

When We Were Like Those Who Dream
Mark 10:46^b-52; Psalm 126

Mark 10:46-52

⁴⁶As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”

⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

⁵¹Then 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.”

⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”

Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Psalm 126

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;

then it was said among the nations,

“The LORD has done great things for them.”

³The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. ■

The Sermon

A retired pastor friend who also serves as a guest organist in churches around central North Carolina listens to several different services each Sunday. He told me that this year, as churches enter the high holy days in the liturgical calendar known as Stewardship Season, he hasn't been hearing the same kind of stewardship-season preaching we usually hear this time of year.

He said people seem to be treading a little more lightly these days, which, he added, is probably a good idea.

I confirmed that, somehow, something would feel almost tone deaf, right now, about a lot of the stewardship season preaching from previous years that I've heard, and that I have offered myself. ("Don't Be a Flat Tire on the Chariot of the Lord.")

This is still, in some ways, a delicate time, a nomadic time, a time of being exiled, displaced from a world we used to know.

This autumn finds us flawed but faithful disciples making our way forward on a dimly lit path: an old road, whose foundation is long established and whose milestones are venerable, but in the ever changing environment we find ourselves in, we can't be as sure-footed, in some ways, as we were before: it's not as easy to see where to put our feet down as we step carefully along this good, old road.

My email inbox is stuffed full of testimonies of churches, congregations and pilgrims who were blithely marching along, confidently walking the way we did in 1953, or 1986, or February, 2020—

and suddenly finding themselves plunged into muddy puddles of irreconcilable expectations, or stumbling into the roadside bramble of people wanting things to be the way they used to be even as everything *else* is *different* than it used to be.

So we walk our pathway gingerly, adjusting our eyes to the softer light, praying prayers of gratitude for safe passage and prayers of strength and comfort for those who struggle.

The details may not always be clear in terms of what awaits us on the journey immediately ahead—this calendar year or next, this liturgical year or next, this budget year or next; but the promise of our ultimate destination is clearer than it ever has been.

It is not to wait passively for a distant, alien afterlife of eternal glory,

but to recognize, in the intersection of the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross, heaven and earth united here and now, in which we can say with Revelation 21: See, the home of God is among mortals; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them, and will wipe every tear from their eyes; and Death will be no more; and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

“To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life...and I will be their God, and they will be my children.”ⁱ

The road we travel has always led to that destination, and it still does.

Jesus didn't tell his disciples, “Just wait till after you die; that's when it gets better.” He told us to start living into the reality of the Kingdom of God right now, immediately, by being hands and feet and voices for God

in the world. He says: Come along, and follow. We're going to be picking up friends along the Way.

Bartimaeus was sitting by the roadside just outside Jericho. He was blind, and known by the locals as a perpetual panhandler. Some knew his Dad, Timaeus, and probably thought of him with some empathy, some concern, and some misplaced judgement over “whatever must have happened in that family to have caused” things to turn out this way for Timaeus's son.

Welcome to a day in the life of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, of the greater Jericho area.

I'm told that those who are deprived of one of the senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch—tend to have at least one other sense magnified.

I wondered if perhaps Bartimaeus was able to perceive something a little bit differently than the people around him when it became audible (the Greek word for “having heard” is ἀκούσας, as in “acoustic”) that the large crowd that was moving down the road on the way out of Jericho had Jesus at its center.

This week, Dr. M. Leona Godin, a writer, performer, and educator who some years ago developed a condition called central vision loss, had a piece published in the New York Timesⁱⁱ in which she talked about how representations of “disabled people's lives are [often] flattened into saccharine narratives about overcoming adversity, usually designed to make nondisabled people feel uplifted and grateful.”

She mentioned that although Helen Keller “often put forth an uplifting message, she did not shy away from challenging her simplified public image and the assumptions held by the audiences who came to see her.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And Dr. Godin mentioned “the extremes of disabled representation that we usually find in mainstream media—superhuman disabled people on the one hand, pitiful creatures in need of a cure on the other.”^{iv}

Bartimaeus isn’t presented as either superhuman or pathetic—just a guy about whom we know only a little of his background, his condition, and how he managed to make a living.

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

A bunch of people were “rebuking” him “that he should be silent,” according to Mark, but he just cried out even louder.

Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.”

And they called Bartimaeus, and they said, “Take courage,” or “take comfort—rise up—he is calling you.” And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

And Jesus said, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus said, “Teacher, let me have sight.”

Jesus said, “Go on! Your faith has healed you.”

Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the road.

I wonder why some in the crowd had tried to get Bartimaeus to stop crying out—begging, as people had seen him do a hundred times—for Jesus to have mercy on him. They wanted him to keep it down, stop making a spectacle of yourself, quit being a nuisance. Stay in your lane. Control yourself.

Maybe they were embarrassed at somebody being so nakedly emotional and desperate. Keep your cloak on, Bartimaeus, and stay silent.

Maybe his begging or his blindness or both had long since become something they just didn't like to see.

