

Sermon - Proper 25, Year B
Bartimaeus/Throwing Off the Cloak
10/27/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Gospel this morning, we meet Jesus and his disciples again along the road up to Jerusalem. In the very beginning of the ninth chapter of Mark, Jesus takes three of his closest friends up to the top of Mount Tabor where they witness the event we call the Transfiguration. Jesus appears suddenly bathed in white light, his clothes shining like the stars, and he reveals to them the mysterious and remarkable reality of his communion with almighty God. You may remember that in the story, Peter is so overcome by beauty that he longs to just stay on the mountain top – “rabbi, let us build three tents.” But Jesus insists that they travel back down the mountain, and this begins his journey to Jerusalem where he will eventually be crucified.

For the past several weeks, we have heard the stories together about the various encounters that take place along the way. Jesus heals a boy seized by an evil spirit. He teaches his disciples about sin and about patience. He offers some challenging reflections about divorce and wealth, and he welcomes a flock of little children into his arms for blessing. Today, we find Jesus in Jericho, about one to two days walk from Jerusalem. This is the last stop before he will reach his destination. The very next event in the Gospel of Mark is the story we recognize from Palm Sunday: Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds hailing him, “Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

But before the calamitous happenings in Jerusalem, Jesus stops along the road. A blind man named Bartimaeus calls out to him: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” The passage tells us that “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’”

Jesus calls Bartimaeus to come near. The crowd, suddenly a bit more kind, insists, “take heart, he is calling you.” And so the man stands, throws off his cloak, and approaches Jesus, who speaks with him, eventually restoring the man’s sight and welcoming another follower along his way.

This is a beautiful portion of the Gospel for several reasons, but this morning, I want to draw our attention to a small detail with very powerful implications. In all of the Gospels – and especially in the very clear, very succinct Gospel of Mark – every detail of the text teaches us something. Every single recollection of this holy story extends a hand in invitation to us. And we receive something wonderful this morning:

Did you notice the detail about the cloak? “So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” This is verse 50 in chapter 10 – the whole verse. It can be easy to miss, but it is worth remembering what this cloak meant to the blind Bartimaeus. A blind person at the time of Jesus was considered either a great tragedy or a great burden. If someone was blind and did not have the care of their family, they were left to a life of begging for charity, usually at the gates of a synagogue or somewhere in the town square. They were homeless, sleeping on the streets and exposed to the weather, and a large cloak was often the only lifeline. A cloak was a bed. A cloak was a shelter from the elements. A cloak hid the face – it was some protection from being fully seen and known and shamed. A cloak was the symbol of the beggar, the outcast, and the forgotten. A cloak somehow served both to separate the blind man from the rest of society *and* to protect him from it. To be without his cloak was to be functionally naked, exposed, and in danger.

In the final verses here of chapter ten, we see something extraordinary. Jesus calls the man forward, and immediately, ***Bartimaeus throws off his cloak***. It is worth spending a few

moments in these precious seconds. This moment is before Jesus has even asked Bartimaeus what he wants. This is before Jesus has done any healing. At this moment in time, Bartimaeus does not yet know what will happen next. Jesus could scold him. Jesus could simply bless him and move on toward Jerusalem. **Bartimaeus has no idea what is about to happen to him, and yet in this radical act of trust and faith, he throws off the entirety of his protection and his comfort.** This is Jericho – a bustling city of trade and chaos and thieves! At any minute, someone from the crowd could have no scruples about stealing something that a beggar has left behind. A good cloak, after all, could go for a good price. I once set a pair of boots down at a bus stop in downtown Philadelphia while I adjusted some things, and before I could even turn around, they'd been stolen. And I can usually see pretty well. For Bartimaeus, this cloak was both his protection and his shame, and here, in the presence of Jesus, *he throws the cloak away.*

There is a special invitation for us here. Bartimaeus did not fully know who Jesus was (and certainly the crucifixion and Resurrection had not yet taken place), and yet Bartimaeus trusted in what he'd heard and in the small, precious things he *did* know enough to stand and throw off the burden of his cloak and follow Christ. He threw off the cloak even though he did not yet know he would be healed.

I wonder what cloaks we might be hiding under today. I wonder what things we all cling to for protection or maybe to stop others from truly seeing the fullness of our faces or our hearts. We might not yet know everything we hope to know about Jesus – we don't know if or how we will be healed – and yet he calls to us, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Perhaps you know right away what your cloak might be. Maybe you know that you worry too much about appearing perfect or about money or your health or your reputation. Maybe you know you spend too much time on social media or reading the news or judging others or feeling

self pity. If you aren't sure what your cloak is, think for a moment about whether there is anything you worry about or cling to every day before you pray. Think about what keeps you up at night, the thing or things that even your faith can't seem to soothe right now. It's okay to recognize them. These things are simply a part of human life. Maybe these worries or actions have protected you. Maybe they are even precious to you quite simply because you do not know what your life would look like without them.

But in the weeks ahead, imagine these things as a cloak. Imagine that Jesus stops before you on the road, and invites *you* to come forward and be near to him. What would it feel like to cast this cloak to the side? What would it be like to allow Jesus to meet you fully, face to face? To listen to his voice as he insists with gentleness and surety – **to you**: “My brother, my sister – go; your faith has made you well.”

Amen.