

## *An Invitation to See*

*For the children:*

How many of you have this Bible at home? (*I have the **Peace Table** with me. We gave a copy to every family in our church that had young children; we also invited anyone interested to purchase their own copies.*)

The story we're going to hear later is in here. Let me show you.<sup>1</sup>

I won't read it to you, since we'll be hearing it later. But this is a story about a man named Bartimaeus. That's a strange name, don't you think? Bartimaeus was blind. Do you know what that means? It means he can't see.

If you couldn't see, and Jesus asked you what you wanted, what do you think you'd say? We'd probably ask to see. So does Bartimaeus!

Another man in the Bible, who isn't blind, asks Jesus for wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:5). And you know what? God makes him wise!

It makes me wonder what we would ask Jesus to do for us. What do you think?

The good news is that God wants us to have everything we need. Sometimes that means we won't get what we want, but always it means God cares about us.

Let's pray:

*God: sometimes we don't get what we want. In those times, it's easy to think you don't hear us when we pray. Remind us that you always want us to be happy – and sometimes that means you won't let us have what we want; instead you give us what we need. Thank you for helping us learn the difference. Amen.*

Jesus and his disciples were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, with Jesus in the lead. The disciples were amazed while the others following behind were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, he told them what was about to happen to him. "Look!" he said. "We're going up to Jerusalem. The Human One will be handed over to the chief priests and the legal experts. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. They will ridicule him, spit on him, torture him, and kill him. After three days, he will rise up." James and John, Zebedee's sons, came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They said, "Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory." Jesus replied, "You don't know what you're asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said, "You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, but to sit at my right or left hand isn't mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared." Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with James and John. Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that's not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people."

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<sup>1</sup> *Peace Table* (Herald Press, 2023), p. 254.

Jesus and his followers came into Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, was sitting beside the road. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" Many scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy!" Jesus stopped and said, "Call him forward." They called the blind man, "Be encouraged! Get up! He's calling you." Throwing his coat to the side, he jumped up and came to Jesus. Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said, "Teacher, I want to see." Jesus said, "Go, your faith has healed you." At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way.

Mk. 10:32-52 (C.E.B.)

*For the adults:*

I don't know how much you know about the city of Jericho. It's reportedly one of the oldest cities still occupied. There are claims that it began nearly 10,000 years ago! And despite being destroyed by Joshua, it was rebuilt and still a thriving city today. One of the primary roads to Jerusalem goes through Jericho. For that reason, pilgrims would gather there before ascending the steep road up to Jerusalem. Since it's a road known for roving bandits, travelers gathered in Jericho to ascend the hill with larger crowds (see Lk. 10:30). It's probably where Jesus stops to answer the question of James and John, too (Mk. 10:42).

But imagine the scene in Jericho. It's less than a week before the Passover celebration begins. People from far and near make the journey to Jerusalem every year to celebrate this holy day. For some, this is an annual gathering. For others it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. There is excitement in the air.

Maybe you can imagine yourself living in Jericho. Maybe you are an Innkeeper. This is the time of year you look forward to because it's the season that pays the bills throughout the rest of the year. People are filling the city streets and lodging is at a premium. People are in a festive mood, so there are larger tips than usual, too. You never make it to Jerusalem yourself, but you sure are happy to see the crowds!

On the other hand, you might be one of the pilgrims who come to Jericho every year for what has become a de-facto family reunion. After all, Passover is a family celebration as much as it is a religious festival. You haven't seen your cousins since last year and this is a time to "ooh" and "ahh" about how much the children look like your grandmother or how much they have grown since last year.

Or perhaps you are a first-time participant in the celebrations. Maybe you have lived in lands far away and have finally saved enough money to join the crowds in celebrating this most important event in the life of your people. You have a heightened awareness of the story of your faith as you gather and sing the Psalms, the processional Psalms you'll be singing with others as you trek up the hill to Jerusalem.

I suspect there are also those who take advantage of the crowds. Some might be vendors selling the equivalent of modern-day T-shirts and key rings. Some would be offering special seats or maybe a tour package that would include meals and lodging in Jerusalem. Some may even offer to provide childcare or husbandry services while the pilgrims make the last leg of the trip on foot.

Still others, I suspect, would sit by the road and ask for alms, preying on the generosity of the pilgrims. They have no intention of leaving Jericho; after all, the crowds will come back down the hill next week at the end of the festival. To these beggars, this is the best kind of crowd to work with – they are in good spirits, there is extra money to be spent, and it's a religious holiday that encourages people to give. They couldn't ask for anything better.

Added to the mix this year, is the travelling preacher who has brought his own crowd with him. He is making a reputation as a miracle-worker, but more recently there is talk that he may be the Messiah, the Son of David, who will ascend the throne and free the land from Roman rule (Mk. 8:29).

No matter which part of the story is your part, expectations are high.

It's all Jesus can do to keep the expectations of his Disciples in check. For several weeks now – maybe even several months – he has been trying to get them to see that he was going to Jerusalem to die (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). But now they hear the expectations of the crowd and the rumors circulating and they want to believe a different story, the story of a King being acclaimed and anointed, the story of a King who might rule from David's throne and fulfill the hopes of the people.

