

Mark 10:46-52

10:46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

10:47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

10:48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

10:49 Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

10:50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

10:51 Then 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."

10:52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Sermon: Save Us!

Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!

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When we wave our palms high, and when we sing our loud hosannas each year on Palm Sunday, we tend to envision triumph and joy as we make our way into Jerusalem. But In truth, the first Palm Sunday most likely didn't have the triumph and grandeur we prefer to remember. It's really the observances of that event a century or two later, with crowds of pilgrims walking in the footsteps of their ancestors, that tint the story for us. Likely, the original "crowd," consisted of a few dozen faithful followers. And one wonders how much of their faithful expression would have been heard over the ominous drum beat of Pilate's soldiers, and the step, step, stepping of his regiments marching, and the clop, clop, clapping of his cavalry's horses.

I think the gathering was more akin to the invisible people we refuse to see in public squares – the guy at the Panthers game with a megaphone proclaiming a strange prophecy in a sea full of disinterested people; the street prophets in Moore Square standing on milk crates; the subway musicians sharing their soulful prayers one distracted passenger at a time; the benedictions and proclamations spoken aloud in the lobbies of homeless shelters, and abortion clinics, and city jails, and immigration offices, and emergency rooms, and courthouses.

Too often, we assume hosanna is a cry of triumph. But hosanna means, "Save us." And while, yes, there is certainly triumph in the story of

Easter morning, and certainly reason for praise in acknowledging the source of our redemption and mercy, hosanna is a guttural, desperate, urgent cry.

Save us, God, save us, 'cause we need saving! Save us from the idolatry of Rome. Save us from our invisibility. Save us from subsistence. Save us from a world that doesn't look like yours. Save us from this weighty fatigue. Save us from a world that's falling apart. Save us from the hypocrisy, and the flimsiness, and the utter impotence of all these isms promising a healing that never comes. Save us from this endless waiting.

I offer you this perspective, because I believe it's pivotal to understanding this morning's text.

A couple of weeks ago, we talked about the rich young man who wasn't quite ready for primetime. He was eager to follow Jesus toward a new future, but not so eager that he was willing to leave behind his dependence on the power and privilege of present circumstances. This man was still on a journey of discernment. And I believe, wherever he may be today, God offers expansive grace and space for his wanderings and wonderings.

But contrast this rich young man with Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus is marginalized in every sense of the word. Physically, socially, spiritually, even geographically. He lives in Jerricho. And I know Jerricho is a place full of good stories, but, y'all, after that wall came tumbling down, they didn't develop a whole lot of other stuff. Jerricho is a map dot. Maybe there's a Dollar General, or a Hardee's, but there isn't a whole lot more. Even today, the most common spots of interest

are a highway sign claiming its status as the oldest city in the world, and a big ole tree that maybe, could have, perhaps might have been the one Zacchaeus climbed.

And today, Jesus isn't going toward Jericho. He's headed out of town.

Bartimaeus is afflicted with blindness. He lives in a time where blindness reduces his social standing, prevents his ability to earn a living, and prevents his place in a household. Not to mention the spiritual stigmatization of persons with blindness in the first century – there's an assumption, and a terrible one at that, that he must have done something to be in such a condition.

Bartimaeus also lives in a time where the temple and temple establishments are what scholar James Anthony Noel describes as superfluous. Originally, the Jerusalem Temple had been the center of religious life – it was where faithful people experienced the presence of God. It was the conduit to covenant living. But the original temple had been destroyed in the Babylonian exile.

For the next five hundred years, as Israel is subdued by one empire or another, the physical space of the temple cedes way to other spaces, most notably any place where people gather to share word and tradition. Judaism becomes a story without walls and borders, a diaspora of faithful living. Its people bound in word and deed.

But we've all read our gospel, and we know that Herod's gonna Herod. And he's got a great desire to use the people's nostalgia for the Jerusalem Temple to his political advantage. He builds a grand new temple, one that rivals the best in Rome. Herod himself won't have to be faithful, and his minions won't either. They just need to keep up

appearances. The temple establishment serves as a propaganda machine for Rome's interest.

So we have, here in this setting today, an occupied people, waiting for five hundred years, on a sense of healing we can't even begin to imagine. And in the backdrop of this dire need, this desperation, is a temple, an edifice that's nothing more than a façade, filled with phony people, claiming to be a source of healing.

So again, context is vital. Bartimaeus is a forgotten man, in a forgotten town, surrounded by a political, religious, and social infrastructure that has not only forgotten the very essence of God, but fails to see Bartimaeus (not to mention Jesus!) as a child of God. Bartimaeus hasn't just been pushed to the margins, he's been pushed right off the page, and into the abyss. And so of course, it only stands to reason that a man of no account, in the middle of nowhere, with nobody on his side, would know a little something about the kingdom of heaven.

Unlike our rich friend, who has every available means, but still finds himself discerning the one thing he lacks to pursue discipleship, Bartimaeus possesses none of the meaningless means, but all the means for discipleship.

