

**A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2018,**

**AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE**

A pastor explained how Saturday was a day to get things done around their house because of work, family, and church responsibilities. Just a few weeks ago he and his youngest son, Jeff, who is six years old, had just finished mowing the lawn and were putting things away. The pastor thought this would be a terrific opportunity to rest and spend a few minutes with Jeff. The two of them crawled up on the family's trampoline and gazed up into the blue sky. With a puzzled look, Jeff turned and asked "Dad...Why are we here?"

The pastor thought this would be great teaching opportunity so he explained how we are children of our God in Heaven, how God has sent us here because God loves us and wants us to experience the things created for us, how God wants us to serve one another, to learn, to grow and to develop those qualities that will allow us to return to live with God some day. The father paused and asked if that had answered his question. Jeff responded, "Not really." The pastor then began to think how else he might be able to answer the question when Jeff again asked, "Dad ... Why are we here?...weren't we supposed to pick Mom up an hour ago?"<sup>i</sup>

Son of Timaeus, son of David. Because they are in the bible, we tend not to think of their familial relationship and more about honorifics. Yet today's gospel speaks about who these men were as sons, one who is blind and the other who is able to see all. The gospel story begins where we left off last week. Jesus and his followers come to Jericho, and as they are leaving the city they come across a blind beggar, Timaeus. As they walk by him, he shouts, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus rebukes him, but after further dialogue, he asks "what do you want me to do for you?" the same thing he asked of James and John in last week's lesson who unwisely and uncomprehendingly ask for positions of honor and glory. Bartimaeus, in contrast, asks for sight. Whether or not he's asking to see for the first time or to see again, narratively the emphasis is on spiritual insight.<sup>ii</sup>

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, pastor of Tokyo Lutheran Church in Japan, tells us "What stands out about Bartimaeus is that he calls on Jesus by name, appending that impressive title 'Son of David,' without ever having met him. In fact, he not only calls out; he creates a ruckus. Onlookers try to shush him. Undeterred, he demands mercy. The rich young man wanted eternal life, James and John

wanted glory, but this guy, blind and parked on the roadside, wants only mercy. He doesn't even specify the nature of the mercy until Jesus puts the question to him plainly. When Jesus responds with 'Call him,' the crowd quickly changes its tune to say 'Take heart, he is calling you,' and Bartimaeus tosses his cloak aside in his eagerness. He may be blind, but he isn't lame: 'he sprang up.' On receiving his sight he learns 'your faith has made you well,' a statement applied only to one other person in the Gospel, the woman with the issue of blood. She too was distinguished by her adamant insistence on contact with Jesus when he passed by in the midst of the crowd. Restored to sight, Bartimaeus doesn't 'go your way,' as Jesus instructed, but instead 'followed him on the way,' a new disciple."<sup>iii</sup> So whether we realized it at first, this is also a calling story; this is the way Jesus gathers disciples by acting and healing, and they are quick to put all aside and go with him.

It would seem that this is all there is to say about this short passage. Yet there are some interesting little tidbits that are keys to further revelations about the text itself. The first is the title "son of David." The blind man seems to know these words but no one has ever yet spoken them in the *Gospel of Mark*. This is how one begins to understand that each gospel writer has his own agenda. The genealogies for Jesus in *Matthew* and *Luke* go to great depths to demonstrate that Jesus was both the adopted descendant of David through Joseph and the blood relative of David through Mary. But it is in the spiritual and theological realms that the title finds its deeper meaning. "Son of David" was a way that a believer expressed their faith that Jesus was the Messiah long awaited for. So when the blind man calls out Jesus by this name, he is expressing his faith but making a revelation as well, all of which suits Mark's storytelling. It is here in Chapter 10 of his gospel, on Jesus' way to Jerusalem, that he chooses to tell the first part of the tale as to why the Pharisees and other religious leaders sought to have him killed. Killed, yes! The very one they longed for over 1000 years! The blind man can see and intuit what others could not, which is why he is given such prominence as a prophet in the story and why he speaks what one might call "the magic words," the words that bring about his healing.

The second little tidbit is when Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and approaches Jesus. The cloak here is used as a visual cue for a blind person or beggar. It was often the only source of shelter, or laid on the ground to collect alms. It is interesting that the rich man in the earlier part of this chapter of the gospel had trouble giving up his riches, but Bartimaeus immediately throws it all

away. Jesus stands still and listens to Bartimaeus, giving the opportunity for him to step outside the identity the Israelite culture had placed on him as marginalized. Bartimaeus responds by throwing away the symbol of his place as beggar and with renewed energy comes to Jesus. Hence the cloak becomes a symbol of the old life being given over for the new.<sup>iv</sup>

The Canadian Mennonite blog asks us this: What would it look like for us as a faith community to cry out to God, step away from our assigned identities, and take the risk of following Jesus into a new identity? What kind of healing would we find if we would surrender what we hang on to from our past identities, like certain structures and images of church? Could we even shed the cloaks of our patterns of interaction, and embrace new ways of being a faithful community in our society? This is a challenge. And we may not be up to the risk that it takes. But I believe that we are not alone in the journey. The fumbling, blind, inept disciples of *Mark* went through this and somehow were granted the grace to become the body of Christ. Our faith community continues the journey, constantly crying out for healing and being transformed by God's power. All we need to do is be willing to throw off our cloaks and step out in faith to follow Jesus' way.<sup>v</sup>

