

It's a pleasure for me to be here with you this morning, thank you Liz for your invitation! I appreciate the opportunity to share the message with you today. I am deeply convinced that reading the Gospel together as a church is really about the willingness to hear different voices and different perspectives on Jesus's life and teaching. It's not that some of us have better insights, it is mostly because it deepens our reflections and open our hearts to hear what others have to say. Of course it can help, but nobody needs a degree in theology to react to the Scriptures, what's needed is life experience. And so as a preacher, I know this is something that I really try to do – to try to listen to how different people respond to the Gospel and it is often a starting point for me in writing my sermons.

This week, a comment a woman sent on line about this passage of the Gospel made me pause. The woman said that she did not really know what to do of the story of Bartimaeus, because his healing seemed unfair to her, and she explained why. She said that a year ago her young son had a bike accident and since then he has been suffering from terrible headaches that force him to spend long hours in the dark when as a kid he should be enjoying sunshine, and school and playing outside with his friends. She said she has been praying for one year for her son and nothing seems to be happening so far when, on the other side, Bartimaeus, the blind man was saved from darkness and healed by Jesus “immediately”.

And so I started thinking about that. “Immediately” you have probably noticed, is a big word in Mark's Gospel, we find it about 30 times, and most of the time, “immediately” refers to the way miracles happen: *Immediately* the leprosy leaves the leper, *immediately* the paralyzed man stood up, *immediately* the ears of the deaf were opened, and so on...And so I think, this woman is right, you know. The Gospel - this is not the way we experience prayer and healing, most of the time we're like this woman, we spend months and sometimes years praying to finally get a response, if we experience getting a response at all.

And yet. Yet, “immediately”, as I was thinking about this story, another thought hit me. It hit me that if the man was healed “immediately”, “suddenly”, he probably had been waiting for a very long time too. People knew about him, he was Bartimaeus, this man who had been sitting on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, begging while others went on their way. If you have this experience just driving down the same road each day, you probably know about that, there is always this man or this woman you see all the time at the stoplights, begging for money, and sometimes it is a little familiar and good to see their faces, and sometimes it’s a little annoying because you know they are going to ask you again today, and sometimes it’s a little heart-breaking to think that nothing seems to change for them – ever.

Bartimaeus, sitting on the busy road towards Jerusalem, had been waiting a long time for something to happen to him, for somebody to show up for him. Witnessing life moving on around us and feeling left behind, this is something I guess a lot of us can relate to whether we are aging, experiencing disabilities, unemployment, grief or depression, or simply because we are not happy anymore in our marriages or in our jobs, and we can’t see where it’s leading us – we feel stuck. It’s true in life and it’s true in our spirituality, actually it’s often that our relationship with God seems to be on hold when our lives seem to come to a stop, and this is I think the story of Bartimaeus: Surrounded by all those people who seemed to know their way, in their lives and with God, busy, happy, walking towards the Holy City, but he, Bartimaeus, was left on the side of the road. In those times indeed, it is hard to not let darkness overcome us and lose hope – when it seems that nothing good is going to happen to us... So what can we learn today from the story?

Well, the first thing we can learn about Bartimaeus is that, in spite of being stuck on the road, he remained open and alert. I think this is true of a lot of people with disabilities, and we can learn from them. Not being able to use one of their senses or members, they learn to develop the other ones. Bartimaeus could not see, but he certainly could hear. He knew about this Jesus, the *Son of David*, the prophet in whom he could find help and salvation, and my guess is that he had been expectantly waiting for him, listening to conversations and rumors from all those people around him who probably talked about this holy man and his whereabouts.

It can be the same for us. In those situations where we are stuck, we can stay alert, and even if we are in darkness, we can learn how to discern God's presence: by reading the Bible, talking to other Christians, writing about our experience, trying something new. We cannot force God to show up, but we can notice the way in which God comes closer. Bartimaeus prayed what came to be known in the monastic spirituality as the "Jesus prayer": "Have mercy on me!". It is a prayer the monks trained themselves to pray constantly, to pray as they breathe, so they would bathe into God's presence. Maybe a lot of us don't feel called to pray like that, but I think even in our darkest times, when it seems like we have lost our way and it's hard to talk to God, still we can keep a short and simple life of prayer – Crying for help, if it is all we can do.

The second thing I noticed about Bartimaeus is that if he could listen, he could also shout and everybody heard him. Bartimaeus had a huge disability and yet, he was not just a poor beggar, he refused to be a victim and he had enough self confidence to make himself known to Jesus. One of the ways we can "unstuck ourselves" from difficult situations is to keep the conviction that we are never one hundred percent a victim. Our doubts and fears and sometimes people we know can try to silence us, or make us retreat in our own places of solitude, but we can also choose to take a step forward, even if it seems very difficult and paltry. Among those conflicting voices of "should" and "shouldn't" we hear around us or inside of us, we need to strive to go towards where there is greater light and life, and leave behind our insecurities and our comfort – and sometimes even the things we are unhappy about have become comfortable, not that we like them but we've gotten used to them. It can be scary for a blind man to see again. His whole life is going to be transformed, and yet Jesus' s question: "What do you want me to do for you?" seems rhetorical: who wouldn't want the light to come into their lives?

The last thing I noticed is that the story happened in Jericho – and I wondered about that until somebody pointed out to me that the last time people shouted in Jericho, the walls crumbled to dust and it opened the way for the Hebrews to the promised land. Maybe today we are also asked to cry to Jesus so the walls of our inner prisons will crumble so we can find the way, and in the end I think this is what the story is all about: When the time comes for him, Bartimaeus will spring up from his place of darkness and will follow Jesus on the way.

I read recently the story of a woman who was saying that a week before starting chemo for a breast cancer, she went on a silent retreat and she kept looking at Jesus on the cross wondering what all this suffering was all about. And she said that this is what she heard from Jesus: “Yes, there is suffering, but there is a way”. I think this is really what we are called to hang on to as Christians: there is a way (Weren’t we called the people of the way to begin with?). We often hear that we can be or do whatever we want if we have the will, well I am not sure about that and I like it about Bartimaeus that he stays so humble and aware of who he is. Like him, we all have our disabilities, our insecurities and our weaknesses and maybe we can heal from them, or maybe we never will, but still, there is a way for us to the promise land. We find hope, not so much because we convince ourselves that good things will happen for us, but we find hope within ourselves, in the life we have in us, life that pushes forward in spite of everything. In the end of the story, Bartimaeus left his coat behind and it really made me think of a shave of skin, or a butterfly leaving his cocoon. Jesus says it’s his own faith that has saved Bartimaeus. Faith is not about belief. It can be part of it but mainly, faith is about finding life and energy and desire and goodness in us and around us. Yes, sometimes we feel stuck and we can choose to live like that, but we can also consider it as a preparation to go towards something new.

And so in the end, maybe we are called as individuals, but also as a community, in our daily life, in our society, we are called to encourage one another to head towards what brings us life and to head towards the light. I think this is the conclusion of this strange story of Job we have been hearing about for weeks. Job, like the blind man, is made well again. It’s not like nothing bad happened, it’s like God can bring light in any situation. In spite of all the mistakes, pain and heartbreaks, life begins again. Life begins again, yes, there is sufferings, but there is a way. With God, there is always a way. Amen.