

Blind Spots
Jeremiah 31:7-9, Mark 10:46-52
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
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Is there any more quintessential miracle of Jesus than healing a blind person? You know Jesus, you know Jesus healed people, and you know that meant healing blind people. As a kid in Vacation Bible School, I learned the song “Blind Man Sat By the Road and he Cried” — do you know that one? And for many people, one of the best know of all hymns is a favorite, where we get to sing out those words “Was Blind, But Now I See!!” with such joy!

There are a few different scriptural records of Jesus healing a blind person. They all have value, but that said this one speaks to me quite loudly, and maybe you too. As pastor, I need to be mindful of how I preach one of these stories, after all, I bet you would agree that I’d offer a different take on blindness to a congregation of people who themselves were blind. Able-ism is frequently a challenge when preaching these ancient texts. Please know that I am trying my best.

That in mind, let’s look at the context of this message within the scripture. I love how this starts off. They came to Jericho. As they were leaving Jericho, something noteworthy took place. Did you catch that? If you look away for just a second and you will miss it. The focus is not Jericho—oldest city in the world, city where the Israelites entered the promised land, city of Joshua, city of Rahab, city of Herod’s winter palace, city where the Romans were very present. This is one of the great cities of the ancient world! And yet Jericho here is just a pit stop on Jesus’ preaching tour. Jericho is so uneventful that the moment Jesus arrives he leaves again!

Well, maybe not precisely, but from the Gospel writer’s point of view it might as well have happened that way. Point being that this reminds us that sometimes the important stuff doesn’t happen in the important places, or to the important people. It doesn’t mean that Jesus was never there, or that we should ignore the powerful—but if that isn’t Jesus’ focus, maybe we shouldn’t get too hung up on the powerful in our own world either. Our takeaway is that despite all of the

political, historical and theological high points of Jericho, in the end this isn't what matters. What matters? A blind beggar man on the side of the road on the other side of the city.

The scripture here is cheeky in how it tells us who we are dealing with. Something is literally lost in translation. We are told this is "Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus"—that may not sound odd in English, but in Hebrew, Bar means Son Of, so Bar-Timaeus means Son of Timeaus—so the scripture reads that they came across Son of Timaeus, you know, Timaeus's son—so the writer is really hammering this point home. And Timaeus means "unclean." In recent times, we are starting to have a better understanding of communities and people who are marginalized, people that are irrelevant to society as it is. This guy is marginalized of the marginalized - blind (strike 1), beggar (strike 2), and he is Bar-Timaeus, or literally "son of the unclean" (strike 3). There are just a few words being used to set up the situation, but that situation is absolutely loaded with meaning—and we are just getting started!

What does the blind man do? He starts shouting out "Son of David!!!" as loud as he can. I can't think of any modern analog for what this guy is doing here. This is tremendously political, because if you call this guy Son of David, then you are saying that he is the one who rightfully belongs on the throne, and when you say this within earshot of violent Roman occupiers, you are not just risking your life, you are risking that they might take this as a call for rebellion against the Emperor and kill everyone, just to be on the safe side. This is highly political, and terribly dangerous—the blind unclean beggar heralds Jesus as the Messiah and heir to the throne of David. And what does everybody do? They tell him to shut up. Probably less politely than that. Maybe more like "be quiet or you are going to get us all killed." Also note that the text says they sternly ordered him to be quiet. None of them seem to have thought he was a fool, none of them seem to think he was wrong. As a blind, unclean beggar, perhaps they believe Bar-timaeus is not worthy to call out to Jesus.

Come to think of it, maybe there are some modern analogs to what is happening here. Every time I've seen protestors by the side of the road, calling out, I see people telling them to be quiet, that no one wants to hear from them—but usually much more rudely than that, with rude hand signs choreographed to go along with rough language. One commentator I read referenced the

mainline churches who urged Dr. King to tone down his rhetoric, saying we hear you asking for racial equality, but be quiet and we will help you when we are good and ready, and stop making a ruckus in the meantime.

Any time we hear people crying out for justice, we may be reminded of Bar Timaeus and his disruptive discontent. He is not willing to remain by the side of the road, quiet enough that people can ignore him. He is unwilling to accept the situation as it is and demands action. He approaches Jesus naked—all pretensions and clothing removed- literally bared before God. Well, maybe—that is what some commentators think, so maybe yes or maybe no—but throwing off his garment before approaching Jesus is quite an image. Whether you think he was now literally naked or not, he forcefully makes his point.

Even after all of that, here is the thing that really gets me about this passage.

Bartimaeus perceives what the others cannot, much like the demons who get frightened when they recognize Jesus for who he is. Bartimaeus is doing the same thing. He is proclaiming the arrival of the Messiah, and that the Messiah is going to take action. This is a big deal for so many reasons.

For one, look at what comes in the scripture immediately after this little story. Palm Sunday, when many people come out into the street to do the exact same thing that this blind beggar does. They cry out, calling him Son of David, loudly, again and again, and many even throw their cloaks in front of him. Bar Timaeus is, in a very real sense, that first person that kicked off the Palm Sunday entry into the city, the one who got it all started.

There is another very important thing happening here. Put simply, the blind man is the only one who can truly see what is happening, and the only one who can see what is about to happen. The scripture is filled with stories of people who are spiritually blind. Bar Timaeus is actually blind, but spiritually has a more clear understanding than the disciples do.

