



June 1: Rising Strong: From Darkness into Light | John 9:1-11

Do you ever get a hymn stuck in your head? ALL week, I have been hearing a faint echo of that hymn playing in my head, “How Can I Keep From Singing?”, faint but VERY persistent.

Verse 3, What though my joys and comforts die? I know my Savior liveth; What though the darkness gathers round? Songs in the night He giveth

Affirming...that even when darkness surrounds us, the Lord is near, giving strength and comfort, giving us songs to sing.

This hymn wonderfully begins and supports our theme of RISING STRONG from darkness to light...from blindness to sight, celebrating our ability to choose to sing even in dark and difficult times, to sing even when we can't see a way out or see God at work.

Maybe someone needed a reminder about that hymn this morning.

Now for a story, “A Song in the Dark,” written by beloved pastor and storyteller Max Lucado. It's about an encounter that opened his eyes—and it might open ours, too.

On any other day, I probably wouldn't have stopped. Like the majority of people on the busy avenue, I would hardly have noticed him standing there, but the very thing on my mind was the very reason he was there.

So, I stopped. I had just spent a portion of the morning preparing a lesson out of the ninth chapter of John, the chapter that contains the story about the man blind from birth.

I'd finished lunch and was returning to my office when I saw him, he was singing. A white cane in his left hand. His right hand was extended and open awaiting donations. He was blind.

After walking past him about five steps, I stopped and mumbled something to myself about the epitome of hypocrisy, and went back in his direction. I put some change in his hand, **“Thank you.”** He said.

Once again, I started on my way. Once again, the morning study of John nine stopped me. Jesus saw a man blind from birth. I paused and pondered, if Jesus were here, he would see this man. Not sure what that meant, but I was sure I hadn't done it.

So, I turned around again, as if the giving of a donation entitled me to do so. I drew near and observed. I challenged myself to see him. I would stay here until I saw more than a sightless poor man on a busy street in downtown Rio de Janeiro.

I watched him sing. Some beggars grovel in a corner, cultivating pity. Others unabashedly lay their children on blankets in the middle of the sidewalk, thinking that only the hardest of hearts would ignore a dirty, naked infant crying for bread. But this man did none of that.

He stood tall. He sang loudly, even proudly. All of us had more reason to sing than he, but he was the one singing.

The passersby had various reactions. Some were curious and gazed unabashedly. Others were uncomfortable. They were quick to duck their heads or walking in a wider circle, “No reminders of harshness today. Please.”

Most, however, hardly noticed him. Their thoughts were occupied, their agendas were full, and he was... well. He was a blind beggar.

I was thankful he couldn't see the way they looked at him.

After a few minutes, I went up to him again. **Have you had any lunch?** I asked. He stopped singing. He turned his head toward the sound of my voice and directed his face somewhere past my ear. His eye sockets were empty. He said he was hungry.

When I came back with a sandwich and something cold to drink, he was still singing and his hands were still empty, but he was grateful for the food. We sat down on a nearby bench. Between bites, he told me about himself, 28 years old, single, living with his parents and seven brothers.

“Were you born blind?” I asked.

“No, when I was young, I had an accident.” He didn't volunteer any details, and I didn't have the gall to request them.

Though we were almost the same age, we were light years apart. My three decades had been a summer vacation of family excursions, Sunday school, debate team, and playing football.

Growing up blind in the third world surely afforded none of these things. My daily concern now involved people, thoughts, concepts and communication. His day was stitched together with concerns of survival, coins, and food.

I'd go home to a nice apartment, a hot meal and a good wife. I hated to think of the home he would encounter. I'd seen enough overcrowded huts on the hills of Rio to make a reasonable guess. Would anyone be there to make him feel special when he got home?

I came whisker close to asking him, “Does it make you mad that I'm not you? Do you ever lie awake at night wondering why the hand you were dealt was so different from the one given a million or so others born 30 years ago?”

