

Blind Bartimaeus

TEXT: Mark 10:35-52

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 10, 2024

In this morning's reading from Mark, Jesus is on the road through Jericho, on his way to Jerusalem for the last time. Jericho was a major city and the gateway from the south to Jerusalem. It's also an ancient city. As part of the Palestinian territories today, it's one of the oldest continually-inhabited cities in the world, with the earliest settlement dating back 11,000 years.

Sitting at 846 feet below sea level and known in the Bible as the "city of palm trees," Jericho is an oasis in the middle of a desert, thanks to a water source known as "Elisha's Spring." King Herod the Great built his winter palace in Jericho and other nobles followed suit.

As a major trading hub, Jericho would have had lots of traffic even at regular times, but every Jew in every land who was able to travel was required to be in Jerusalem for Passover, and any of them coming from the south would be passing through Jericho.

So, when you hear this story, think bustling city with lots of people coming and going. The text itself says that Jesus and his disciples—likely more than just the twelve—are with a large crowd leaving the city.

While people begging could be found at the gates of every city, Jericho would have been a prime location to ask for help, given the wealth within the city and the large crowds always passing through. Bartimaeus would not have been the only one trying to scrape together some help either at the gate or along the roads to and from.

Jesus, and likely most of the large crowd around him, are making the Passover pilgrimage. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is the very next story, and he's already got a crowd around him as they leave Jericho.

Jesus has a lot on his mind. He knows what awaits him in Jerusalem and has just described it in graphic detail to his disciples fourteen verses before this. He sees those who are begging—and no doubt feels for them. But he continues to walk, his face set toward Jerusalem.

But suddenly, Jesus hears a wailing cry from a blind man named Bartimaeus, who's begging by the side of the road. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus walks on, but the plea comes again—louder, more pitiful, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus, no doubt, also heard those telling Bartimaeus to shut up—don't bother the teacher; hit up someone else. They'd said the same thing to little children earlier in this same chapter.

And, like with the children, probably with a combination of compassion for the man and anger at the callous response to Bartimaeus' pleas for help, Jesus decides to stop. "Call him," Jesus says to the crowd, making them reverse their contempt and issue an invitation. "Cheer up!" they say to Bartimaeus. "On your feet! He's calling you!" Even the crowd knows how lucky Bartimaeus is. Jesus doesn't do this for everyone.

Bartimaeus jumps to his feet and throws off his cloak—probably his only significant possession, as it could serve as his bed, blanket, and coat. Bartimaeus makes his way to Jesus, already transformed in the mind of the crowd from a worthless beggar to a man worthy of a famous rabbi's attention—their own blindness cured before his.

At last, Bartimaeus reaches Jesus. Jesus sees him—A blind man, reduced to begging in the streets, standing before him. His need is as obvious as the summer sun. And yet, Jesus still asks him, "What do

you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus says, simply, "Rabbi, I want to see." Jesus gives an equally simple reply: "Go, your faith has made you well."

There are lots of potential lessons for us in this story. But we're focused on choices this year, and this story gives us a couple of obvious choices and some that are more subtle. The first obvious one is Bartimaeus choosing, not to just call out to Jesus, but to call out to him specifically with the title "Son of David."

There were a variety of expectations for a coming Messiah in Jesus' day, but at the top of the list of qualifications for almost all of them was that the Messiah would be of the house and lineage of King David. Mark's gospel doesn't give us a genealogy for Jesus, but Matthew and Luke both do, and both of them have Jesus as a descendant of King David. Ironically, Bartimaeus calling out loudly to Jesus as "Son of David," was his way of saying, "I see you. I know who you are."

And I think that's part of what tips the scales for Jesus in deciding to stop and help him. Jesus is surrounded by his disciples and a large crowd of others, heading for the Passover. Bartimaeus is loud and won't stop yelling for the "Son of David." By stopping, Jesus acknowledges and accepts the title before the crowd. And that's a surprising choice for Jesus to make in Mark's gospel.

Jesus has a very public ministry, but overtly equating himself with Messianic expectations is rare across all the gospels, and is intentionally shunned in the gospel of Mark. *Until this moment.* Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus tells both his disciples and those who have either experienced or witnessed his miracles to keep quiet about it.

