



**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • March 2, 2022**  
**Ash Wednesday**



**CALL TO WORSHIP**

*Yet even now, says the Holy One, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning and with hope of transformation.*

**Here we come, Lord, just as we are for you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.**

*God, clear of pretense, we return to you as you have fashioned us with great love and never turn us away.*

**Shape our hearts anew, O Lord, that in our lamenting of sin, that we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect forgiveness, and peace.**

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

*Creative, passionate God, you delight to shape the world in beauty and harmony. You invite us to participate in the balance of creation. We grow in wisdom as our experience unfolds; we take good learning out of difficult situations yet also find our well-meant endeavors leading to unintended consequences. Too often, we give in to temptation that disrupts the joyous, chaotic, order of the universe. We cannot undo all our mistakes, but we can turn once more to the living presence of Jesus and find new ways to live and love each other and the earth.*

**Do not let our hearts be fearful but let us in silence acknowledge our sin and seek the forgiveness that restores our peace.**

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE**

*Even as Adam and Eve faced the consequences of their sin, our God prepared a way for them still to be connected to the earth and the living presence of God. So, it*

*is with all of us: in Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection, we are made able to persist, upright and strong, for our sins are forgiven.*

**Thanks be to God!**

**SCRIPTURE**

*Mark 10:46-52*

**MESSAGE**

*Mark Briley*

*"Sacred Rhythms: Longing for More"*

*"There are moments in our lives when we cry out [if even] inwardly, 'I don't care what anyone else says; there has to be more to the Christian life than this!'"*

Maybe you've been in such a space before. Maybe you're in such a life space now. It doesn't matter if you've grown up in the church, are new to the faith, or somewhere in between, we are all prone to such a pondering at some point. Ruth Haley Barton, who authored the book, *Sacred Rhythms*<sup>1</sup>, which will supply important guidance to our series this Lent, admitted this very feeling even as she was pastoring a church. She called it CFS (*Christian fatigue syndrome*). The more she refused to acknowledge this longing for more, the deeper and wider the emptiness became. She said, "*It nearly swallowed me whole.*" It was a time when she couldn't begin to fathom what Jesus meant when he said, "*I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.*" (John 10:10). In that season of her life, she said, "*I was cynical at best.*" Do you understand this feeling? COVID has brought this languishing upon many of us to be certain. Statistically, I heard though can't verify its veracity, that upwards of 1/3 of people who identified as Christians before the pandemic set in are now claiming indifference to the faith two years into the pandemic. That's a huge shift.

Some of this has to do with our sense that we can manufacture spirituality. We can work at it, yes, and at some point, our *desire* for more must lead to our *discipline* for more, or we're not giving God our best effort toward that transformational reality. However, spiritual transformation is full of mystery.

The Greek word for this process translates into metamorphosis in English, like a caterpillar morphing into a butterfly. It's hard to imagine that the caterpillar has much cognitive understanding about the process or the end product of the whole thing. Caterpillars don't sit around with their colleagues in the break room saying, "*Thinking of cocooning this weekend. I've prayed it through. It's time.*" They don't do that, right? But... there's something in the deepest essence of that little squirmy creature that says, "*It is time*" and so the caterpillar obeys this deep inner urge to enter the transformative process.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacred Rhythms*. Ruth Haley Barton. IVP Books. 2006. Her influence is evident in this message as well as in the formation of the entire series.

Giving ourselves over to our own spiritual transformation is just like this mystery. We find ourselves on the edge of something that we internally long for but something we cannot do for ourselves. We can only put ourselves in position... making ourselves available... and trusting God to work within us.

This is surely, in part, what has led you here tonight. Sure there's the, "*Well I'm singing with the group,*" or "*My parents made me come,*" or you thought there would be snacks. I know there are always many factors that go into getting us to any place and any given time. But since you're here, I have to believe that even some part of you is longing for more... longing to understand and to be understood... longing to *be* more even as you long to be accepted as you are... longing to find control over yourself even as all seems chaotic and out of control all around you. But you're here in this sanctuary on this first day of the season of Lent, so why not make the investment in your soul. [quote Slide] Richard Rohr says, "*A good journey begins with knowing where we are and being willing to go someplace else.*"

Lent is a sacred season that always affords us such an opportunity if we are willing. Where are you willing to *go*? Where are you willing to *grow*? What is your deepest spiritual desire? Do you long for more? The movement from *desire* to *discipline* is important, and so tonight, in what may be the most straightforward and honest night of any church night, is a perfect place to own where we are and be willing to go someplace else.

Why is this night so honest? For starters, the mark of the cross in ash on our foreheads is the very humbling reminder of our mortality. We're all going to die. The science around death still offers the research that the human mortality rate hovers around 100% give or take zero percent. They're even teaching this in schools you know? I still remember my daughter coming home from school one day a few years ago announcing, "*It's official! My classmates and I are going to live until we're 127.*" Perhaps... but even still, that 128<sup>th</sup> year is not promised. Death is real. We deny it. Ignore it. Or assume it's for others. But it takes little to remind us that it looms near.

