

Both of our lessons today feature dramatic changes in circumstances and the impact those changes make. In that gorgeous Psalm 126, we are gaining an insight into what it was like for the Hebrew people who were suffering in Babylonian exile to return to their beloved homeland. Their tears and weeping were exchanged for shouts of joy. Their grief filled efforts to be able to produce a harvest yielded a joyous and abundant return. Profound change has happened; the old ways have given way to a new future for them as a nation, and they are filled with gratitude towards God.

In our Gospel lesson, a blind beggar receives his sight. While the Psalm deals with *national* change, this lesson deals with *individual* healing and change. Because everything is changed for our blind beggar, too, as we will explore shortly. For him also, the old ways have given way to a new future, and he is also filled with gratitude towards God for this change.

In both our lessons, then, we see times of turmoil and change, of new directions forward from the challenges of the past. Before we look more closely at our Gospel lesson for today, let's just think about ourselves and our present context for a moment, to see how it compares. I'm guessing our nation's situation cannot compare to the drama of the Hebrew people in exile, nor can our individual changes quite compare to that of our blind beggar in Mark 10. Nevertheless, I think that individually and nationally, we are also in a time of tension and stress and change. It feels as though our community and church have been hit hard recently with deaths and illnesses. Our country faces a divisive election in a time of polarization. Individual grief and national stress are a potent combination. I find myself simply wanting to verbalize and recognize that this time, right now, is a difficult time for many of us. In such times, it matters all the more that we are kind and patient with others and with ourselves. Let me add, that with any luck, two Sundays from now, the election will be over; whatever the result, we are still followers of Jesus, still siblings with one another in Christ, still part of one nation that will need to find a way to move forward together. It's also true that over time, our own individual griefs will change, and we will need to find ways to honor the losses we've experienced while remaining

faithful and moving forward. Maybe more than we sometimes realize, we are *always* in times of turmoil and change, needing to grieve or heal or find a renewed sense of forward direction. To that extent, we may well understand the poignancy of Psalm 126 when exiles come home to their nation or the desperation that drives our blind Bartimaeus, as well as his reaction to being given his sight.

Let's consider Bartimaeus. We know several things about him. We know his name, Bartimaeus. We know he was the son of Timaeus. We know he's blind, although we don't know how that came about. It seems he once could see, as his plea to Jesus is to see *again*---not to see for the first time ever. And we know he was a beggar. In 1st C. Palestine, there *was no* societal safety net for the desperate apart from begging. Most people were poor, but beggars were a class of people generally physically disabled; the blind, the lame, the diseased. All of these conditions were far more common at that time, in an age lacking the kind of health care we have. Some scholars suggest beggars were given begging-cloaks by the community, as a kind of recognition of their plight and to provide that small gesture of assistance. That cloak meant, in essence, that the person who wore it had the right to beg. Bartimaeus, blind, would be unable to work, unable to support a family, unable to participate in many religious rituals or duties. He was very likely homeless, the poorest among the poor. The one *material* possession he owned was very possibly his cloak that is referenced in our lesson. And he will throw off this cloak when Jesus calls to him, an act of staggering courage. But Bartimaeus also possessed some *non-material* qualities of *character* that enable him to throw off his cloak. What were they?

For one thing, Bartimaeus has faith and insight. He is the first one in Mark's Gospel to use the title "Son of David" in speaking of or to Jesus—and "Son of David" was a title for the Messiah. There is irony here; although blind and disabled, Bartimaeus somehow "sees" what those with good eyesight and whole bodies have missed; he perceives Jesus is the Christ, and he believes that this Christ can bring him healing.

Equally importantly, Bartimaeus is *bold*. Science teaches us that if one of our senses is disabled, we may have other senses that grow sharper to compensate; the blind person may be far more acutely tuned into hearing and touch, for example, than the person with sight. In the case of Bartimaeus, it would seem his

compensating factor for blindness was that he possessed an excellent set of vocal cords, and he wasn't afraid to use them. He can't see, but he can make a ruckus! And he proceeds to do so. Hearing that Jesus is passing by, he shouts out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Nothing shy, retiring, or diffident about Bartimaeus. He probably wouldn't fit in well with our generally self-effacing and laid-back Midwest culture. Actually, he didn't fit in so well with his *own* culture either, did he? Although begging was recognized as the only recourse of the disabled in this time, and good Jews were instructed to give alms to beggars, beggars were still looked down upon. Those around them preferred that beggars be seen if they *must* be, but preferably not *heard*. The crowd's reaction to Bartimaeus' shouting, we are told is that "many sternly ordered him to be quiet". Obviously, they considered him a noisy nuisance and didn't want to hear from him. For just a moment, let's leave our consideration of Bartimaeus and allow this text to challenge *us* when we put ourselves in the place of this crowd. Because I can't help but wonder if we, like them, tend to prefer that people with troubles keep them to themselves. Whether it's that we grow weary of the laments of someone we see regularly, or whether as a culture we prefer whole groups of people raising a concern to pipe down and be quiet, I'm guessing we also are quick to shush people and dismiss their concerns. As a whole, we are not initially open to listening when oppressed or unjustly treated people try and make a little noise, whether it's civil rights or the treatment of the homeless or what have you. Our default setting is often to say, sternly, "Be quiet". I think this Scripture asks of us to reflect upon that tendency of ours to resist the voices of the troubled and to quiet the voices of those who struggle.