"Don't tell anyone," Jesus says time and time again. It's common enough that in biblical studies it has a name—it's called the Markan or Messianic Secret. No one in Mark uses the title "Son of David" for Jesus until Bartimaeus says the quiet part out loud in his wailing cry for help here outside Jericho.

Why Jesus wants to keep that Messianic Secret is hotly debated. I side with those who believe that Jesus was afraid that publicly equating himself with the Messiah would make people misunderstand his role. Part of the reason the Messiah needed to be a "son of David," the warrior king who had ruled Israel a thousand years prior, was that the expectation was for a Messiah who would play a political role in reclaiming Israel from Roman rule—by force if necessary.

But the way of liberation in the realm of God is neither political nor coercive—the ends don't justify the means when God is calling the shots. The prophet Zechariah had summed it up well in chapter 4 verse 6 of the book that bears his name: "Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." But we humans have had a hard time absorbing that message. Both then and now we prefer the might and power over the Spirit.

The Messiah, for those in Jesus' day and, sadly, for too many Christians today, was about winning in all the ways we human beings think about that. Power, fame, glory, wealth. The one who goes first and is served and worshipped by all others. He rules with justice, to be sure; but he rules. On earth. With the might of armies to make others conform to his righteousness. We prefer a Messiah who doesn't get crucified, especially without even trying to put up a fight.

In the chapter before this, when Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in his glory in the Transfiguration, Jesus told them not to tell anyone what they had seen. Keep it secret; keep it safe. Expectations for what the Messiah would be and do were already well off the mark.

Glory is what everyone expected and what everyone thought would save them if they could just manage to be part of it. It would not help things if people were talking about seeing him lit up in glory at the top of a mountain. As it was, that vision tripped up James and John, as we'll see in a minute.

What Jesus *did* want everyone to witness was his response to the acts of Roman brutality that everyone knew all too well, and that he would experience in the flesh the next week. His hope was, I believe, that, as hard as it would be to understand, *that* Spirit of non-violent resistance was the power that would make

the liberating work of the Messiah possible, both in Jesus as an individual and through his disciples when he was gone. God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven not by might, not by power, but by the Spirit they would see on display the next week. The Spirit of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit.

And here it comes—the last week of his life. So, now is the time to ask people to tune in. With the cry of Bartimaeus providing the opportunity, Jesus decides to end the secret—to make what was whispered in back rooms shown at the gates of the wealthy, bustling city of Jericho at its busiest time of the year.

Someone's calling for the "Son of David?" Okay, I'll stop. That's me. But don't look to the books of Samuel or Kings for what to expect from this anointed one—which is what the word "Messiah" literally means—look to Isaiah's servant songs. Look to the one who Isaiah says will cause the blind to see as well as the one who will free the captive. Come here, Bartimaeus.

In a sense, Jesus' procession into Jerusalem begins here. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak as he comes to Jesus. Eighteen miles up the road, others—likely including many from this same crowd at Jericho—will also throw down their cloaks to make a royal way as Jesus rides into Jerusalem.

But it's not only Jesus who's teaching here. In a more subtle way, Mark's gospel is also teaching us by the choices it makes in which stories to tell us, with which details, and in what order. If you read this story in the context of what comes before it, you should hear an echo.

We've already noted the echo of the story of little children trying to get to Jesus early in the chapter and noted that the secret was still intact at the moment of Jesus' greatest visible glory in the chapter before. I mentioned that the vision of the Transfiguration in chapter 9 tripped up James and John. I think that's evident here in chapter 10.

In verse 35, right before the Bartimaeus story, James and John came forward and said to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Jesus responds, "What is it you want me to do for you?" The exact same words that he asks Bartimaeus. James and John reply that when Jesus is glorified, they want to sit on his right hand and on his left—the places of honor.

