

Open My Eyes, That I May See

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church Pastor David Labuhn

Blindness is an awful handicap. Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, was very brave and inspiring in her deafness and blindness. She once wrote a magazine article entitled: "Three days to see." In that article, she outlined what things she would like to see if she were granted just three days of sight. It was a powerful, thought-provoking article. On the first day, she said she wanted to see friends. On day two she wanted to spend it seeing nature. The third day she wanted to spend in her home city of New York watching the busy city and the workday of the present. She concluded her article with these words: *"I who am blind can give one hint to those who see: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you were stricken blind."*

As bad as blindness is in modern times, it was so much worse in Jesus' day. Today, a blind person gains the hope of living a useful life. Today, we have Braille, seeing-eye dogs, and accommodations for those who are blind. Some of the most skilled and creative people in our society are blind. But in the 1st century, Palestine blindness meant that you would be subjected to abject poverty. You would be reduced to begging for a living. You lived at the mercy and the generosity of others. Unless your particular type of blindness was in some way self-correcting, there was no hope whatsoever for a cure. The skills that were necessary for correcting blindness were still centuries beyond the medical knowledge of the day. Little wonder then that one of the signs of the coming of the Messiah was that the blind should receive their sight according to the prophet Isaiah.

Today, in the Gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus' dramatic encounter with blind Bartimaeus in Jericho takes up only seven verses of scripture, but it offers a compelling vision of faith in Jesus our Savior. As we have said for the past several Sundays, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. He is on His way to the cross. He is almost there. The next chapter of Mark's Gospel described the "Triumphal Entry."

The location of this encounter has significance. It is outside the City of Jericho. Originally, Jericho was a Canaanite City that God directed Joshua to attack and conquer. You may remember that he and the people marched around it for six days, blowing trumpets and shouting. The walls of Jericho fell and the city was destroyed. At its destruction, Joshua laid a curse on the site saying, ***"Curses before the Lord be the man who raises up and rebuilds this city. At the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation and at the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates."*** That is exactly what happened. During the days of Elijah, when Ahab was the King of Israel, according to 1 Kings 16, a man named Heil tried to rebuild the city and it cost him. Both of his sons died, Aibrim, when he laid new foundations, and Segub, when he erected the gates. After that, no one dared rebuild the city of Jericho, and the old city lay in ruins.

Because the region has warm and had pleasant winters, the area was chosen as the location for a new city that would serve as the winter palaces for later Jewish kings. King Herod had his palace built there for rest and recreation. It had a lot of water brought in by an aqueduct and there were extravagant pools, gardens, baths, and abject luxury. The new city of Jericho also became an administrative center. New Jericho became a suburb of Jerusalem. It was only 15 miles away (but the difference in elevation is 1,800 feet); the

proximity to Jerusalem made it possible for the monarch to deal efficiently with affairs of state during his winter sojourn there. Jericho becomes the tax center for all of Israel. It had become the place where tax collectors, as well as chief tax collectors, built mansions and lived in luxury in this Jerusalem suburb. A large share of the money they used for this extravagance was from cheating and extorting money from the poor. Tax money that was supposed to go to Rome went into their pockets. You may remember that Jesus met a man named Zacchaeus, a tax collector, in Jericho on another trip to Jerusalem.

The rich and the mighty isolated themselves away from the common crowds in this wealthy suburb of Jerusalem, but on the outskirts of the city there were countless beggars who lived in the hope that some of these more fortunate people might pity them and hand them a coin or two as they rode off to Jerusalem in their chariots. One of these countless beggars sat there by the roadside as usual and hoped to be noticed by someone who might toss him a coin or two. He was a beggar, but not an ordinary beggar. Mark tells us that he was a blind beggar. Mark tells us his father's name was Timaeus, and so he was a son of Timaeus. The prefix, "Bar" in Hebrew means "Son." So, Bar Timaeus was the son of Timaeus. Now, Timaeus might have been known to many, but his son, the blind beggar, was only known as his son. If he had a name, no one called him by his name. He was a nobody. No one even recognized him as a human being. They only recognized him as a beggar—a blind beggar for that matter. And, day after day, Bartimaeus—or whatever his name was—sat there by the roadside with an outstretched hand to anyone who would notice him among the many beggars who sat by the wayside.

Most days, the pleading of the other beggars muffled his own pleas and he couldn't get anyone to notice him. I wonder what thoughts went through his mind as he sat there—day after day—hoping someone would notice him? I wonder what he felt sitting there in his darkness and misery. I wonder what he imagined the meaning of his life to be. I wonder if he was confused about the reason for being born to this misery. I wonder because I really don't know. But I would imagine that most people in his situation may have been bitter with God and hostile at life. The miseries of life can either make us or break us. Only a few go beyond the treachery of their misery and look to God.

But from the story, it seems that Bartimaeus was different from the other beggars. Jesus was on his way to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem along with thousands of other people. Jericho was the place of a rendezvous point for Galilean pilgrims desiring to avoid Samaria, both in going to and in departing from Jerusalem. He was among those Galilean pilgrims who knew about Jesus, His teaching, His miraculous healing, and feeding. And when He came to Jericho, he encountered Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, sitting by the roadside in Jericho. Bartimaeus did what he did daily; begging for money.