But returning to Bartimaeus, he will not be resisted or quieted. His bold nature asserts itself before our very eyes. When told to be quiet, we read, "he cried out even more loudly"! He will not be silenced; he will not shut up and go away. He presents us with a model of persistence and boldness before God, and he's about to present us with a model of courage and honesty, too. Because Jesus responds to his ruckus- raising by requesting Bartimaeus come forward to him. And at this point, the crowd changes their attitude. They go from shushing Bartimaeus to encouraging him. They tell him, "take heart; get up, he is calling you." Aren't those powerful words for any of us to say to one another? "Take heart; get up; Christ is calling you." And here's

where we get back to cloaks---because we are told, “Throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” “Throwing off his cloak”.....think what that meant to blind Bartimaeus. His only material possession. His one source of warmth and comfort. His one sense of identification as one who is allowed to beg and thus survive. That cloak represents Bartimaeus’ way of life, wretched though it has been, and to throw it off in order to spring up and embrace the healing Jesus will offer seems to me to require jaw-dropping courage. And if we, again, were to let this text challenge *us*....can we, like Bartimaeus throw off some part of our lives that is holding us back, that is tethering us to a troubled past, in order to receive healing from Christ in the present? Our cloak might be fear, anger, guilt....something that robs us of joy and keeps us from embracing the future God offers us....can *we* throw off that cloak to discover how God may bring healing and a renewed vision of the future into our lives?

Bartimaeus *can* do this, and throwing his cloak and springing towards Jesus, he now has a starkly honest conversation with Christ. Jesus asks him a question that perhaps he asks us as well, a question that cuts through our pretenses and facades. Simply he says, “What do you want me to do for you?” How would *we* answer, if Christ asked that of us....”What do you want me to do for you?” Would we have enough courage and honesty to lay bare the deepest desires of our hearts? *Bartimaeus* answers honestly and plainly. He doesn’t put on a show of being stronger than he is or clothe his need in piety or take an indirect approach, he just lays his deepest need right out there for Jesus: “Let me see again.” And as a result of this courageous and honest encounter, Bartimaeus regains his sight and proceeds to follow the One who returned his vision to him.

Now just for a moment I’m going to ask us all to do a little textual comparison and analysis between *this* healing of a blind man in chapter 10 and a healing of a *different* blind man that happens just two chapters earlier in this same Gospel of Mark, in chapter 8. We had *that* text a few months back, but to refresh your memory: an unnamed blind man is brought by friends to Jesus. Jesus heals the man’s blindness using spit and touching his eyes. He twice lays hands on him to accomplish the complete healing, and then he sends the man home.

So, how are these healings the same? Both involve the recovery of sight to one who is blind, through a healing act of Jesus. But in other ways they are quite different. It seems possible that the man in Mark 8 was born blind, while Bartimaeus *became* blind through an accident or illness---*different kinds of blindness*. Extending that metaphor, what kind of blindness might we have? We're not all the same, we wear different sets of blinders as a result of our past or our prejudices or our preconceptions.

Next, the blind man in Mark 8 is brought to Jesus by friends. He doesn't need to be assertive or humble himself to ask for help or cry out or put out much effort at all. Bartimaeus, in contrast, is initially on his own. The crowd at first wants him to be quiet. He has to shout as loud as he can to get Christ's attention, and he does so. Once Jesus asks him to come forward, the crowd begins to encourage him, and then he *springs* forward to come to Jesus, willing to lay aside his precious cloak. To extend the metaphor further—don't *we* come to Jesus by differing paths, each of our journeys unique? We may be helped or hindered by others around us, we may have to get noisy and persistent, or we may simply receive grace unexpectedly. But our “come to Jesus moments” are as unique to us as these two men's were to them. And that's ok!

In healing the blind man in Mark 8, Jesus gets messy, uses saliva, touches his eyes. Instead, Bartimaeus is healed through his honest expression of need and simply by a word from Christ. In Mark 8, Jesus repeats the healing act twice; it's a process. For Bartimaeus in Mark 10, it's a one-time declaration of healing. Just as is true for us, healing comes in different forms, it may be a process over time or may be quick, it may get messy or may not. As we've noticed before, there is no one-size-fits-all for the healings of Jesus. Each is individualized, personalized, meeting the one involved where they're at. There's no one right or wrong way to seek healing or to receive it. God sees us and responds to us as an individual, hard though that is to believe. That's good and freeing news for us. But this particular healing of Bartimaeus, which we have before us this morning, is---in every way and with pun intended—an eye opener.

I love this story. I love Bartimaeus. I hope you do, too. He has so much to teach us here about courage and making our voices heard and being open to change. His willingness to let go of parts of his past in order to

enter a renewed future is deeply inspiring. And we learn so much about the nature of *Christ* in this story---we learn how God Incarnate listens to the cries of the troubled, how God interacts honestly and directly, how God can bring healing and open up new future vistas that couldn't be seen before. Right now, between a looming national election and our own personal griefs or troubles, we may have a hard time seeing a future. God has a future for us; God will show us a way forward. God does this for others, including those we try to shush. And God also does this for us, even if others shush us. Can we throw off our cloak--whatever it is that stops us from springing to Jesus for healing and help? Can we lay bare our hearts and needs when Christ asks us, "what do you want me to do for you?" Amen.