Jesus denies their request, saying it's not his decision to make, and since their attempted power grab makes the rest of his disciples mad, Jesus calls them all together to remind them of his teaching—the lessons that his disciples, especially James and John, should have learned by now:

"You know," Jesus says, "that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The words of Jesus being repeated in our story, "What is it you want me to do for you?" especially in light of the fact that what Bartimaeus wants is obvious, make Bartimaeus a foil for James and John's request. The disciples approach boldly and say, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." In other words—we want you to serve us. How different that is from the cry of Bartimaeus, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" waiting to approach until Jesus calls for him. And how different are the requests! Jesus grants the request for mercy and reprimands the request for glory.

Adding to Bartimaeus as a foil is his name. In Matthew, Jesus heals two blind men here; Luke gives us just one; but only Mark gives us a name. The name "Bartimaeus" means "son of Timaeus" in Aramaic, and the name "Timaeus," comes from the word meaning "to honor, to prize something of value."

Throughout his life, every time Bartimaeus heard his name, he heard that he was the son of one who was highly valued; and yet here he is, a blind beggar at the gates of Jericho. The first had become last. And yet, when Jesus asks Bartimaeus "What would you like me to do for you?" he merely asks to see.

James and John were fishermen who Jesus had already elevated to be two of his three closest disciples. Along with Peter, they were the ones privy to moments like the Transfiguration and special teachings that the other nine were not. James and John were already among the last made first.

But that's still not good enough for them. With the glory from the mountaintop seared into their brains, they want that privileged status not just to last in this life, but endure into the age to come, when Jesus would come in all that glory.

When they saw the vision on the mountain, Moses and Elijah stood on either side of Jesus. In the age to come, it seems James and John are putting themselves in those roles. In the story of their request and the story of Bartimaeus, which both Matthew and Mark serve up together, it's the disciples who are blind and blind Bartimaeus who truly sees.

I think Bartimaeus also serves as a foil for the rich young man we talked about last week—the one in whom Jesus saw all the qualities of his other hand-picked disciples but who refused Jesus' request to join them if it meant giving up his wealth. That story is earlier in this same chapter, and it ends with Jesus telling his disciples, “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

The only thing between that line from last week and James and John asking for the best seats at Jesus' glorified table is Jesus reminding his disciples that he is going to be mocked, flogged, and killed and nobody's going to get any of that glory if they can't also drink from that cup.

The story of James and John's request ends with Jesus telling all the disciples, “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And immediately after that, Mark presents us with the story of blind Bartimaeus calling for mercy and Jesus granting him his sight.

At the end of the Bartimaeus story, Mark sums up all of it with this: “‘Go,’ said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.”

As it turns out, Jesus didn't even heal Bartimaeus. It was Bartimaeus' own faith that proved he could see after all. No matter the state of his physical eyes, he had recognized that Jesus was the Son of David. And, in a nod to the rich young man, the minute Jesus called for Bartimaeus he threw aside perhaps his only possession—his cloak. And although Jesus, after restoring his sight, told Bartimaeus to “Go,” he followed instead.

When Jesus said to his disciples that “many who are first will be last and the last first” or that “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,” Jesus wasn't laying out an alternative route to the power of kings and armies. He was laying out an alternative definition of power and a different way to think about the ways the Son of David might free his people.

Jesus was describing the kind of power he would show the next week, a power that can't corrupt those who wield it; a use of power that liberates the oppressed while, at the same time, helping the oppressor to see the world through God's compassionate eyes. At the same time that Bartimaeus gained his physical sight, the crowd learned to see, through Jesus' eyes, the dignity and worth of those begging along the road.

Sadly, for all our bluster about recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, Christians around the world, including here in the United States, right this very minute, are still walking up to Jesus with the request of James and John—asking for the seats of highest honor, and dreaming of our power over others both now and in the age to come. “Bring that rapture! Open the skies; slaughter the infidel, bring Jesus in all his glory to take us to rule with him for a thousand years!” “Jesus, we want you to do for us whatever we ask!”

Bartimaeus, the Son of Honor, knew that the favor to ask of God's anointed was not for glory, power, or wealth. The only thing necessary was to ask that Jesus' heal our blindness. If we were able to recognize our condition and make that request of Jesus—“Rabbi, I want to see”—by that act of faith we would heal ourselves. Amen.