

## A Sermon for DaySpring

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*Journey to Discipleship*

Mark 10:46-52

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The grammar of Christian faith in our creeds and our hymns, in our music and the way we think and talk about the faith---the grammar of Christian faith in the gospels includes some powerful images of transformation.

Darkness to light, blindness to sight; come to Jesus, walk the path with him. Be healed; be seen and restored. Cry for help and receive mercy.

Many images of transformation, and most of them are in the story of Bartimaeus. He's the last of those whose lives are transformed and who follow Jesus on the way. This is what discipleship is made of. Maybe that's why Bartimaeus is such a favorite, and his story is so loved.

Jesus is leaving Jericho heading the 15 miles to his destination of Jerusalem. As he and the crowd with him are leaving Jericho, a blind beggar known as Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside begging, cried out, "Jesus, Son of David! Have mercy on me!". The crowds shush him up, but he just cries out even louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me." Jesus calls him over and asks him, "What do you want?" Bartimaeus asks to be able to see again. Jesus replies, "Your faith has made you well." And immediately, he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.

It's a wonderful story to love, a story of healing of a man who was blind, a cry for mercy that was heard. It's one of the few times we know the name of someone healed in the gospels—a man who demonstrates uncommon faith.

Mark must have loved this story. He tells it at a critical moment in the gospel. Mark's gospel is described as "a Passion story with a long prelude." The Passion story—Jesus in Jerusalem, arrested, tried, crucified—that story begins in the very next verses in Chapter 11. The first 10 chapters are the long prelude, which means Bartimaeus's faith and healing is the last story before Jesus' passion.

All of Mark's gospel to this point has been a carnival of attention-seeking, a circus of power-hungry actors from disciples to crowds, to Pharisees, to principalities and powers in the form of demon-possessed men and nefarious sicknesses and things that go wrong, or if not wrong, then just never quite right. Until now.

Jesus moves "immediately" from one to another. A healing of illness here, a silencing of an evil spirit there, a humbling of the disciples, a rebuke of the Pharisees. Whether friend or foe, everyone wants something from Jesus and needs something from Jesus. Their demands are sometimes righteous; sometimes perverse, they're always serious.

This 10-chapter prelude finds its conclusion in a story that in contrast to most of it, is simple, and it ends as the capstone story of faith and discipleship. Not of Jesus' closest 12 disciples, not a rich, young ruler who has a lot to offer, not the religious leaders who have their theology and scholarship all worked out. It's this man. This man, of whom Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well." Bartimaeus appears to be the exemplar of faith in Mark's gospel. It's the one story in Mark where something doesn't go wrong. In every other case, there's something that happens or is said that lays a shadow of uncertainty over the story.

You might remember the last time Jesus healed a blind man, Jesus steps back and asks what he saw. "Well, I see trees walking around." Jesus heals him again, and this time, he sees. Not so with this story. In this story, there is no ambiguity, just a clean and simple story of healing. We come, finally, to this story, and all goes well. This happy, little gospel story does important work, sealing four fundamental steps on the journey to discipleship.

You can see each of the four steps in Bartimaeus's own life. We can see first, to recognize Jesus' identity. Bartimaeus is the first in the gospel to identify Jesus' messianic identity as the "Son of David". This is significant and may be what caught Jesus' ears and attention. "Son of David." Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, where he will commandeer a colt, sit on it, and ride it into the city. . . just . . . like . . . David. Blind Bartimaeus could see it already, even if the others could not. This Jesus is the King of kings, the long-awaited Messiah. The blind man knew. He, in the deep sense, 'saw.' Jesus is no mere teacher, not just a good man, but he's the one we've been waiting for.

He knows the identity of Jesus, and he knows the heart of Jesus. He's the one we've been waiting for; he's the one I've been waiting for.

Foundational to discipleship is to know our need for God's mercy. Just in chapter 10, we see the feckless alternatives. The rich, young ruler wanted the formula so he could gain eternal life; James and John wanted glory. Bartimaeus just asks for mercy. The heart of God is merciful and compassionate. "Have mercy on me," he cries, and he doesn't ask for anything more. To know ourselves is the path to knowing God.

