

“What do you see?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Joel 2:23-32*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When Jacques Lusseyran [**loos-aye-run**] became blind at the age of seven, in 1931, most people thought his life was over. He'd be ripped from his family and friends, shipped off to a special school, with little hope of a real education or career or even a family. He'd end up on the streets, another forgotten beggar. Today, we know that blindness is just a different, beautiful way of experiencing the world, worthy of respect and services. But not in 1931. The truth is that the world stopped expecting much of anything from Jacques the moment he became blind.

Maybe you've felt that way too. Like the world gave up on you, stopped seeing any value or possibility in you. Like the world could only see parts of you. And maybe at some point you started to believe them, like you could only see yourself as they saw you.

That could have been where Jacques's story ended—except Jacques had two very special parents, who refused to see anything but the son they had always known and loved. They kept him in school and learned Braille together. His father told Jacques something that he'd never forget. He said, you're not blind, you are “the discoverer of a new world.”

In his memoir *And There Was Light*, Jacques shares that he began to discover that he could see the world through smell, touch, and hearing. More than that, he discovered within himself an intuition, an inner light. With practice, he could stand in a forest, stand perfectly still, and tell you the names of all the trees around him: oaks, poplars, nut trees. He said he could distinguish between the trees by the different sounds they made.

Imagine that. Suddenly, a whole myriad of details—in buildings, in landscapes, in faces—details we mostly overlook, became visible to him. Suddenly, he had to take the time to really know people; a glance wouldn't suffice; he had to listen to the timbre of their voice, to scan their face with his fingers, to smell the musk of their clothing, to feel the pain and the joy that emanated from them.

It was like he was seeing the world—and all its complicated people—for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

And so, while others dismissed the rise of Adolph Hitler as a foolish fad soon to pass, Jacques saw the threat in a way others did not. As a young boy living in Paris, he learned German so that he could listen to German broadcasts. And when Germany invaded France, Jacques, at just the age of 17—the boy the world had given up on—became one of our most important resistance leaders.

When he was captured and taken to Buchenwald, he survived, using his knowledge of the German language. After the camp was liberated, Jacques went on to teach in the United States, to become an author, to marry and father four children.

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<sup>1</sup> This description is informed by Barbara Brown Taylor's beautiful book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

The boy they called blind—when really he had more sight than them all.

Makes you wonder: what are we not seeing?

You heard me speak earlier, in the children's message, about one of Emerson's favorite books: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* It's a deceptively simple book that at first blush seems just to be another animal and color book. And yet it has won awards and sold 7 million copies. Interesting tidbit: it also was briefly and accidentally banned by the Texas State Board of Education when they confused the author with a known Communist by the same name. As far as I know, there's no Communism in the book.

Each page asks a new animal what it sees. Every animal can see only the creature immediately in front of it. Toward the end, the book asks, "Teacher, Teacher, What do you see?" The teacher looks directly at the reader and says, "I see children looking at me," as if breaking the third wall and seeing for the first time that this is a book being read by children. The book then asks the children what they see and concludes with a litany of all the many animals. Only these children—much like Jacques—are able to see it all, every page, every animal.

How many times are we like the animals in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*? How many times do we only see what's right in front of us?

We can become so fixated on a single goal, or routine, that we miss the God-given opportunities that surround us. We can get caught in despair, or hatred, or just exhaustion, and be able to see nothing else. When we get sucked into this tunnel vision, this myopia, we lose sight of the larger story; we lose sight of each other, and of God.

It's happening all the time to the church. We either fail to see the changes that are taking place, and get stuck in a rut. Or we see those changes, which fill us with hopelessness and frustration, and we think: this is the end.

Which brings us to today's Scripture reading. A reading of such importance that Peter chose it for the very first sermon preached by the early church: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions."

In Joel, God promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to widen our gaze and empower us with the perceptive power of Jacques, of the children in *Brown Bear*, of the prophet, of God herself.

It is the power to see a brown-skinned man hanging from a cross, another broken hope, and perceive an act of love, a love so great that it will rip the veil of death itself and reunite us with our Creator.

It is the power to see a blind boy and perceive a visionary who will lead a resistance movement against hate.

It is the power to see a church, a bygone of ages past, crumbling and irrelevant, and perceive a sacred community, forced to the edge of its own evolution, becoming what it was always meant to be: a counter-cultural people braving crosses for the sake of a love, and a mystery, that turns tables.

Take note that this power does not come to us individually. Over and over again, Joel uses the plural: “sons, daughters, old people, young people, even male and female slaves.” It would seem that this vision is only accessible together, collectively.

Take note also of who is included. This vision is not just for the young or the old; it requires both. Moreover, it comes especially to slaves, to the oppressed and the suffering, without whom the vision is not possible.

This is what our Holy Conversations process is all about: it’s about coming together to look and listen with God’s eyes, with Spirit sight. It’s also what our stewardship campaign is all about: “Be Thou My Vision: 20/20.”

What dreams and visions could we have for this church? What amazing things could God do through us?

Today we celebrate the Reformation, which, as imperfect as it was, was an attempt at this greater vision—to imagine a Scripture read by all, a God directly accessible to all, a grace freely given, a justice undeterred.

What shall be Westminster’s Reformation? How will we break the third wall and come to see our story? How will we access the perceptive power of Jacques?

Surely, it will only be together, and it will only be by listening well, and it will only happen when we are brave, and bold, and ready to dream. **Amen.**