “Lord, I want to see.”

⁴² Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight! Your faith has healed you.” ⁴³ At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they praised God too.

A rich tax collector

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. ² A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn’t because of the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today.” ⁶ So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

⁷ Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

⁸ Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.”

⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ The Human One ^[b] came to seek and save the lost.”

Christ Collides With Our Blinders – Mitch Stutzman

April 6, 2025 – Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church

I grew up in Indiana Amish Country. We had a lot of buggy traffic filling the county roads and traveling the shoulders of major highways. The buggies in Indiana are all black boxy buggies. Some Amish groups have buggies with rounded tops, some communities require an open carriage with no roof at all, some groups have grey buggies instead of black, there is an Amish community in central Pennsylvania that has bright yellow buggies...But all of these communities have horses. The volume of horse drawn vehicles in the community I grew up in means I got to see a lot of equipment that people use with horses. Does anyone know what this is (hold up horse blinders or share a picture). These are horse blinders, or some call them blinkers.

These blinders serve an important purpose when you are driving a horse. Blinders keep a horse focused, they prevent the horse from getting spooked, and depending on the task they can protect the horses eyes. Horses are big and powerful animals. But big and powerful as they are, *wild* horses are prey animals. They are not terribly confident animals by nature. When a horse pulls a buggy, it needs to be focused. It can be dangerous for

the animal and for passengers for a horse to get spooked by a passing car, or people on a sidewalk, or even an unexpected shadow alongside the road. A horse can get unpredictable when scared. And proximity to a scared 1000 pound animal is not ideal.

So, as a measure of safety and to keep the horse comfortable, horses will wear these blinders. In doing so they stay focused and avoid getting scared. Blinders restrict the field of vision for the horse and help make it possible for the horse to pull a buggy, or to work in the field. Blinders are a good, useful, and important tool that keep us (and our horses) safe.

Today we are exploring a grouping of three stories in the Gospel of Luke. Our Bibles have multiple gospel accounts. Each one effectively tells the same story; but each has a slightly different emphasis. Luke reveals one of his aims in the very opening of his book.

To paraphrase, Luke says that his intention is to write an *orderly* account about the things that have been *fulfilled*. So, from the outset we know that Luke's goal is to communicate, through his way of telling the story, how prophecy was fulfilled and how God has remained faithful to the promises made.

Luke is a gifted storyteller and uses some expert composition to add meaning and value to his account. The section of the book that we are in today are stories from the road. Stories of the teachings and events as Jesus and his followers are moving toward Jerusalem where the story culminates.

The first of the three short stories that we hear today is Jesus visiting with just the 12 disciples. This section of the scripture signals an important transition point in Luke's story. There is another place in Luke's narrative where Jesus tells of what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. That was back in Chapter 9, at the beginning of the "stories on the road" section. And here, at the end of that section, we see it again. Whenever we hear echoes or see bookends like this that frame a section of teaching, it is worth paying attention to.

Jesus tells his disciples 3 times, that he is going to die. He cites the prophets and speaks of the fulfillment of what has been written. And twice, once in chapter 9 and now here (the bookends of the on the road section), it says that his disciples didn't understand.

For whatever reason, these disciples do not seem to get it. But I can't really blame them. Maybe this lack of awareness is because of a limited field of vision. When you think that you are on the winning team and you have a specific idea of what "winning" looks like, it is hard to think of anything else. Maybe, the disciples chose to put on their blinders and thought "Let's keep ourselves focused on this new Kingdom Jesus is talking about, let's stay focused on winning. Let's put on these blinders because that shadow over there, seems a little spooky and I get unpredictable when I am scared."

Next, we hear two more stories, one of a blind man begging outside the gate of Jericho, and the story of Zacchaeus. We may be more aware of Zacchaeus thanks to a little song that you may have heard if you grew up in Sunday School. Perhaps we don't know as much about the blind man outside the city gate. But I think we should consider these two stories together, as a unit.

In the same way I have been pointing to other storytelling tools that Luke uses, pairing characters or pairing stories together is another tool that he uses often. If you hear an echo, it's worth paying attention to. You will often see couplets throughout Luke's writing. One of these pairs of stories that we find in Luke's gospel is this beggar and Zacchaeus.

I want to pause here for a moment. I want to acknowledge the complexity that is held in stories related to persons who are disabled throughout scripture. The church has a complicated history with disability and ableism, and it is in part because of how we read scripture. Our views have been shaped around how we look at these narratives of people who are blind or otherwise disabled and think that these people are broken or incomplete because of their disability. That reading has created and continues to create harm in church spaces. We should be attentive to the ways that we talk about disability in the church. The very title of this message or the idea of Christ colliding with and confronting our “blindness” is in itself a slippery slope, that could potentially reinforce an unhelpful narrative and moral judgement that people who are blind are somehow “less than” or “other.” We could spend all our time just talking about disability theology and our role as church in that. But for now, let’s just be attentive to how we carry these stories.