Bartimaeus doesn't need a superfluous establishment to sense the presence of God; he doesn't even need his physical sight. He senses the palpable nature of the spirit – Jesus in his presence – and he acts with urgency. He refuses to be silent, refuses to wait, refuses to stand on decorum. He shouts, he sings, he yells, he claims his moment with all the courage and relentlessness it requires.

He doesn't sing a loud hosanna, but it's pretty close: "Have mercy on me, Son of David." Have mercy on me. Louder. And louder. And louder.

When he is finally acknowledged by Jesus, he leaps up, rushes forward, and pursues Jesus. In the process, he leaves behind his cloak, the one thing he has of value – the thing that keeps him warm at night, and offers him space to sit on the roadside, and collect coins to get by.

And his ask is just as bold as his attention-getting tactics. “What is it you want?” Jesus asks. “Let me see again,” Bartimaeus says. He not only identifies Jesus as an authentic source of redemption, but he makes himself vulnerable – he longs and he faiths with his whole being. He claims, demands even, his purpose and belonging in God. “Go,” Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” And we’re told that immediately, Bartimaeus sees, and that he follows Jesus to Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus senses the presence of God, faiths the power of God, boldly moves toward God, and experiencing new possibilities in God, chooses a life of service toward others.

As Jesus’ last pupil in the field, Bartimaeus, does what good pupils should do. He believes that God has the power to redeem brokenness. But he knows that such power will not be made manifest in silence. And so he seeks God’s healing publicly, actively, and relentlessly, even in a world that tells him he shouldn’t.

And having received God’s healing, he does not remain still. He does not return to the normalcy of life with sight. He follows Jesus to Jerusalem. For transformed by God’s power, Bartimaeus understands that Christ calls us not to be served, but to serve others. So off he goes, following Jesus to Jerusalem, even if Jerusalem won’t be a pretty sight to see, even if this new calling will be difficult.

I find myself moved by the rawness of Bartimaeus' hosanna, but also, by the rawness of our own hosannas. Because it seems to me, when we cry out, "have mercy on us, save us," we proclaim a confident statement that has nothing to do with confidence in our own ourselves, and everything to do with our confidence in God.

We live in a world that tells us to mask our anxiety, to find contentedness in unmet needs while we wait for the powers-that-be to get around to addressing them. Stand in line. Trust the process. Stuff it way deep down inside. A delayed justice is on the way, so we needn't rock the boat while waiting on the runway.

But putting up a brave front to avoid discomfort about the world is not a sign of strength, nor good health, nor ardent faith. It's contrary to the message this gospel preaches.

We believe in the Lordship of Christ – that is our ultimate loyalty, our ultimate provisions, our deepest needs are met in following Jesus. But we cannot, nor will we ever make our needs known to God, if our requests are always tempered by our fear of disrupting the present, our insistence to be confined to Rome's smallness, or our insatiable appetite for consumerism.

I wonder how often we fail to realize the bold vulnerability with which we pray the prayer Jesus taught us – Your Kingdom come, God's intended world, right now! Give us our bread, this day, right now! When speak aloud these words, we acknowledge the greatness of our need, and the even greater generosity, creativity, and transformation of our Creator.

Let me close with one last thought. I have, for many months, been extremely perplexed in considering how to speak to you about the

world we now live in. I am convinced, now more than ever, that the great strand, really the great verb, woven through our sacred scriptures is “humanize.” Story after story shows us how to see every person as being made in the image of God, as belonging to the extended family of divine love. And every commandment for discipleship urges us to act with compassion in order that we might know each other through the lenses of God’s love. Ours is a story of reconciliation – not just with our Creator, but indeed, with all creation!

And yet two weeks removed from another election, large swaths of our national leaders, and even greater numbers of our voting electorate appear to show not even the slightest concern for humanizing one another. A war in Gaza, and other escalations defy every reasonable and authentic reading of the covenant we claim to keep as people of faith. An utter disregard for our planet and the creatures and resources that fill it, defy our call to be stewards of God’s earth. There is an epidemic of otherization.

So what am I to do? What are we to do?

I have been called to preach the gospel, and to minister to this congregation. I intend to keep preaching and teaching, and loving, but even the perfect sermon won’t solve this epidemic. I am a citizen of this nation, and I will exercise my right to vote, in this and every cycle. I hope you plan to do the same. I’ll keep recycling, I’ll keep conserving, I’ll keep seeking to be a peacekeeper in my daily interactions. I’ll take seriously God’s call of stewardship. I’ll walk with friends this afternoon, in hopes of ending and endless hunger.

But today, in this very moment, I’ve had it with formalities. I’ve had it pretending I’ve got it all figured out. I’ve had it waiting for Pharisees,

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and middle managers, and publicists with no awareness of God's possibilities and no interest in God's love to create the same old same old scripted responses to the pressing needs of our time, of every time.

Here, in the presence of God, confident in God's ability to usher in a transformative spirit in, around, and amongst God's people, I cry aloud,

"Save us, save us. Have mercy on us. Please!!! For blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Come, Lord Jesus, come! Come right this very minute. And save us!
Save us! Save us!

Amen.