- Peter doesn't see what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, and rebukes Jesus when he is told that the road he has described leads to the cross,
- Peter James and John don't see the importance of the Transfiguration and want to stay on the mountain, rather than to descend to the work that waits,
- The disciples cannot see that to be greatest is to be least, and that the old way of doing things is in process of being turned upside down.

Before Sunday morning worship, for some weeks now a few of us have been reading and discussing a book called *God and the Pandemic* by theologian N.T. Wright, which goes into some theological depth in looking at what has happened in the world over the past two years, what continues to happen in the world right now, today, and the author has some questions. The primary question is a good one, where is God in all of this? plus other questions, like how ought we respond to the realities of this coronavirus pandemic? We in the class are starting to consider another really big one: as Christians and as the church, what do we do now?

Near the beginning of the book, Wright talks about how in a sense, the pandemic really hasn't much changed the world. Instead, it pulled back a curtain that had been covering up a lot of things that have now come to light. That hit me like a bolt from the sky, because we in the church have a name for this sort of thing, and this concept addresses a LOT of questions. That word is apocalypse, and I have come to firmly believe that we are currently living in a time of apocalypse. Before I say another word, I must clarify what that means. In contemporary American society, we tend to think of this word as meaning the end of everything, the destruction of everything. That is not at all what I am saying, or thinking, or meaning!

An apocalypse is a disclosure or revelation of great knowledge. In religious concepts an apocalypse usually discloses something very important that was hidden, or provides what Bart Ehrman has termed, "A vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities." Our earthly realities don't always make a lot of sense, and when you try to figure it out, our earthly realities can be somewhat frightening. The heavenly secrets are letting us know that we are living in a time of transition. One thing is ending, and another thing is being birthed, right now.

Of course, if you really love the way things are going, so that you have all the societal privilege, any change away from that is not good news. If you are told we will move into a time of ending how things are, and into a new reality, this is terrifying, and may well seem like the end of the world.

How about if you are someone who has lost your job, lost your health care, have been gerrymandered out of a vote, and know what it means to kiss your children goodbye in the morning, not knowing if you will ever see them alive again? If you are marginalized, if you are the one at the side of the road shouting out for mercy, shouting out that Black Lives Matter, and being told to shut it even as racist violence rages on unabated, and now it's all coming to an end so that something new can be birthed? This is very, very good news indeed!

And blind son of uncleanliness, Bar Timaeus himself, is the only one here other than Jesus that can see things for what they are, who can really see the world that is about to come into being, where king Jesus reigns. If apocalypse is disclosing something very important that was hidden, then what is it being disclosed in our own time, revealed by pandemic? Well, we see how fragile our society really is, as healthcare systems are overwhelmed, as people turn on one another over anything and everything, as income inequality worsens, jobs are lost, supply chains disrupted, climate change rages to an inflection point, and we face an epidemic of people being lonely and depressed. Lots of people quitting their jobs, I'm guessing because they had been forced to reconsider the priorities of their lives. And on, and on.

Visionaries and prophets say what God tells them to say, and so they have knowledge that the rest of us lack, and often warn us of what it coming, and to change our ways. Prophets were just as ignored in antiquity as they are in our own time, and probably just as disdained, too. Shut up and sit down, that's how to treat their kind.

Well, remember the words we just heard from the prophet Jeremiah:

I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back

If you are blind Bartimaeus and are told that God will gather up the blind and the lame to his own self, weeping, and will console them personally? That is very welcome news! And if you ignore the blind and the lame begging outside your building, and you hear that an army of them will gather, led by God—that isn't consoling, is it?

What else? The man runs to Jesus, who says to him “What do you want me to do for you?” Picture that! You'd think it would be obvious—he is blind, you heal the blind, perhaps he wants healing—but Jesus asks him the question. I think there is something positive to be said for asking someone just how you can help them, rather than assuming you know what needs to be done. If Jesus could ask before acting, then we can do that too. You respect the persons agency, and you allow them in a small way to participate in what happens next.

What is the takeaway? What are our spiritual blind spots? Where do we need to have our sight restored? The positive thing about apocalypse is that it forces us to reconsider all of these things, while offering us an opportunity for a fresh start, and what does the kingship of Jesus mean if not a fresh start for all who claim him?

How often do we overlook the important moments of life in favor of what we think should be important? eg: The brief encounter before church, The person we bump into at the grocery store, the gas station clerk on the way to church. Life happens in the “pit stops” and sometimes the most inconvenient interruption can be transformative and life changing. Jericho is important, just as we have centers of power in our lives—but don't neglect what happens on the way there, or what is hidden on the way out.

Engaging with people shouting at the side of the road means challenging the order of things, after all they are never calling out for no reason. Are we willing to hear what they have to say? That is risky, because if we hear them, we might need to do something about it. Are we willing to speak out against rampant gun violence and school shootings, or any number of untenable situations?

What else? When you hear this story read, who are you? For most of us, I'd say we are the ones living in Jericho—after all, we are part of comfortable society, with the relative safety and security of the status quo. Jericho gives us a paycheck at the end of each month. Are we willing to step outside the walls of Jericho? That's where Jesus is, after all, meeting those who don't fit in. More than that, the gift of Jesus isn't helping them to fit it with polite society. The blind man doesn't ask to be welcomed into Jericho. Bartimaeus says let me see, and let me be part of a world where the Son of David is the sovereign.

God, help us to envision a world with your eyes, and to see a world where Jesus, Son of David, reigns as sovereign. May it be so. Amen.