

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 25
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 24, 2021
Jeremiah 31:7-9
Psalm 126
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

After Blindness, Following Jesus on the Way

Today we continue with Jesus in his final journey toward Jerusalem. He began this journey way to the east of the Jordan River in the region called Perea, a region associated with struggle. That was our gospel two Sundays ago.

Then last week, while on the road and still on the eastern side of the Jordan River, Jesus taught about servant leadership in response to the kerfuffle kicked up by the audacious request of James and John to be given places on his right and his left when he at last reigns supreme.

Today, Jesus, his twelve core male disciples, and the growing crowd that is traveling with them cross the Jordan River at a place where the people of Israel and many other peoples have crossed that river for centuries upon centuries. That place of crossing is Jericho.

The Hebrew scriptures describe Jericho as a city of palm trees. Think: oasis. From the desert wilderness of Perea on eastern side of the Jordan into the desert wilderness of Judea on the western side. And, in between, a city with shade and water.

Jericho is thought to be the oldest city in the world, dating from as early as 12,000 BCE. It is also the oldest continually inhabited city on earth.

Jericho is that place where the Israelites led by Joshua many centuries before Jesus crossed into the promised land. They took the city of Jericho by a most unusual and miraculous means. Do you remember? They marched around it for seven days as God instructed, and the walls came tumbling down. This is probably the most famous Jericho story, but it also figures in stories connected to King David, the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and others besides.

And, I suspect we all remember that Jericho has a supporting role in what is probably the most famous of all Jesus' teaching stories: the one we call the parable of the Good Samaritan. The man who is beaten and left for dead in the ditch is traveling the lonely wilderness road from Jerusalem down to Jericho.

In today's gospel, Jesus and his growing entourage are about to take that wilderness road from Jericho up to Jerusalem. And I do mean up. For, in addition to being earth's oldest and longest-inhabited city, Jericho is also the lowest city on earth. Not the lowest *place* on earth (that's the Dead Sea, some twenty miles south of Jericho and more than 500 feet lower), but the lowest city.

From Jericho up to Jerusalem is seventeen long and lonely miles climbing over 3,000 feet in elevation. Once again Mark's gospel uses geography to convey something crucial: the way to Jerusalem from Jericho is arduous.

All three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, have stories of Jesus healing blind men near Jericho. In Matthew 20, Jesus heals two unnamed blind men sitting beside the road as he leaves Jericho to go on to Jerusalem (Matthew 20:29-34). In Luke 18, Jesus heals one unnamed blind man on the way into Jericho, and when he gets into the city of Jericho, Jesus spies Zacchaeus the tax collector up in a tree, tells him to come down, and invites himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner (Luke 18: 35-43). The message is clear: from Joshua onward, miracles happen in and around Jericho.

In our gospel today from Mark, there's no Zacchaeus, and there's nobody to be healed on the way into town. But there is Jericho. Jesus and his core group of male disciples cross the Jordan River and come into Jericho. And then, just as quickly it seems, they and Jesus' ever-growing entourage are leaving Jericho. And as they leave there is one man, one blind man, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, sitting by the roadside.

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he begins to shout. He calls out to Jesus for mercy, for healing, and he addresses him with a messianic title: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

There are a lot of people traveling with Jesus by now. As Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, some people tell him to pipe down and shut up. This just makes him holler louder. He is desperate.

Jesus stands still. Again, he stops for someone in need. Again, he allows an interruption of this last and most crucial journey of his life. He says, "Call him here."

Then some folks, maybe some of the same ones who just previously were telling him to shut up, say to Bartimaeus, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and springs up. He may be blind, but he is not lame. He gets himself to Jesus as quickly as possible.

Once again, Jesus asks the petitioner before him, "What do you want me to do for you?"
What do you want?

"My teacher, let me see again." *My teacher.* There's a connection. Bartimaeus recognizes Jesus' authority. And Jesus, surrounded by many people, has time for this one person.

Sometimes Jesus lays hands on people to heal them. Not this time. It's an instantaneous healing. He tells Bartimaeus to go, tells him that his faith, his trust has made him well.

Bartimaeus regains his sight immediately and, Mark says, follows Jesus on the way. This means both that he joined that big crowd accompanying Jesus to Jerusalem and also signals that Bartimaeus was part of the Jesus movement, which, in its earliest days was known simply as the Way.

