

October 28, 2018 • Baptisms • Reception of New Members

“Take Heart!”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Jesus and his disciples had passed through Jericho. Something of a mini-LA of its time, Jericho had been recently restored by Herod the Great and was the site of his awesome new summer palace. Perhaps nowhere else in Israel at that time did wealth and poverty live so starkly side by side: prosperous courtiers, landowners, merchants, impoverished laborers, beggars...

The beggars gathered daily just outside the city gates, spreading their cloaks on the ground around them to receive a few coins, a few bits of food, anything anyone entering or leaving the city might give. Bartimaeus was there among them. There, from the sidelines of the action, from the periphery of power and empowerment, is heard a voice.

Shouting! “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Many in the crowd angrily rebuked him, ordering him to be quiet, but Bartimaeus cried out all the more loudly: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Demanding, persistent, desperate, determined, Bartimaeus would not be intimidated or deterred. “Have mercy on me.”

This story gets intense and personal real fast. Bartimaeus claims an identity. He asserts his very being out of the chaos of movement and poverty. He exacts center stage and challenges the Messiah to meet him there.

What a model of faith is Bartimaeus, especially for the more timid among us who tend to tiptoe up to God, nervously, hoping God might take a moment to see us and to listen. Instead, here’s Bartimaeus shouting: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Now. I’m ready to be made whole. I want to see it all.

But hadn’t Bartimaeus already seen enough, we might wonder? The details of the text are sketchy, but we can speculate a little...He asks to see again. Had he grown up with his sight and lost it through illness or accident? Had he not “seen” how people treated a blind beggar? He surely had “seen” their fear of him, how they related to him, passing right by as if he did not exist. Turning their heads, perhaps condescending to drop, from a safe distance, a few coins onto his cloak, a morsel of bread. And he had also “seen” a few who were kind.

Bartimaeus had no doubt “seen” violence on the streets. He had no doubt “seen” that a few luxuriated in wealth, while many barely scraped by. Bartimaeus had no doubt “seen” how the powerful could marginalize and push out the powerless, and keep them at safe distance. The blind Bartimaeus had no doubt, seen all that, and much more.

And yet, he said to the One whom he recognized as Messiah, as Son of David, as teacher, as healer—Jesus: “Let me see again.” Give me sight, Lord. Give me insight.

I think that Bartimaeus did indeed want his physical sight restored. He boldly demands Jesus’ attention, but even in so doing, assumes an attitude of prayer and supplication, acknowledging his need of God and of healing. He jumps up and throws off his cloak—his way of making a living, meager as it was—throws off that old cloak. “My teacher,” he says, “let me see again.”

I also think Bartimaeus wanted not only his sight but his insight to be made keener, that he wanted to be able to read the signs of the times. I think Bartimaeus wanted to live with his eyes wide open to everything in his world and he wanted to be participant in that world and participant in its redemption. All this, because Bartimaeus recognized Jesus as the Messiah, as the bearer of God’s New Age, in which God will restore all things and make all things beautiful and just and whole.

Remember how Mary sang of it before Jesus’ birth:

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is upon those who are in awe before him, from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever.”

This is what Bartimaeus now sees in Jesus. And Jesus looks at Bartimaeus, he sees Bartimaeus, he sees into Bartimaeus' heart, and says to him: “Go, your faith has made you well.”

Bartimaeus is made whole. We're talking healing and salvation here. Healing of body, mind, heart, and soul, to birth a new creation, an empowered child of God. Bartimaeus immediately regains his sight and moves from the sidelines to the epicenter. Bartimaeus then begins to follow Jesus on the Way, the way of a whole new life, the way of discipleship.

Ah, but the things Bartimaeus will see on that way. The full gamut of human life in all its ups and downs, its joys and its sorrows, its breakthroughs and its roadblocks, moments of accomplishment and of sheer exasperation. For the Way of Jesus leads us smack into the world, into people's lives and all the beauty and complications thereof. Following Jesus carries us into the shaping of a just and compassionate society. Following Jesus takes us into new life, a life of engagement and commitment, eyes wide open.

All of this, I'm sure, would be much too hard, were we to try and attempt it all on our own. But it is God who calls and God's people who respond together. In today's story, when Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, Jesus turns and says to the people gathered 'round: “Call him here.” Bid him come to me. And in that moment, the people around Bartimaeus are themselves healed and transformed. They see Bartimaeus with new eyes, they encourage him, saying: “Take heart. Take courage. Rise up. Jesus is calling you.”

On this very special day on which we baptize two new sisters in Christ and receive eleven new members into the fellowship of this congregation, we are powerfully reminded that this is what church is really about. We are seeing it with our own eyes this morning. This commitment one to another. Saying to them and to one another: “we are here with you and for you.”

And together with you we all belong to one another and to God. We are here to help one another hear the voice of Jesus calling to us. We are here to help one other stay focused on that beautiful new city that God is creating even now. We are here to encourage one another to reach out and invite in those on the margins, those who have been set aside and left out of the feast God has prepared for all God's children. We are here to pray one another nearer to the heart of love.

We'll sing it in our closing hymn today: “With your grace you feed us, with your light now lead us, unite us as one in this life that we share. Then may all the living with praise and thanksgiving give honor to Christ and that name which we bear.”

Take heart. Take courage. Rise up! Jesus is calling you. Jesus is calling us.

Thanks be to God! AMEN