It's no wonder James and John begin to imagine what life will be like after Passover. They envision him ascending not just the hill to Jerusalem, but also the throne of David (Mk. 10:37).

That's when we encounter Bartimaeus.

We don't know much about Bartimaeus. We know that Bartimaeus was named after his father, Timaeus (Mk. 10:46). We know he was blind. We know he was begging for mercy – not necessarily for money. We know that because he asks for mercy and because he throws off his coat, which was in all likelihood used to catch the coins people would throw his way (Mk. 10:47, 50).

Unlike the “man born blind” we know from John's gospel, it would seem that Bart – if I can call him that – was not born blind, but rather acquired blindness at some point in his life (see Jn. 9 & Mk. 10:51). A common experience among the people was to contract a disease in which the eye duct would dry out, and in the arid climate it often led to blindness. It was a dreaded disease spread by flies, and my guess is that when he begins to cry out for mercy, the crowd – including the disciples – not only silence him they try to avoid him (Mk. 10:48).

You do remember that as a blind man, he was not welcome at religious festivals? There were prohibitions keeping people with disabilities from being in the temple, a prohibition with roots in the Levitical Law (Lev. 21:17-21). According to those laws anyone with a blemish was not allowed to participate in sacrifices.

I'm thankful the church has not upheld those laws, by the way. We recognize that people who cannot see are no less human. We know that a person who cannot walk can still know the good news of God's love. We believe that disabilities and deformities are not chosen, and are therefore not to be used to exclude people from the life of faith.

But poor old Bart didn't grow up in the church of today. He was relinquished to a life without worship because he lived in a different time and a different place. And so, he asks for mercy (Mk. 10:47).

I don't know how he supported himself; my guess is that his parents provided for him, so he was not in need of money. He was, however, in need of acceptance. At the same time, I wonder if he could see things the people around him were blind to. It was as if he had insight rather than eyesight.

If you have read through Mark's gospel, you may have noticed that it feels like there is a secret going on, one which we as the readers are introduced to early on, but no one else in the story seems to know .. except for the demons. We are told in the opening line of the book that Jesus is God's son (Mk. 1:1). But no human says that about him until he is on the cross. That's when a soldier says he “was certainly God's Son” (Mk. 15:39).

Bartimaeus may have already understood that, though. He calls out to Jesus as the Son of David, acclaiming Jesus as the Messiah (Mk. 10:47, 48). He was naming and perhaps professing something others were either afraid to name out loud or were unable to see.

It could also be that Bart remembered how King David made room at his table for Mephibosheth, the lame descendent of King Saul (2 Sam. 4:4 & 9:1-7). Perhaps he was calling Jesus to make room for the blind and the crippled in his coming kingdom. He may have been pleading for mercy on behalf of all those who were cast out because of their disabilities and deformities.

What strikes me in this passage, however, is the question Jesus asks. Jesus asks the same exact question twice. When Jesus spoke to James and John who wanted to sit at his right and his left, he asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mk. 10:36). It’s the same question he asks of Bartimaeus. “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mk. 10:51).

The disciples ask to be placed at Jesus’ side in his Kingdom (Mk. 10:37).

They want to be seen while Bartimaeus asks to see – even though he seems to notice what no one else can see!

I wasn’t able to verify the source of a story I came across, but apparently Charles Osgood originally told the story. It’s the story of a man who had been blind for 50 years before receiving his sight through the miracles of modern laser surgery. In speaking about his newfound eyesight, the man spoke of the amazing varieties of color – countless shades of green, the brightness of the yellow leaves, the way light reflects off windows. He spoke of seeing but not hearing birds as they fly through the air and the beauty of the clouds as they roll across the sky.

Charles Osgood reportedly made the observation that this man could not see the way we could until his surgery, and now we cannot see the way he does.

Maybe the disciples should have asked to be able to see and Bart could have asked to be seen. After all, if they had noticed him on the side of the road, maybe they would have made a place for him in their entourage.

And that leads me to wonder what we would ask Jesus for?  
Would we prefer to see or to be seen?

Sometimes I think the disciples don’t want to see. Sometimes I think we don’t want to see, either. We prefer to look past the beggars on the streets, just as we prefer not to notice the lonely in our own community. We prefer not to see the needs because it might require us to act.

Sometimes we prefer not to know how we can help; otherwise we might feel obligated to do something. (We’ll talk more about that during Sunday School.)

Sometimes we prefer not to see.

But if we close our eyes, if we choose not to see, we may not be able to see the road in front of us. We wouldn’t be able to follow Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. Closing our eyes may spare us the vision of a man dying on the cross, but we wouldn’t be able to see the empty tomb, either.

Jesus is offering us an invitation to see.

The question remains, do you want to see or do you want to be seen?

*Lenten Communion:*

The Worship Commission has invited us to celebrate communion each week during Lent as a community discipline. Each week we will offer a variation in how it is served as a means of exploring different facets of our celebration.

Today, we will be using Hawaiian sweetbread as a reminder that this meal is not only a commemoration of the Last Supper it is also a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits us. Our focus is on the words of Jesus when he says, “I tell you, I won’t drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Mt. 26:29).

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