Now, of course, there are stories of facing and defeating death that help build our sense that we can overcome death on our own. A man attacked by a mountain lion while on a run, wrestles and kills it with his bare hands. Death defied... at least for the runner. Two elementary-aged sisters wander from home, get lost, and rely on their 4-H skills to survive for a couple of days in the wilderness. Amazing!

Or maybe you heard Jeremy Taylor's survival story? A self-proclaimed adventurer, Jeremy and his dog, Ally, love to explore the wild mountains of Oregon and ventured out on such an expedition. Heavy snow set in and ultimately trapped he and Ally in



their car without a phone or any way of finding freedom. For the next five days, this man and his dog survived by starting the car once in a while to supply a little heat and eating the only thing he found in his car that put any calories into their bodies at all. Wait for it? **[Jeremy and Ally]** Taco Bell sauce packets. That's it! Five days! Taylor said after being found

and rescued by a snowmobiler, "*Taco Bell fire sauce saves lives!*" Thankfully, these stories all ended well but we know many more do not. And this man's escape of death doesn't give him a pass altogether. He'll face death again. "*Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.*" Accepting our mortality is part of what this night is about. When the ash is placed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross later tonight, we'll hear it said, "*From dust you have come, to dust you shall return.*"

It sets the tone for this season in a way only death can. Yes, at the end of all of this, we'll celebrate Easter... the resurrection... life eternal... but how can we really appreciate it if we don't recognize that death comes first. We often think of this spiritually as a death to self. Giving up our way for the way of transformation... like a caterpillar spinning a cocoon trusting that the remodel of its very being is worth the submission of self to the process.

There's got to be more, *right?* There's *got* to be more. While this longing and desire is often bittersweet as it means there's some hard work ahead, it also is the very thing that reminds us that we are alive in ways we truly and ultimately want to be alive. When was the last time you felt a longing for healing and fundamental change groaning within you? Do you know where you are? Do you know where your spirit is? Are you willing to go someplace else? That's the question of this night. Very specifically the question is this: *What do you want?*

This is not a new or mysterious question, but it is a transformative one... one that Jesus asked of people often. "*What do you want?*" he would ask. "*What do you want me to do for you?*"

This is the question asked in the scriptural passage you heard read just a bit ago. The story of Bartimaeus – Blind Bartimaeus as he was often called... which is rude but also a reality that he had struggled with presumably for a long time. We don't know how long Bartimaeus spent begging by the side of the road, but it had clearly become something he was known for.

We become known for the things we do as well which tragically begins to define us in ways God would never define us. Be careful about projecting such definitions onto others and even onto your own life.

Bart heard the buzz that this Jesus would be passing by, and he wants to see more than anything else – physically see of course but there is a greater spiritual depth to his desire as well. He wants the healing to cover his mind, body and spirit. He wants to be transformed.

It was a noisy and crowded day in the city, and Jesus was such a popular teacher the crowds around him always made it tough for everyone to get close to him. To get his attention, Bartimaeus was going to have to dig deep.

We live in a different time and place, but we feel that same press. The crowds around us, the attachments to our phones, the noise in our heads even, are trying to push us out... keep us away from truly feeling our lives... and we must dig deep, even on nights like tonight, to put ourselves out there and say, *"This is important. I need this."*

The moment comes and Bartimaeus cries out, *"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* And as Jesus so often does throughout the biblical narrative, he hears the voice of the one who honestly cries out. He stops, finds his way to ensure that Bartimaeus stands in front of him, face to face. The need seems obvious, perhaps, but Jesus never assumes. He says, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* What is your desire? This is such a tender place to be. Bart has taken the big gulp and put himself out there this far. *"I know you don't know me all that well, Teacher, and I don't know you that well either... but I'd really like to see again."*

If I asked you what you want... what would you say? We might start with a surface thing here or there. My son might say a "G-wagon" or a "McLaren" or something like that. But when Jesus stands before you and asks, *"What do you really want?"* you know what he means... and you feel what he means, too.

Ruth Haley Barton says, *"Your desire for more of God than you have right now, your longing for love, your need for deeper levels of spiritual transformation than you have experienced so far is the truest thing about you. You might think that your woundedness or your sinfulness is the truest thing about you or that your giftedness or your personality type or your job title or your identity as husband or wife, mother or father, somehow defines you. But in reality, it is your desire for God and your capacity to reach for more of God than you have right now that is the deepest essence of who you are."*

How bad do you want it? Desire, at some point, must give way to discipline for any transformation to be realized.

