



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

A Deeper Longing

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 10:46-52

January 1, 2023 — Sermon by Melanie Hardison

I have a confession. It's New Year's Day and we Christians are people of hope. And I have a love-hate relationship with the very hopeful thing that is the New Year's Resolution.

Resolutions are easy to love because they're full of possibility. We dare to hope we'll finally lose those 20 pounds. We dare to hope this will be the year we get our finances in order. We dare to hope we'll finally clean out those closets (or the basement). We dare to hope we'll actually make time to pray every day. We dare to hope we'll find true and lasting love.

As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke says, "Let us welcome a new year, full of things that have never been." Full of things that have never been. I could live right there in all that possibility. And, the realistic part of me remembers that I've made enough New Year's resolutions to know they don't always stick and can easily become one more thing I hoped would happen, but did not. So I've begun to think less about resolutions, those lofty do's and don'ts, the 'I wills' and 'I won'ts,' and I've begun to think more about the deeper longings that lie underneath the resolutions I make.

Bartimaeus is a man who's lost his eyesight, and when we meet him, he is living the life of a beggar, sitting on the side of the road. He hears the crowd coming and knows Jesus is in it. His longing for sight is clear and deep. It is what keeps him from participating in society, from belonging. He cries out, "Jesus, have mercy on me!"

The crowd tries to shush him. But Bartimaeus, there's a longing in his voice, something clear and compelling. The next thing he knows, Jesus himself is asking for him! Bartimaeus springs up, throwing off his cloak (likely, his only possession), and the crowd leads him to Jesus. He hears Jesus say, "What do you want me to do for you?" And with all the clarity of

someone desperate for new life, Bartimaeus says, "Let me see again." Jesus restores his sight, and Bartimaeus "follows him on the way."

Scripture offers story after story like this: People who open their hearts to God, who say "yes," and who drop everything and follow. Of course, in the Christmas story, the Magi—the wise ones who travel from the east—follow a star to the tiny town of Bethlehem where they find the baby Jesus. After days and nights of travel, they're led to bow down and pay him homage, offering not only costly gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, but the most precious gift of all: their very hearts. All they knew when they started their journey—these astronomers who study the heavens night after night—was that they were looking for a star. A star that was different. A star which compelled them, like Bartimaeus, to drop everything and follow.

The field of psychology has long recognized that one of our deepest needs is to be loved and to belong. In fact, love and belonging are as great a need for the human body as water and food and shelter. When I was a hospital chaplain serving in neonatal intensive care, I was dismayed to learn of a diagnosis called "failure to thrive." The babies I visited with this diagnosis had often been abandoned. No family visited to hold them and rock them, to love them or offer a place of belonging in the world they'd just entered. Failure to thrive is often a condition of isolation that can impact babies as well as older adults. It can even become a cause of death, so deep is the human need for touch and love and belonging.

When it comes to our spiritual lives, I wonder if failure to thrive might be a thing, too. Not just our bodies, but our souls yearn to be known and held and tended. So often though, we walk through the world putting our souls on the backburner as so many other things take priority: the obligations of work and

family, our bizarre need to be busy, the addictiveness of technology... the list goes on. We see tending our souls as optional, not as essential.

So I wonder this new year: What are the deeper longings of your soul, as you enter 2023? What's the extent to which your spirituality, your needs for love and belonging, with God and others, are under the surface of any resolutions or hopes you might be carrying for the new year?

In November, I had the opportunity to go to the Texas Hill Country with a remarkable group of pastors from all over the country on a wellness retreat. One of the outcomes was that each of us was encouraged to create what's called a Rule of Life. Now, the only time I'd ever heard of a Rule of Life was for members of religious orders, monks, nuns, and honestly, the association I had with it was that it was a thing of the past—an outdated practice of the church.

What I learned, though, is that a Rule of Life can be deeply transformational. Anyone seeking to live a deeper life more in tune with God can create a Rule of Life. It can be as simple as a phrase, like the one a friend created, which is “to participate in the healing of the world,” or it can be as detailed as a two- or three-page plan. What I found was that trying my hand at writing a Rule of Life helped me get clear (or clearer) on who God wants me to become and how I might live in order to get there.

What I discerned as one of my deeper longings is to get better rest. Which is why it's a bit ironic that my Star Word last year was “rest.” It came to me quite by surprise. Toward the end of the year I got a card in the mail from one of you, a church member, and enclosed was her Star Word from the previous year: the word “rest.” She wrote a lovely note about pastors working hard and how she had journeyed with this word but found that she actually gets enough rest and she thought that perhaps “rest” should be my word for the coming year. It was the sweetest. So last year I didn't draw a Star Word from the basket because my Star Word had already so lovingly found me.

In our 24/7 culture, rest is something lots of us struggle with. Because real, true rest can be so hard to come by, these days it almost needs to become

something of a discipline. And so it was at this retreat in Texas that I got in touch with my deeper longing for real, true rest. And by rest, I don't just mean sleep. I mean spiritual rest—the kind of resting we do in God. A kind of communion. A rest that's restorative and rejuvenating, rest that is spent delighting in God's presence.

And so my Rule of Life is very much a draft, a work in progress, but it includes regular times to pause and rest. Regular retreat in silence and solitude. Regular time to pause from the rhythms of life and dwell in the presence of God, as Ruth Haley Barton says, “a creature in the presence of the Creator.”

Perhaps the Star Word you draw today¹ will connect with your deeper longing—will help you recognize the longing or help you attain it. And if your Star Word doesn't connect in that way, it may have another gift to offer you. And if not, well, it's just a Star Word. It's a tool to help point the way. The good news is there are lots of things to help point the way on our journeys. Like Bartimaeus being clear enough to answer Jesus when he asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” Like the story of the Magi, who saw a star so big and so bright that they simply followed. Other things that can help point the way are showing up for worship. Making time to pray. Spending time with your church family and the people who love you.

The irony in some of this is that even when our needs for love and belonging are met, even the closest human relationships can leave us feeling less than complete. Spiritual leaders through the ages have noted that as essential as human connection is, even in the presence of others, we can feel lonely. Some of you know this. But, when we come fully into the presence of God, the sense of loneliness vanishes. To come fully into the presence of God is to be fully known, fully understood, fully accepted. It is to feel complete.

Because the love and grace God offers is so complete, there can be no deeper longing than to be fully and completely loved by the Divine. In fact, scripture tells us that God's deepest longing is for us. Some human relationships are fortunate enough to come close to mirroring this kind of love. But no human

¹ Baskets of Star Words will be available today and on Jan. 8 in the Narthex, Welcome Center, Friendship Hall and at the Gathering. After that, Star Words will be available at the south reception desk. Anyone unable to come to the church in person is welcome to email Rev. Hardison and she will draw a Star Word for you: melanie.hardison@villagepres.org.

love can be so complete as the love of God.

I think this is what Bartimaeus knew, when he sprang up and followed. I think this is what the wise ones knew, when they dropped everything to follow the star.

So I wonder, if Jesus asked you, “What do you want me to do for you?” what is the one word your deepest place would cry? Would it be mercy? Peace? Rest? Freedom? Belonging? Love? I don’t mean to imply that just because we cry out, our wish is granted. Too

many of us are well aware that’s not how it works.

But I believe there is power in getting clear on our deepest longings. There is power in naming them and bringing them before God.

Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” How will you answer? How will you let the new year—full of things that have never been—guide you? How will you let your Star Word guide you? How will you let God, with all the things God places in your path, guide you? Amen.