Bartimaeus had heard about Jesus and realized that at this moment when he was aware of the others talking about Jesus that he had a chance. He had a chance for life from Jesus. So, when he heard that Jesus was near, Bartimaeus began to cry out urgently, ***“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”*** By his saying, “Son of David” Bartimaeus was announcing that Jesus was the Messiah. The words, ***“Son of David,”*** are Old Testament speak for the Messiah. Bartimaeus recognized Jesus as His Savior. The crowd tries to

hush him. They acted just like Jesus' own disciples when they tried to chase away little children from Jesus. And, really, in many ways, Bartimaeus was like those little children, he was lowly, needy, he was without status, and he was dependent on others especially Jesus. He was just what Jesus said He had come to receive.

The crowd, like Jesus' disciples, thought Jesus was too busy, too important to be bothered with someone like Bartimaeus, this poor wretched blind beggar. Maybe the people around Bartimaeus were embarrassed by how he was shouting. But Bartimaeus was not to be denied his chance. He would not be shushed. No! He cried out more desperately, ***“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”***

You may recognize some of his words, ***“have mercy on me”*** we say in our liturgy. We call it the Kyrie Eleison. Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy. Bartimaeus was admitting his absolute helplessness both physical and spiritual just as we do when we speak those words in our worship.

Suddenly, Jesus stops. He turns around. Somehow over the noise of the crowd, Jesus has heard this man. Jesus says to the crowd, ***“Call him.”*** So they called to the blind man, ***“Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling for you.”*** Then, Bartimaeus did something that the young rich ruler who had come to Jesus earlier could not do. Bartimaeus threw his cloak aside. His cloak was his only possession and he probably used it as a place for people to throw coins, the alms he begged for, similar to how street musicians use their guitar cases today. Bartimaeus enthusiastically gave up all his security in this world. He gave up everything, jumped to his feet, and approached Jesus when he called him.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. Don’t you think it’s obvious what he wanted Jesus to do for him? Yet, Jesus asked him, ***“What do you want me to do for you?”*** Why would Jesus ask such a question? To see what was in his heart! The heart is the place of many desires. And most of the heart’s desires are sinful.

I recently heard a story about a children’s talk based on today’s gospel lesson. The pastor told the children about Jesus meeting the blind man Bartimaeus. When the pastor got to the point where Jesus asked Bartimaeus, ***“What do you want me to do for you?”*** He asked the children with great seriousness, *“Boys and girls if you were blind, what would you ask Jesus to give you?”* After a pause, one little girl looked at the pastor with wide eyes and said earnestly, ***“I’d ask Jesus for a nice...little...dog to lead me around!”*** Everyone in the church began to laugh...everyone, that is, except the little girl’s parents. She had been pestering them for a dog for months. Now, she saw an opportunity to enlist the aid of...a Higher Power to obtain her desired goal. She was really exhibiting the true heart of us humans which is focused on ourselves.

The desires of the human heart are wicked and changeable according to the situation. How often has a well-intentioned person said, *“If I won the lottery and got rich, I would build a church or pay off my church’s mortgage? I would build a new house for my mother and father. I would relieve the debts of my family and friends.”* But, if this well-intentioned person ever got this money in his or her hands, what would be the outcome when the desires of the heart come into play? Selfishness and greed often change those good intentions.

So, it's not hard to understand why Jesus would ask the blind beggar such a question. It's the kind of question that digs deep into our heart to expose its hidden desires. Jesus' question to Bartimaeus was a test of faith—a test of resolve—a test of truth—a test of the heart's desire.

Bartimaeus might have said he wanted Jesus to place a curse on all those who had treated him so poorly. He may have asked for Jesus to punish his parents for his blindness (most blindness in Ancient Palestine was the result of infections in the eyes at birth and grew progressively worse as the child grew older.) But Bartimaeus gave his only one answer—restore my sight. By saying restore, did Bartimaeus mean he had once been sighted and now was blind? Perhaps, maybe not. His blindness was a tragedy no matter when it occurred. Bartimaeus wanted to see. And who would he see first? His Savior—His Redeemer—Jesus.

Jesus answered his request. He restored his sight. And then, Bartimaeus was able to see Jesus. Imagine the joy and relief that he felt when Jesus acted to give him sight! And in thanksgiving for what Jesus had done for him, we are told he followed Jesus in the way – the way to Jerusalem. To the cross. To the event that assured Bartimaeus, and us, salvation for eternity.

So, what do you see in this story? Do you see the powerful faith of a person who would otherwise be miserable and dejected? Do you see someone who recognized his Savior in the person of Jesus? Do you see someone who recognized his absolute helplessness physically and spiritually? Do you see a person who truly gave up all he had and followed Jesus? Do you see someone who trusted Jesus to answer his prayer? Do you see a person who was so thankful for what Jesus had

done for him that He committed himself to Jesus as one of His disciples?

And where do you see yourself in relation to this story? Do you see yourself as blind to your own sins? Do you see yourself as blind to the pain that you inflict on others because of your sin? Do you see the distance that has separated you from God because of your sin? Do you see yourself as absolutely helpless in your sin? Do you trust in the only one who can save you from your sins? Is your hope in the only one who hears and answers your prayers? Is your treasure with this world or with heaven? Are your eyes open to Jesus in your life? Do you see Jesus as the one who grants you mercy? Do you see Jesus as the one who serves you? And do you thank Him by serving Him with your life?

Sometimes our eyes play tricks on us. Sometimes, we who are sighted, do not see what is plainly in front of us. There are other times when we see only what we want to see. There are other times when things are camouflaged so we can't see them even when we are looking at them. Sometimes, others try to put blinders on us so we only see what they want us to see and not the truth.

Today, Jesus asks, ***“What do you want me to do for you?”*** What is your answer? Like Bartimaeus, do you answer, ***“Open my eyes, that I may see?”***

In the name and to the glory of God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.