As usual, this story means many things to many people. As usual, different people have interpreted this story different ways. As usual, there's a message of comfort for us and a challenge of invitation to us.

For most of my life, I viewed this story as a kind of allegory. For example, Bartimaeus is someone who already knows Jesus, already is a follower, a believer. He is any of us. He used to be able to see. He knew where he was going and what he was doing. Then something changed. Somehow, he lost his way, his purpose, his mission. He wants that vision restored. He wants to return to how things were when he knew who he was and where he was and where he was going. He asks Jesus to have mercy on him and allow him to see again.

When Jesus stops for him and Bartimaeus understands that Jesus is waiting and available, he springs into action. He's serious about being able to see again, about getting back on track, about rejoining the Jesus movement. He throws off his cloak; he throws to the side anything that might weigh him down, any obstacle. He springs up. He doesn't hesitate. He knows what he wants. He asks directly and clearly. And Jesus answers his petition right away with an instantaneous recovery of sight. As soon as Bartimaeus regains his sight, he rejoins Jesus in traveling the Way.

In this kind of Bartimaeus-as-every-person interpretation, there is certainly value. It is good news for us if we feel lost and turned around. We can have our vision renewed and get back on the road with Jesus. That approach to this text worked fine for me for a long, long time.

And then, my Mom went blind.

For seven years she had been without the sight in one eye. Then, she lost the sight in the other eye.

When she first lost her sight completely, one of us stayed with her in her home 24/7 for the first six months.

One night not long after she went blind when I was staying with her, I heard a loud thump. I rushed to see if she was alright.

I found her in the living room kneeling next to the sofa with her head in her hands. "Mama? Did you fall? Are you alright?"

"I'm just begging for mercy," she said.

Begging for mercy. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

In that moment is when that Jesus prayer of Bartimaeus was branded on my heart.

I’ve no doubt that my mother was just as sincere in her requests as Bartimaeus was in his. Yet hers was not an instantaneous healing.

At 86-and-a-half years of age, she had to learn to do everything again in the dark. She lived another seven years. And they were seven years of chronic grief and struggle.

Those years were a metaphorical version of that upward road from Jericho to Jerusalem. I thought it would never end. So did she. It was a long and hard and holy road.

It was for our family like the long way back from exile that our first reading describes. Jeremiah says the blind and the lame were among that huge group of Israelites returning from a place far, far away from the home they had previously known. Trying to get back to Jerusalem; trying to get back home. Where is the oasis? Where is the holy place?

I hated the fact that my mother went blind. I understood how it happened, glaucoma undetected and untreated for years, but I hated the fact of it. My active, vigorous Mom became homebound and fearful. After a few years, she came to a place of some acceptance, but losing her sight was, in her own words, the worst thing that ever happened to her. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on her,” was my frequent prayer.

The reason to pray this prayer for ourselves and others is in our second reading today from the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

When Mom died, at age 93-and-a-half, I knew that at last her “faith had been made sight.” And, when she died at home in our arms as she wished, the first thing my sister and I said to each other was, “She can see again.” And then we, like those Israelites returning from exile wept tears of joy and relief.

Sometimes the healing is instantaneous. Sometimes the gifts and wonders of modern medicine can reverse setbacks and amazingly restore us to previous states of health. Sometimes not. Sometimes all we can do is bear witness and have compassion on another in their suffering. Sometimes the healing comes at death, which opens to the next stage of life. For, as the preface to the eucharistic prayer in our burial liturgy says so perfectly, “to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended.”

I still identify with Bartimaeus when I feel turned around, when my vision is dimmed, my way unclear. I still cry out for help as he did, as my Mom did. And increasingly, I think about how each of us, all of us are not only Bartimaeus but also how each of us and all of us are

part of that great crowd around Jesus. In that crowd are people who tell Bartimaeus to shut up and pipe down when he asks for mercy. And in that crowd are people who encourage him to take heart, to throw off his obstacles, and go to Jesus, who even help him get there. Which people are we? Whose are the voices crying for mercy around us? Who is stuck on the side of the road and needs our assistance? Who needs our companionship to walk a hard road?

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us.” Give us vision and help us to follow you on the Way.