The third tidbit is that they are at Jericho when the story begins. The connotations of Jericho are important. Jericho is the sight of the great battle of victorious Israel, led by Joshua after the long wandering of Exodus. With a great shout and the blowing of the trumpets -- the heralding of God's kingdom -- the walls of Jericho gave way to Israel. We might think of blind Bartimaeus in a sense as the state of Israel at the time of Jesus' life. The people need help, they need someone who will bring back the true spirit of faithful leadership, they need vision. "Joshua" and "Jesus" are in effect the same Hebrew name (in English we read them differently due to translations over the centuries from language to language). It means "God is Salvation."<sup>vi</sup> So here we get an idea where Jesus is going and what he has in mind. He is accepting his call on the major stage of events as he heads to his crucifixion and death. He has the call, he understands the signs, he has the vision. And *he* is also all three -- the call, the sign, and the vision, and with these tools, these attributes, he leads us into the kingdom of God. That's why it is important to examine this text deeper, to look at these tidbits, because they often contain clues to how our faith will save us.

And in this deeper sense, they add to the happiness that the text itself already brings to us. “Be of good cheer” the crowds say to Bartimaeus. It is a phrase that is used at least four times in the gospels, usually with regard to healing: the healing of the paralytic, the healing of the woman with the issue of blood, the walking on water when the disciples were afraid, and the story of Jesus as the peacemaker that has come to save the world. It is in what language folks call the “imperative mode,” meaning it is not an invitation, but rather a command. So if we are told by Christ that our days should demonstrate this command, how have we done so at the end of our day?

Perhaps this will move you. In Calgary, Alberta, a 26-year-old mother stared down at her 6 year-old son, who was dying of terminal leukemia. Although her heart was filled with sadness, she also had a strong feeling of determination. Like any parent, she wanted her son to grow up and fulfill all his dreams. Now that was no longer possible. The leukemia would see to that. But she still wanted her son's dream to come true. She took her son's hand and asked, 'Billy, did you ever think about what you wanted to be once you grew up?

Did you ever dream and wish what you would do with your life?' Mom, 'I always wanted to be a fireman when I grew up.' Mom smiled back and said, 'Let's see if we can make your wish come true.'

Later that day she went to her local fire Department in Calgary, where she met Fireman Bob, who had a heart as big as Alberta. She explained her son's final wish and asked if it might be possible to give her 6 year-old son a ride around the block on a fire engine.

Fireman Bob said, 'Look, we can do better than that. If you'll have your son ready at seven o'clock Wednesday morning, we'll make him an honorary Fireman for the whole day. He can come down to the fire station, eat with us, go out on all the fire calls, the whole nine yards! And if you'll give us his sizes, we'll get a real fire uniform for him, with a real fire hat - not a toy - one-with the emblem of the Calgary Fire Department on it, and a yellow slicker like we wear and rubber boots.' 'They're all manufactured right here in Calgary, so we can get them fast.'

Three days later Fireman Bob picked up Billy, dressed him in his uniform and escorted him from his hospital bed to the waiting hook and ladder truck. Billy got to sit on the back of the truck and help steer it back to the fire station. He was in heaven. There were three fire calls in Calgary that day and Billy got to go out on all three calls. He rode in the different fire engines, the Paramedic's' van,

and even the fire chief's car. He was also videotaped for the local news program.

Having his dream come true, with all the love and attention that was lavished upon him, so deeply touched Billy that he lived three months longer than any doctor thought possible.

One night all of his vital signs began to drop dramatically and the head nurse, who believed in the hospice concept - that no one should die alone, began to call the family members to the hospital. Then she remembered the day Billy had spent as a Fireman, so she called the Fire Chief and asked if it would be possible to send a fireman in uniform to the hospital to be with Billy as he made his transition.

The chief replied, 'We can do better than that. We'll be there in five minutes. Will you please do me a favor? When you hear the sirens screaming and see the lights flashing, will you announce over the PA system that there is not a fire?' 'It's the department coming to see one of its finest members one more time. And will you open the window to his room?'

About five minutes later a hook and ladder truck arrived at the hospital and extended its ladder up to Billy's third floor open window-- 16 fire-fighters climbed up the ladder into Billy's room. With his mother's permission, they hugged him and held him and told him how much they LOVED him. With His dying breath, Billy looked up at the fire chief and said, 'Chief, am I really a fireman now?'

'Billy, you are, and The Head Chief, Jesus, is holding your hand. Be of good cheer,' the Chief said. With those words, Billy smiled and said, 'I know, He's been holding my hand all day, and the angels have been singing.'

He closed his eyes one last time.<sup>vii</sup>

Some say the story isn't true, but that is what they say about the gospels also. It is our response to the text that is critical. "Be of good cheer. Rise! And answer the call.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

Pastor, BBCC

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.liveabout.com/funny-jokes-and-stories-for-fathers-1270518>

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<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2642](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2642)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3805](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3805)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.canadianmennonite.org/blogs/cheryl-woelk/throwing-cloak>

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> <https://dailyexegesis.blogspot.com/2012/03/jesus-son-of-david-have-mercy-on-me.html>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://message.snopes.com/showthread.php?t=90631>