Maybe the sight of him being who he was and doing what he did dredged up from deep inside of them some visceral feeling—and of course they'd never say this out loud, even to themselves—but maybe something about the sight of this broken person, secretly, in their heart of hearts, made them feel a disgust toward him, not entirely unlike hatred.

Bartimaeus, just by being there, reminded them of the vulnerability of the human condition: that not only are we all mortal, but *parts* of us are mortal. Our faculties, our abilities, don't come with a lifetime guarantee.

Maybe every part of their lives was about trying to concoct or construct or conjure a world where that simply couldn't be possible.

And seeing him out there every day was incontrovertible evidence that it could happen to anybody. Wasn't that Timaeus's son? I knew Timaeus. How in the world could *this* have happened to somebody who's just like us?

Maybe seeing Bartimaeus, and how he struggled to survive—not to mention mourning the loss of the gift of sight that he had once had—just made them afraid. And when you're trying to create a reality in which you don't have to be afraid—stockpiling weapons or hoarding goods or accumulating money or whatever other illusions of invulnerability you can conjure—you can't tolerate anything that raises the curtain on what we're really afraid of.

Just this week, Seth Godin^v wrote,

We'd probably be better off if we could simply say, "I'm afraid."

Our culture has persistently reminded us that the only thing to fear is fear itself, that confessing fear is a failure and that it's better to lie than to appear un-brave.

And so we pretend to be experts in public health and epidemiology instead of simply saying, "I'm afraid."

We fight possible change from the start instead of examining it on the merits.

And we make uninformed assertions about the causes and implications of global phenomena instead of acknowledging that change is scary.

Fear of being afraid keeps things on our to-do list forever, keeps important conversations from happening and shifts how we see our agency and leverage in the world.

The bravest leaders and contributors aren't worried about appearing afraid. It allows them to see the world more clearly.^{vi}

Centuries before Bartimaeus haunted the streets of Jericho,
God said through Isaiah,

"I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground."^{vii}

There were others there that day—or maybe it was some of the same people—who, when Jesus said, "Call him here," said to Bartimaeus, "Take courage," or "take comfort; rise up, Bartimaeus! He is calling you."

In some ways, we're all Bartimaeus, asking God to restore our vision so we can see the beauty and truth of God's presence and sovereignty in the world—as well as seeing more clearly the condition of the world and all its people, and how God wants to use us to bring healing and light and hope, peace, justice, and love.

In some ways, we are the disciples walking with Jesus, trying our best to follow where he leads—even as we lose our bearings, bounce off telephone poles, trip over dog leashes in the public square—

and hearing his voice, and doing our inadequate best to listen to his words and understand what he means and then try to figure out what he wants us to do with it.

We're kind of Bartimaeus, and we're kind of the disciples, but most certainly, we are the people in the crowd.

We are the ones who are hearing Bartimaeus cry out for mercy.

We can try to silence him; or hope we can just ignore him, feigning deafness if we have to;

or, when his presence and his clamoring for mercy finally become too threatening or too embarrassing, we can distance ourselves from him, or try to get him dragged off, or let him be locked out.

Or we can be the ones who encourage him and offer him strength.

We can help him to his feet, and cheer for him, and stand by him as he rises up.

We can follow his example of bravely crying out for mercy in a world that's more comfortable with people who declare their own supremacy.

We can celebrate with him when he hears the voice of God calling him to come along on the most amazing journey.

We can make sure Bartimaeus is included and not excluded, is respected and accorded the dignity of a child of God, is allowed to use his voice, and earn a living, and be heard, and be seen.

We can welcome him on our journey, and ask to join his. And we can walk this road following Jesus together.

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.*

Some decades ago, James T. Fatzinger offered this prayer:

“Sometimes, God, we do not expect too much from you;
we expect too little.
Our lives are not filled with great expectations.
Sometimes your promises seem so outlandish,
so unlikely as to be laughable.
We are afraid that your promise, like our promises,
may be broken,
and we are hesitant to be so vulnerable.
Sometimes we are afraid your promises may come true
and demand too much of us.
Help us to cling to your promises
and laugh with joy
when impossibilities come true through Jesus Christ.”^{viii}

“I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,” says Isaiah,
“by paths they have not known I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,

the rough places into level ground.
 These are the things I will do,
 and I will not forsake them.”^{ix}

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
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ⁱ Revelation 21:1-7

ⁱⁱ M. Leona Godin, “Helen Keller and the Problem of ‘Inspiration Porn’” (New York Times, October 21, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/opinion/helen-keller.html>)

ⁱⁱⁱ M.L. Godin, “Helen Keller”

^{iv} M.L. Godin, “Helen Keller”

^v Seth Godin is no relation, as far as I am aware, to Dr. M. Leona Godin, quoted earlier.

^{vi} Seth Godin, “Afraid of Afraid.” Seth’s Blog, October 22, 2021

^{vii} Isaiah 42:15-16

^{viii} JTF, in Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi, eds. Touch Holiness (The Pilgrim Press, 1990)

^{ix} (Isaiah 42:15-16)