"For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are completely his." (2 Chronicles)

Hebrews 4: "Let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

*Kyrie eleson*, are ancient words that begin many church services around the world. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. The prayer is one of our most basic appeals to God: we are imperfect, we are in need, sometimes we are in trouble; we need you, we call on you; we trust you. God is not deaf; God is not blind. God is love. Sometimes, we don't understand God's ways; sometimes, it feels like God doesn't hear. For some people, it seems God doesn't care. We come back to the prayer, "Lord, have mercy." Have mercy on us when we don't know what to do. Have mercy on us when we think we know what to do, but our ways are not your ways. Have mercy on us when we do right, and we are proud;

have mercy on us when we sin and falter, and we are grossly ashamed. Lord, of mercy, Christ, have mercy.

Hearing this call to him from the crowd, hearing this with a heart of compassion, Jesus stood still. He stopped. For a story—Mark’s story—where everyone is always on the move, Jesus stops right here. Some translations say he “stood still,” and calls him over. The crowd, which has been shushing him, now say, “Take heart, get up! He is calling you.”

In the messianic project of getting the world straightened out, how can there be time or capacity to deal with one more miserable old blind beggar sitting by the city gate, a miserable sort in the wilderness, between the power centers of Jericho and Jerusalem, where important things happen. But Jesus’ well of compassion is bottomless. He hears the man’s cry for help and stops for him. If this story is full of images of discipleship, here is one powerful image of God’s compassion. Always on the move until now, a cry for mercy stops him in his tracks. God stops and hears you.

And here, then, is the moment discipleship comes alive. To surrender to Christ’s call in joy—the symbol is in the cloak. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak. For a blind beggar by the road, a cloak may be his only possession. To throw it off is to leave it behind, though he is still blind when he does so. You remember the rich young ruler only lacked one thing—to let everything go, and he can’t. This man only has one thing and leaves it behind. This is a tremendous image of faith.

This act is pondered beautifully by a poet named Suzanna Guthrie, pondering the cloak, she says:

I see him in slow-motion  
Leaping to his feet  
Then leaping again  
Blindly through  
The parting crowd  
His mantle soaring above them  
Like a sail  
That one thing necessary  
-warmth, shelter -  
Thrown to the wind  
For one dim risk.

And what of the abandoned garment?  
I want to know. Did some  
Thoughtful person take up the cloak  
And carry it for him along the way  
Knowing the once-blind man would  
Need it again in the dark days to come?  
  
Or, did Bartimaeus let his mantle fall  
To the ground, leaving it for the next  
Beggar waiting along the roadside

He left his cloak behind and leapt up--sprang up--to come to Jesus when he was called. Like the disciples leaving their nets to follow at the beginning of the gospel, now he does the same at the end of the gospel. There must be something here inherent to following Jesus. Something always to leave behind; something precious we let go; something that feels like freedom until it becomes our shackles (like ego), something that feels necessary until it becomes a burden (like fear); or like St. Paul, who had a life filled with all kinds of good things-- there’s nothing better than this-- until compared to knowing Christ, “it’s all rubbish.”

He cried out “Son of David”—Jesus’s identity; “Have mercy,” – Jesus’s character. He responded to the call to come; left behind all he had to come to him.

And then, finally, is to stand before Jesus, be healed in ways you hardly could have ever hoped and go with him. “What do you want me to do for you?” “Let me see again?”

Physical blindness isn’t the only kind of blindness. There’s a spiritual blindness and to be healed from it is to see again or see for the first time. Often those who continue in spiritual blindness are so blind they don’t even know they are blind. That’s the final judgment of Mark’s gospel, especially chapter 10. The rich, young ruler sees his religious accomplishments but can’t see his neighbor. The two disciples see the path to their glory but don’t yet see the way of the cross.

Jesus healed the one who was ready to be healed. “Your faith has made you well.” We see what Mark is trying to say about everyone. Everyone needs mercy, even if they don’t know to cry for it. Everyone is blind and cannot yet see. But they will. They will all see. We will all see, but not until the cross is set and the nails are hammered. Then our eyes will be opened. Or will they? This is the question that still remains. Will their eyes and ours ever be opened?

*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.* This was really quite the only response there should have been, ever been to Jesus, from page 1. *Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy on me.* But it took 10 chapters to get here, and it will take a cross and resurrection to get to us.

At the cross, may we, too, confess our need for mercy. How precious does that grace appear when we have eyes to see Jesus, our redeemer, by whose life, death, and resurrection we are saved... In his mercy, we are given spiritual vision to see the truth about the world’s pain and ourselves and our need for healing. And to see then, our Lord as radiantly as the first light of sight, like one opening their eyes to see for the first time in a long, long time.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy upon us. We need you, we trust you, we love you. Hear our prayer. Amen.