Our text today is happening very close to the end of Jesus’s earthly life and ministry. This walk through Jericho is just another one of the many towns along the road that Jesus and his disciples walked through, teaching and preaching.

But there is something different about their experience in Jericho as compared to the other places. Jesus isn’t stopping to teach or to tell parables. In fact, these two men are the only people we know that Jesus talked to in Jericho: a blind man begging near the city and Zacchaeus.

Jesus’s fame had spread to Jericho and a crowd was present to greet him when he came near the city. The crowd that greeted him would likely have wanted to extend hospitality to Jesus and his disciples; providing food and lodging for the night, as was customary for their culture.

The crowd that was present to welcome Jesus to the city is the crowd that the blind man hears and asks, “what is going on?” When he hears that Jesus the Nazarene is passing by he calls out “Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!” While this man would not have had status in his cultural setting, it is worth noting that he served an important purpose in the community.

For those that had resources, there was an expectation that they give alms to the poor. An expectation that they would be charitable to those that need it. So it would have been customary for the folks that need support to sit in prominent locations and make a spectacle of themselves so people could give charitably as was expected through the law and through cultural norms.

The crowd tries to silence this shouting man, but Jesus stops and asks for the man to be brought forward to him. And Jesus asks a rather silly question. The man says, have mercy on me. And Jesus says, “What do you want me to do?” Well, isn’t it obvious, Jesus? He wants to be able to see! Well maybe it is not so simple. Persons who were disabled like this man, would have made their living off charity. They would not have been educated, they would not have been trained in a trade, they relied solely on the support of others.

By this man suddenly being able to see, that means his livelihood disappears. He no longer will be able to sustain himself through charitable giving from the community. He is going to have to go get a job, and that is gonna be tricky at this stage. Is he ready to accept his new responsibilities if he is given sight? But he does agree and is made able to see. A radical transformation for this man. One that affects every area of his life.

Consider the reaction of the crowd in this story: They had tried to silence this man, to keep him in his place, the place that had been defined and prescribed. This community had systematically marginalized this man, they worked to keep the status quo. They put on their blinders, stayed focused on what was ahead and didn’t bother questioning whether anything should be different. “He is blind, this is the role he has in our community, just sit down and be quiet.” This crowd is then ordered by Jesus to usher this man to him.

In this story, Jesus offers grace to the oppressed. This man was oppressed and kept down by the system but experienced restoration, and then what happened? When Jesus offers grace to the oppressed the community celebrates! The man and the crowd all follow Jesus, praising God. When Jesus extends grace to the oppressed

there is celebration. Maybe because the crowd saw themselves as oppressed in their own political system. If Jesus is on the side of the oppressed that means he is on my side! But what happens when Jesus offers grace to the oppressor? That's what happens next.

The other half of our duo: Zacchaeus.

The text quickly points out that Jesus was "passing through" Jericho. This intention from Jesus to simply pass through is a signal to the crowd that he is not going to be spending time with them. His goal is to keep moving; he won't be spending the night or eating at the banquet they probably prepared.

The crowd is likely disappointed but chooses to walk alongside Jesus for as long as they can, hoping to gain whatever wisdom they can during his short visit. We then meet Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who was wealthy.

Tax collectors were not the most popular folks. Tax collectors were collaborators with the Roman Empire. They were the oppressors not the oppressed. This line of work certainly does not make Zacchaeus a popular or respected person among the people of Jericho. He is a marginalized person in his community but for way different reasons.

But Zacchaeus displays a genuine desire to see Jesus. "...but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd." The blind man was able to get an audience with Jesus even though there was a crowd. But here, in contrast, Luke tells us this story that uses the same framework of one man in a crowd who wants to see Jesus. But this time it unfolds very differently.

"So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way." In his book "Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes," Kenneth Bailey explores Middle Eastern social and cultural impacts of actions throughout scripture. I appreciate his insights into Zacchaeus. First: "He ran ahead." Bailey shares that a Middle Eastern man at the time would never have been caught running. Bailey also writes, "Furthermore, powerful, rich men do not climb trees."

Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore-fig tree. The sycamore-fig has large low branches, making it easy to climb. The tree has dense broad leaves which make it easy to hide in. Due to the low sprawling branches of the tree, they were required to be planted a certain distance from town so they would not interfere with any of the structures inside the city walls.