I wore a shirt and tie and some new shoes. His shoes had holes, and his coat was oversized and bulky. His pants gaped open from a rip in the knee, and still he sang, though a sightless, penniless young man. He still found a song and sang it courageously.

I wonder which room in his heart that song came from? At first, at worst, I figured he sang from desperation. His song was all he had. Yet, he seemed too peaceful to be singing out of self-preservation.

Or perhaps he sang from ignorance. Maybe he didn't know what he never had.

No, I decided the motivation that fit his demeanor best was the one you'd expect least. He was singing from contentment.

Somehow this eyeless beggar had discovered a candle called satisfaction, and it glowed in his dark world. Maybe someone had told him, tomorrow's joy is fathered by today's acceptance. Acceptance of what at least for the moment you cannot alter.

I looked up at the Niagara of faces that flowed past us, grim, professional, some determined. But none were singing.

What if each face were a bill billboard that announced the true state of the owner's heart? How many would say “desperate”, “business on the rocks”, or “broken in need of repair” or “faithless”, “frantic”, and “fearful”. Quite a few, I'd guess.

The irony was painfully amusing, this blind man could be the most peaceful fellow on the street, no diploma, no awards and no future, at least in the aggressive sense of the word.

But I wondered how many in the urban stampede would trade their boardrooms and blue suits in a second for a chance to experience his contentment.

Faith is the bird that sings while it is yet dark.

Before I helped my friend back to his position, I tried to verbalize my empathy, “**Life is hard, isn't it?**” A slight smile, he again, turned his face toward the direction of my voice and started to respond, then paused and simply said, “**I'd better get back to work.**”

For almost a block, I could hear him singing. And in my mind's eye, I could still see him, but the man I now saw was a different one than the one to whom I had given a few coins.

Though the man I now saw was still sightless. He was remarkably insightful. And though I was the one with eyes. It was he who gave me a new vision.

In a bustling city street, a poor blind man stands tall and sings—not from pity, ignorance, or desperation, but from a deep well of contentment and gratitude.

His choice invites us to consider: what song are we singing in the midst of our own shadows of adversity?

Where might we need to choose our own faith-filled response to darkness in our world, to the shade and dimness in our own hearts? To look to Jesus and cling to him, when he says in verse 5, “**...I am the light of the world.**”

Before the sun rises, before the first light breaks the horizon, a symphony begins. It’s as if ALL the songbirds in Monticello know where I live!

And around 5:24 am, give or take, they gather in the bushes beneath my bedroom window and on some mysterious cue...their song erupts.

This natural phenomenon is called the “dawn chorus”. It’s not light yet, the darkness is at its darkest. But still the birds sing. Not because the light has come, but because they trust it will.

That’s faith. That’s courage. That’s what it means to rise strong.

Just like that hymn, the story of the blind man and those birds, we are all called to rise strong from darkness into light, by lifting our voices in praise—not only in the bright moments of life, but especially in the dark.

It is essential for us to sing while we’re still waiting for God to act, while waiting for God to provide for our needs. To praise before the breakthrough.

To believe that light and goodness are coming, even when we cannot yet see them.

And maybe, just maybe, our voices raised in trust will help usher in the morning—for ourselves, and for those still waiting in the dark.

Soon we will soon receive from the Lord’s Table, again we are invited into that same grace-filled encounter with Jesus, this same feast of grace, that we have been talking about week after week.

Here, in the bread and the cup, we receive more than nourishment—we receive more of Jesus. And we come not because we see perfectly, but because we long to see more clearly.

Reminding each other, Communion is an act of faith. A way of saying and assuring each other, “**We can rise strong. The Light is coming.**” Because Communion is our dawn chorus—a song of our trust before the full light appears. Amen.

As we move into a Time of Reflection:

1. What song is your heart singing this morning or this season?

Is it one of fear, frustration, or blame—or one of hope and trust in the Light of the world?

2. Or where in your life are you being invited to trust in the Lord before you see the outcome?

What would it look like for you to “sing in the dark,” believing the light of Christ, Christ is coming to you...to comfort, heal, and guide?