**“Three”**

A Meditation on Mark 10: 46 – 52

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Before we enter deeply into this story, we need to acknowledge the metaphor of blindness which we so often encounter in scripture. While blindness and deafness appear over and over as symbols of those who do not understand Jesus’ ministry, we do not have to perpetuate ableist language. We can name it. We can unpack it. We can acknowledge how it can alienate and demean.

We can also celebrate passages such as this one in which the individual with the keenest insight is Bartimaeus. He is the one who recognizes Jesus not just as the “one from Nazareth,” but as the “Son of David.” His understanding far exceeds the capabilities of those in the crowd with their 20/20 vision. If we are paying attention, this irony should challenge us to check our abilities, to ask ourselves how our dependence upon our own capacities can impede our grasp of the truths before us.

What might you need to set aside so that you may enter into this story and claim it as your own?

*Life giving God, we thank you for creating us in dynamic and diverse forms. We know that you desire for us to use our gifts and talents in all variety of ways to expand your kin-dom. In those moments when our abilities impede us, when they block our participation in deeper truths, forgive us, have mercy on us. Set us free. Amen.*

Our journey with Mark is winding down. In just a few weeks, this church year will end, and the season of Advent will carry us forward into a new experience. Throughout next year, we will lean into Luke’s voice, we will experience Jesus through Luke’s pen. But for today, we still get to savor Mark. We get to hang out at Mark’s Deli – which I believe is actually next door to the Wolf and Lamb café.

We’ve been enjoying Mark’s sandwiches – how he tucks one story into another – letting the flavors of one enhance the other. It’s really one giant club sandwich, with the layers repeating themselves over and over. It is a sandwich big enough to feed an endless crowd. Something here for everyone, something here for you.

If you’ve been with us for the past few Sundays, you recognized some of these layers as today’s story was read. Just last week, Jesus was approached by James and John, and he asked them, “What do you want me to do for you?” Their response, “We want to be privileged people!” Ouch…Again, today, we hear this question, but now spoken to someone in a very different situation, and with a very different desire. And what about, “your faith has made you whole”? Haven’t we heard that somewhere? Or “take heart.” “Have courage!” Who has said that? We vaguely remember a rumor about someone ditching their cloak…think back to Holy Week…back in the garden, the unidentified figure who evades arrest by slipping out of his tunic. An intriguing baptismal image. The shedding of what does not lead to life.

Even the phrase, “on the way,” that concludes today’s passage, is one we encountered before. As the story ends, we watch Jesus walk off towards Jerusalem, towards his arrest, towards his death, but he has a new companion by his side. I imagine they can walk in comfortable silence, each resting in the knowledge that they are known. Bartimaeus “gets” Jesus, the “Son of David,” the one for whom they have been waiting. Bartimaeus trusts Jesus to be the one who brings rescue, who brings salvation. And Jesus “gets” Bartimaeus. He knows Bartimaeus as one brave enough to take a journey of faith that is anything but a “smooth path.”

Let’s pay attention to three voices, three phrases from this story:

* Bartimaeus, who cries out, “Son of David, show me mercy!”
* The crowd, who calls out, (first, “be quiet!”) “Take heart! He’s calling you!”
* Jesus, who asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

If asked, Bartimaeus could easily tick off the various ways that people respond to him, respond to his disability. There are those who pity him, perhaps even throwing a few coins his way as they pass by him. Maybe they even think to themselves, “that could be me.” There are those who ignore him, stepping around him as if he were something to be avoided. Then there are those who know his name, who know his story, who are his friend. But it wouldn’t be surprising if the majority of people simply passed him by without a word, assuming he will never know their avoidance since he can’t see them. He knew. And he longed for a different life. He doesn’t want their pity. Hearing that Jesus was passing by, he makes a radical decision. He doesn’t care what people will think of him, or if he will have to defend his choice of words, he just calls out, “Jesus, *Son of David*, show me mercy!”