We know that Zacchaeus ran far enough ahead to make it some distance out of town and climbed a tree. "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'"

In the first story, the blind man is doing everything he can to be noticed. Here, Zachaeus has gone pretty far out of his way to stay hidden. Unlike the beggar man who called out to Jesus, here Jesus calls out to this man.

Culturally, at the time, the people of Jericho would have wanted to extend hospitality to Jesus. And Jesus had intended to keep right on moving. But Jesus, already out of town, stops and calls Zacchaeus out of the tree and invites himself to his house. But "all the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'"

Jesus had just politely refused the hospitality offered by the devout Jews in town and has now invited himself to Zacchaeus's house. This man, who has abused his community and his fellow Jews, this oppressor, is now going to play host to the messiah? Honestly, I might have grumbled a little bit too. What is Jesus doing?! This doesn't make sense. This isn't what winning looks like.

I imagine that the next verse picks up after the meal had been eaten and after they had sat together at the table for a bit. Zacchaeus stood up and said to Jesus, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." A radical transformation for this man. One that affects every area of his life.

Jesus responds to him saying: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. "...this man, too, is a son of Abraham." Zacchaeus was a Jewish man but had been separated from his community because of the line of work he was in. He was an outcast. But the words that Jesus speaks to him are words of restoration. Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham. This is of course about his soul and his salvation, but it also is a statement that provides restoration of community for Zacchaeus. Jesus's statement means that Zacchaeus is not just another tax collector, another sinner, but that he is a "real Jew" again.

This duo, the beggar and Zacchaeus; both marginalized by their community. One who wanted to see and be seen and one who wanted to see and stay hidden. Both experienced a radical transformation. One gets to celebrate alongside his community, the other while restored does not experience the same welcome. When grace is offered to the oppressed, we celebrate. When grace is offered to our oppressor, we have different feelings about that. I don't know exactly what to do with that.

It is much easier to put my blinder's on. It is easier, more comfortable, for me to stay focused on this little part that I might be able to understand. If I start opening up to the possibility that Jesus is here for everyone, that Jesus is ready to extend grace even to my oppressor...that makes me feel uncertain. But Jesus is constantly extending an invitation for us to expand our field of vision. To open ourselves to the possibilities that come with the radical upside-down kingdom.

But these blinders keep me safe! I can't put these down, I might be spooked by what all I see, and I can get unpredictable when I am scared!

The difference between us and a horse as it relates to these blinders, is nobody is putting these on us, we put these on ourselves. We like the safety and security that it can provide. We are not interested (ok, I am not always interested) in being confronted by the radical grace of Jesus. It is much more comfortable to stay in my lane, to stay committed to the things I KNOW are true. This is how things are supposed to be, it is clear, this is what I can control, look right here don't look away!

The crowd's greed for Jesus's attention blinded them to the grace that Jesus was prepared to pour out on both the beggar and on Zacchaeus. The crowd had the opportunity to be in the presence of and participate in the transforming power of Jesus's grace. But like other crowds from the scriptures who considered themselves devout, they let their understanding of the way things "should be" separate them from the moment that was taking place right in front of them. They tried to silence the beggar, and they were too busy grumbling about Jesus spending his time with a sinner... to recognize what was happening.

We should be actively searching for the moments of transformation that happen around us. We should reframe our thinking to become more present in our own lives and to take off these blinders that we put on; the things we have placed in our lives to limit ourselves and our prophetic vision. We need to constantly work to open ourselves to witness Christ's transforming power that is at work in our homes, in our church, in our communities, and in our world.

That narrow field of vision, I don't know if that's what Jesus has in mind for us. Horses need blinders when they are being driven. But horses don't need blinders when they are being led. So, what if we let Jesus lead?

Jesus leads us into something different. Jesus says, "You have been so focused here that you missed this over here!" What might we be missing as we navigate this life because we covered it up, limited our own field of vision..? What radical acts of love and grace are we missing because the safety of our blinders is a comfort to us?

To paraphrase reflections from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "God's grace is free but it isn't cheap." Jesus is ready to pour out God's grace on everyone, the oppressed and the oppressor. But to receive that grace, it will take radical change and risk. It is free but it isn't cheap. And for us that may mean taking off our blinders, and taking a look around, letting Jesus lead, and realizing that the invitation to join in God's mission in the world has been right here the whole time.

What are we missing? Let's take off our blinders and lean into the prophetic vision that God has for this world, and find our place in the work. Amen.

Commentaries Consulted:

Bailey, Kenneth E. (2008). *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

Shertz, Mary H. (2023). *Luke*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press.