A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*“Eyes to See”*

Mark 10:46-52

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I once was blind but now I see.

The grammar of Christianity includes many images of faith.

Walk a path.

Wash in water.

Climb a mountain.

Fall on your knees.

There is one image that stands above them all: seeing.

I was blind but now I see.

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. Those who continue in spiritual blindness do so at least in some part due to their own will, but mostly because they are so blind they don’t even know they are blind. That’s the judgment of Mark’s gospel brought to the surface by poor blind Bartimaeus, Timaeus’ son, sitting by the city gate outside of Jericho. Sitting there, sitting there, day after day, doing what you do when you live in the first century and you are blind, you sit there and hope someone will show you a little kindness by dropping a coin or two into your lap that you can take to buy some food to eat to live for another day.

Everyday streams of people flowed in and out of Jericho, many of them heading out of town, up the steep, winding, and dangerous road that leads to Jerusalem. Jesus, who once told a story about a man attacked by robbers on that same road, was among the crowds leaving Jericho one day on his way up to Jerusalem. The fifteen mile walk up the steep and dangerous road was the least of Jesus’ worries. He knew well what was waiting for him in Jerusalem -- if he makes it past the thieves lurking in the shadows along the roadside and if he can muscle his way up the rocky incline and avoid stumbling and falling,

If he can make it to Jerusalem, then he’ll walk right into the tension of a city on edge, religious leaders trying to corral the people, Roman soldiers trying to keep their provisional version of peace, crowds of people looking for a scapegoat for their problems.

Jesus had a lot on his mind as he left Jericho heading up to Jerusalem.

His friends were little consolation. They felt the weight of the situation too, but understanding it was beyond their ability to comprehend. So they bickered with one another and acted as if they were more important than they worried they really might be.

That’s about the state of things. In the political economy of getting the world straightened out, there’s little time or capacity to deal with one more miserable old blind beggar sitting by the city gate, an asylum seeker of sorts in the wilderness, caught between Jericho and Jerusalem.

But Jesus’ messianic well of compassion seems bottomless. He hears the man’s cry for help. He sees the man sitting by the gate. I suspect Jesus was acutely aware of the great irony in this moment.

Everyone around him needed mercy, but only one was asking for mercy.

Everyone around him was blind, but only one man knew he was.

Bartimaeus represents the last step before the first fateful step toward Jerusalem and the cross. This isn’t just a compassionate healing story. This is a prophetic gospel story. There’s more to Bartimaeus than meets the eye.

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. Through the gospel Jesus moves deftly from one to another. A healing of illness here, a silencing of an evil spirit there, a humbling of the disciples here, a rebuke of the Pharisees there. Whether friend or foe, everyone wants something from Jesus, needs something from Jesus. The demands they place on him are sometimes righteous, sometimes perverse, always serious, at least to the asker. In this way Bartimaeus is no different. He asks Jesus for something. He wants something. He needs something.

Yet he stands here, or really, sits here. He who by all accounts could have been and should have been a footnote on the gospel story. In small script at the bottom of a page could have been reference to his healing. Instead, Bartimaeus is not only named by name, unusual in the gospel of Mark, but his newfound, miraculously awarded eyesight is the gateway to Jerusalem. Or was it his blindness that is the gateway to Jerusalem? It is by him that we see what Mark is trying to say about everyone.

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? Bartimaeus doesn’t stand erect as an exclamation point on the gospel, but bends over on himself like a question mark posed to all gospel readers. Will you see? Will you see, not just Jesus for who he really is as Messiah? Will you see yourself for who you really are in need of mercy? Will you have eyes to see every Bartimaeus-like person who needs some of your mercy too?

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” This was really quite the only response there should have been, ever been to Jesus. Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy on me.

Blind Bartimaeus already has vision, before he sees. He perceives what he cannot yet see. He can see what others have missed all along.

They’ve all missed it. Even the disciples, especially them we might say, because they had most opportunity to see. But they all missed it, God-incarnate, present-to-them, a suffering servant come near.

So before Jesus leaves Jericho, heads up the steep dangerous fifteen mile road, enters Jerusalem, faces hostile crowds and Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes and Pilate and soldiers and a crown of thorns and a cross, all before the sun sets on the next Sabbath day, he knows he has one more thing left to do.

He hears the shouts of a beggar man by the side of the road near Jericho. Everyone hears him. Frankly, it’s annoying, this incessant, not to mention, rude interruption of really important business. No one in the crowd on the road with Jesus would have seen him had they not heard him, but he refused not to be heard, yelling out over and over again. When the crowd shushed him, he just shouted louder his one and only appeal, “Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Even here at the end of the road Jesus travels, crowds are gonna do what they do in the gospel.

Just like they said to the children who tried to come to Jesus, the crowds say, “Leave him alone. “

Just like they said to the woman at the well. “You can’t be here with Jesus.”

Just like they said to the woman who poured oil on his feet. “You don’t belong here.”

“Be quiet, leave him alone, you can’t be here, you don’t belong here.” People say there’s a wisdom in crowdsourcing solutions to problems, but there’s also a very particular blindness that crowds exhibit—crowds don’t see the person on the margin. They don’t see suffering. Bartimaeus doesn’t represent an occasion for grace to them. He’s an annoyance on the road to glory they thought they were travelling.

This blind man not only somehow knew Jesus was near, but he seemed to know a lot more than people gave him credit. No one else in the gospel of Mark names Jesus “Son of David.” No one. Others call him Rabbi, a demon calls him Holy One of God, but no one calls him Son of David—Son of the king of Israel, Son of David—the one to inherit the throne, the long-awaited Messiah. There’s a lot of weight hanging on the words—son of David. His life hung on it. Both of their lives hung on it. Alone, among all those people, the blind man sitting outside the walls of Jericho understood who it was who was about to make his way to Jerusalem.

You don’t ask the Son of David on the day he heads for Jerusalem for a few coins or a few crumbs to get through to another day. You beg for clear sight to be able to see this thing that is happening. Let me see my Messiah. Let me see my Lord. Let me see my salvation.

Bartimaeus was a prophet with clear gospel vision. He wasn’t just asking for a few coins, another small act of almsgiving from one more disinterested passerby. He could have asked that from anyone passing by who might have had a little jingle in his pocket. He singles Jesus out in the crowd, calls to Jesus by name, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” And when asked, “What shall I do for you?” “Let me see again. I don’t want to miss this.” Having enough to eat tomorrow mattered little compared to having eyes to see what was happening today.

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, given spiritual vision to see the truth about the world’s pain, ourselves and need for mercy, and our Lord as radiant as the first light of dawn after a long dark night.

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