Remember when Jesus asked the disciples, “who do people say that I am?” and then followed it up with, “who do YOU say that I am?” (Mark 8: 27 – 30 if you want to look back.) Some of the disciples mumbled about prophets and John the Baptist, and “prophet” was a safe answer. Jesus was doing the work of the prophets who had gone before him: healing, warning. But Peter knew that “prophet” was too safe of a response. Peter said, “You are the messiah.” Bartimaeus has listened to the stories about this Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe some of his friends have passed on not only the reports of miracles, but also the teachings, the parables. Bartimaeus isn’t just looking for a prophet. If he had been, he could have called out “Jesus of Nazareth, have mercy on me!’” But he is bolder than that. He is braver than that. He is looking for the Messiah who comes to save God’s people, to restore God’s community.

Bartimaeus cries, “Have mercy on me.” He could have cried out, “heal me!’ Or “give me back my sight!” But he cried out, “have mercy on me.” His concern went far beyond being able to use his eyes. He wanted to experience the fullness of God’s mercy.

And here’s where the crowd steps in, and we hear them say, “Take heart, he’s calling you!” But not before they say to him, “Shut up! You’re embarrassing yourself!”

“Be quiet…what do you mean calling him the ‘Son of David’?”

The unspoken message is, “Who do you think you are to ask for mercy?”

For they believe all the teachings that relate disability to sin, that relate suffering with wrongdoing. They believe he suffers for his sin, the sins of his family.

But watch how quickly they turn. From “leave him alone” their collective voice becomes, “Rise up! Take heart! He’s calling you!” That crowd is us, isn’t it? We think we know what God wants, but much of the time, we get it wrong. “Don’t bother, God,” we say to those who aren’t like us, not understanding that God very much *wants* to be bothered! God wants to be bothered by the very ones we have metaphorically left on the side of the street to beg.

And you know, I’m sure Jesus loved the crowd. He didn’t stop to shame them. He knew they would get it wrong, just as the disciples had gotten it wrong when they tried to keep young children from wasting Jesus’ time with a game of “hide and seek.” Without calling them out for their mistake, he stood in the midst of them, and said, “Would you bring him to me?”

And in that moment, the crowd takes up Jesus’ voice. “*Take heart!”* they cry. They use Jesus’ words. It is Jesus who has said these very words time and time again. To the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years,(Matthew 9) Jesus said, “*take heart,* your faith has healed you.” To the disciples, when they were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6) and Jesus came to them walking on the water, “don’t be afraid, *take heart!”* And in John’s gospel, we hear Jesus say, “in the world you will have tribulation, but *take heart*, for I have overcome the world.”

As the crowd takes up Jesus’ voice, could they have been experiencing their own mercy? Look at them! Set free from the need to put boundaries around God’s expansiveness! So often our attention is drawn to the individuals in the gospel stories and how Jesus interacts with them, but the healing often radiates out in waves and ripples. Who in this crowd will be changed by this encounter? We are left to wonder.

In response to Jesus’ invitation, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak – presumably his only possession, his shelter, his security – and comes to Jesus. He comes in vulnerability. Jesus doesn’t presume to know what he needs; he asks. “What do you want me to do for you?” One of the most important teachings in scripture. To ask someone how we can partner with them. It is a question that has forever changed how we define mission work. We no longer pick a needy place on the map and go in to “fix things” so that we can feel good about ourselves. We ask, “May we partner with you?” “How may we be present to you?” and we try to hone our listening skills.

“I just want to see,” says Bartimaeus, trusting that the rest will fall into place.

“Go, your faith has healed you,” Jesus answers. But instead of going home, Bartimaeus joins Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. He will be there as friends place their cloaks on a donkey. He will be there as Jesus takes a donkey ride across the cloaks that others have spread across the road. As he looks at those cloaks, he will remember his own, left behind, given away, also in celebration of the Son of David.

And somehow, I see Bartimaeus, running alongside Jesus’ donkey, always there in the corner of Jesus’ eye. A symbol of hope as Jesus made this hard, hard journey. A testimony of the power of God to restore God’s people. And I think it’s also entirely possible that as Jesus looked over at his newest companion, he heard him calling out the words, “Take heart, Jesus. Rise up and take heart.”