I was running through my neighborhood one night this week. The weather's been so nice, you know, and I'm trying to run a bit again. You've got to dig deep against everything else pressing in your life, or in your own body, that's saying, "*Nah. Not tonight. You're good. Take the night off.*" So, I'm running. Slow as it may be... but I'm doing it. As I'm heading into one of the many cul-de-sacs in the neighborhood, I see a couple of garbage cans out in the middle of the street and a man standing in front of a car near those same garbage cans. "*What in the world?*" I thought to myself. And the man is now standing in front of the car, not facing the car but facing the same direction the car is facing, and he has his arms out in front of him like he's pretend driving... sort of like a kid who spreads his arms pretending to fly like Superman. Now I'm slow, remember, and we're on a cul-de-sac so I'm getting to watch this for a good little while without obviously having to stop and stare in astonishment of what was going on. The man's intensity is growing... and his frustration... and it's getting late after what was probably a long day! What I begin to realize is that this is surely the man's teenage daughter in the car and she's going to try to parallel park this beast between those two garbage cans. And no matter how hard the dad shows the motions and is pretending to drive from outside of the car, she's got to try to land this boat between the cans on her own – which dad did not space too generously in my opinion. And sure enough, just as I turn the corner to make my way on down the road, "*Bam!*" She takes the back garbage can out hard and dad has his hands now on the back of his head. I wanted to circle back around... this was getting good. But I pressed on. I wondered if he set the garbage can back up to try again. I wondered how long they kept after it. She wanted to pass that driver's test I'm sure. And dad surely had his own motivations.

How bad do you want it? This spiritual quest that we share... this hope that something will click... that the depths of our souls will be moved and transformed and more in touch with God... is something that we must desire enough to arrange our life around. Barton makes clear that such desire is a catalytic element of the spiritual life. If you've been waiting for someone to flat out ask you, "*What is it you want?*" then consider tonight that ask.

Bartimaeus faces every past moment of his life in that present moment face-to-face with Jesus. "*Bart, what do you want me to do for you?*" "*I want to see.*" And he sees with his eyes what he saw first in his spirit... Jesus. The text says next, "*Bartimaeus followed him on the way.*"

That moment changed everything. Yes, it was not a one-time commitment. Bart had new challenges now that his life was different. Seeing brought about opportunities and challenges that he didn't have before. What seemingly saved his life didn't mean he

wouldn't struggle again. Like Jeremy Taylor who survived a week on Taco Bell Fire Sauce and Lazarus who Jesus resurrected from the dead, Bartimaeus was still mortal and would face death again.

Your first commitment or your renewed commitment tonight will be met with a new challenge each day to your resolve and desire to want it *still* and want it *more*. It is a constant yielding of self to God and an acknowledgment we will mark tonight that must be acknowledged again and again. Yielding is trickier than you think.

A little after seven every school day morning, I drive my son to school. And I'm not the only one. Other people, I have learned, do this, too... drive their kids to school. So many do, in fact, that traffic has a way of backing up a bit... lots of yielding.

Additionally, there's a roundabout, and there are unspoken rules when in the school lot about whose turn it is and when. Lots of opportunities to yield. But you know what happens with this yielding stuff, right? We stop. And then the motion game starts. You give that little wave, "*You go. Go ahead.*" And you inch a bit, and they inch a bit and motion back the universal, "*It's okay. You go. Go ahead.*" And we both wait... but we wait just long enough to decide we'll go which only and always happens at the exact same time they've also decided that you are yielding to them and they'll go ahead. So then you both stop again and instead of just going on, I start back with the nod and hand motion, "*You go.*" After each of these moments in the early morning, I'm about done with yielding, you know?

With all this time I've been giving to my own mortality thinking about tonight, I'm sort of like, "*Forget all this polite yielding nonsense. I'm going to go sometime... maybe it's just my time.*" And I'm inclined to just plow right through. But the discipline of yielding to God must start with our desire and follow with our discipline.

You up for it? The season of Lent is about yielding to Christ and putting in the focused effort. It starts with recognizing our mortality in our quest to discover life that is truly life. If you're in that place of searching for something more... may you know this night is for you. "*A good journey begins with knowing where we are and being willing to go someplace else.*" The path is set to get in touch with the sacred rhythm the season affords. Will you go with us? Tonight, we cry for mercy. We ask to be held in the yielding. Then, like Bartimaeus, we follow Jesus on the way to transformation.

May it be so.

#### **ACT OF PENITENCE AND RECONCILIATION**

*That as the disciples of Christ, we might use our hands, feet, money, time, and energy for the good of all people, we pray to the God of mercy:*

**Hear our prayer, O God.**

*That citizens everywhere may realize that care for their neighbor consists of more than well wishes, we pray to the God of mercy:*

**Hear our prayer, O God.**

*For those in need, that they may not have to remain despondent and alone, let us pray to the God of mercy:*

**Hear our prayer, O God.**

*For all of us here that we may be honest enough to admit what we are selfish about and what we can do to remedy our lack of love, let us pray to the God of mercy:*

**Hear our prayer, O God.**

*Merciful God, the ashes our pledge to take up the cross of life. We come from the earth, and we will go back to it. In the meantime, beginning these 40 days, we will train to live here and make it a better home for everybody. Through Christ our Lord...*

**Amen.**

**BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH**