

PROVERBS 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

¹A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.

²The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

⁹Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

²³for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

MARK 7:31-37

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

SERMON

A man found a dusty old oil lamp one day and he rubbed it with his sleeve to polish it. Out popped a genie, who of course offered him three wishes. The man immediately made his first wish, "I wish that

everyone I meet would love me!” And poof! The Genie turned him into bar of chocolate.

Or, did you hear the one about the woman who found a lamp, and the genie who offered her three wishes? She wished for a million bucks. Poof! The Genie told her to look out her window, and there, as far as the eye could see, was an unending herd of male deer.

Of course the moral of the story with Genie jokes is “be careful what you wish for.” Because genies are notoriously literal in their interpretations.

This weekend, John and I started watching the BBC series “Human Planet.” It’s excellent, and you should all go check it out from the Milan Library once I return it, but it’s also turned out to be my own “be careful what you wish for” moment.

Each episode shows beautiful video footage and tells fascinating stories about people who live in all sorts of different environments. The people of no nationality who spend their whole lives living on boats. The women who trek three days across the desert in order to find a 1 meter square well. They navigate by the number and shape of the dunes, and they’ve been doing this for so long, they can read the vast expanse of sand like a map. It’s unbelievable. The 16-year-old Kazak boy who climbs down a cliff to steal a baby eagle, which he then trains to hunt with him. Six months later, you see the boy and his full grown eagle hunt a Mongolian Fox, as the eagle soars over these huge, high mountains, swooping down to capture the fox. It’s a stunning film. But, at the same time, it’s unsettling.

Because again and again, as a viewer, I'm confronted with whole communities of people who live on less than \$2 a day. The boy who treks miles each day to water his cattle, knowing that if the elephants make it to the lake first, he and his cattle may in fact be at risk of death by dehydration, his family left with no source of income or support. The divers who use an air compressor to provide them with oxygen while they dive to harvest the sweet little red fish I've seen for sale in restaurants here in the United States. Their job is very risky, many of the divers get the bends every time they go down, and they get paid less per week than a single one of those fish dishes costs a diner here in the US. The elderly people high in the Himalayas, exposed to high UV radiation, who have gone blind due to early cataracts. A completely treatable condition, one for which my own parents have had surgery.

It's wonderful to see the myriad ways people have adapted to live in every corner of our planet, and yet it's challenging for me to watch people literally on the knife's edge of starvation from the comfort of my own couch, as I chow down on peanut butter m&ms. It makes me feel uncomfortable and a little guilty and morally stressed. I want to know about how people around the world live, but I should be careful what I wish for, because as an American citizen living comfortably above the poverty line, I'm in the global elite when it comes to wealth, privilege, and ease. I have clean, running water, and it comes out of multiple sinks! I can control the climate of my house. My children have plenty to eat, and I don't worry about them suffering from malnutrition. But those are real concerns, of real people, on our planet. Right now.

That tagline, “be careful what you wish for,” could probably be stuck across the front of the Bible, as well. Not because Jesus is so tricky and literal, but because when Jesus does what people ask him to do, it's often more than they bargained for. I think God has a habit of surprising us in this way, and it's not always pleasant.

Jesus, as we well know, was in the business of healing people. He wandered around, causing the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the mute to talk. He brought people back from death. And in each of these cases, there's something to be learned in the act of healing. Compassion, gratitude, mercy. But, by the same turn, many of Jesus' healings throughout scripture bring with them the cautionary tale of “be careful what you wish for.” Because the fact is, when you've been given a gift of sight or speech or hearing, it asks something from you in return. Once your eyes have been opened, you can't stop seeing the world around you as it is, not as you imagined it to be. And once you have a voice, you'll be asked to use it. And, by and large, these are really wonderful gifts Jesus gives. No one would say it's a bad thing to have your eyes opened or your ears unstopped.

When people have their sight or hearing restored today, it's actually really common for them to have a few months when they just want to go back to being deaf or blind. The additional sense is overwhelming to their system, and it's hard to adjust. Often, a psychologist will follow up with patients for a season after their surgery, to help them adjust to seeing or hearing the world in new and challenging ways. We should be careful what we wish for. Often, what we want is a good thing, like sight, but we're unprepared to deal with the unexpected challenges that come with fully seeing.

And this is a prayer we often pray, there are songs in our tradition that sing about “open the eyes of our hearts, Lord.” Or we may pray a prayer along the lines of, “help us to see others as you see them, God.” Even in the Lord’s Prayer: “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” All over the place, we’re always asking God to soften our hearts, open our eyes, help us to see the world as God sees it, be a part of the kingdom God is bringing. And I think we should be careful what we wish for. Because Jesus is in the business of opening our eyes and clearing out our ears. Of allowing us to see this world as God sees it. And then, once we see it, we have a responsibility to do something.

This week was hard for me. I had moments watching Human Planet or reading through news stories where I was overwhelmed by what my eyes were seeing. Photos of refugees from Syria, of people trapped behind fences, struggling to get on trains, walking along highways, parents bereft of their children, families lost at sea. Those images were terrible and brutal to see, and in seeing them, I now bear some responsibility to respond. To pray, to live more simply so that I have funds to donate to organizations doing good work to help, to make their stories are heard.

And yet, I also had these beautiful moments of seeing things for the first time, and it was wonderful. On that film, Human Planet, there was an ophthalmologist from Katmandu. He has developed his own procedure and manufactures synthetic eye lenses, and then thanks to the donations of others, he is able to travel high into the Himalayan mountains and provide cataract surgery for whole communities of people who have lost their sight. In a few hours time, he is able to literally restore sight to the blind through a

commonplace procedure. Watching a woman who had been blind for over three years suddenly see again, it was a powerful and beautiful moment of human compassion, ingenuity, and care. And this morning even, I opened up my computer to the front page of the New York Times. Right at the top of the page there was a scrolling band of images. Germans, lined up at train stations and airports, food and supplies in hand, welcoming Syrian refugees into their country. A little German boy stood by with a big sign reading “Welcome,” in front of him he had a basket filled with his own toys, toys he had brought to share with Syrian children as they arrived. And there were photos of Syrians, with handmade cardboard signs in hand, “Thank Germany!” and “Bless Angela Merkel!” These photos are a powerful counternarrative to the photos of Hungary: Gratitude and welcome winning out over barbed wire and a child on the Turkish shore, hospitality and compassion reigning far supreme over fear and hatred.

This is the business Jesus is in: opening our eyes and allowing us to see fully the world around us. Unstopping our ears, so we can hear the stories other people tell. Loosening out tongues, so that we can use our own voices to speak hope and compassion and grace to the world we find ourselves in. And it’s happening all the time. In Tyre according to the Gospel of Mark, on the Road to Emmaus in the book of Luke, here at the Communion Table, in the reading of the daily news, in watching a nature documentary on PBS, the words of scripture ring so true to me: Christ was known to them in the breaking of the bread. Their eyes were opened. We should be careful what we pray for, because with a God like ours, we are guaranteed to get a lot more than you asked for, but it is absolutely something we need to see and hear and speak.