

Sermon by Sarah Hoch
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Trinity Episcopal Church , Excelsior
Ordinary Time 26 (Mark 10:46-52)

"Immediately, he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way."

Imagine, if you will, the time leading up to this extraordinary moment in Bartimaeus' life. He once could see, but now is blind. He sits in the dust of the roadside just outside of Jericho, under a cloak, and relies on the charity of passers-by. The fact that he's begging tells us that his needs are not otherwise met by himself or the community -- neither he nor his family nor his neighbors can provide what he needs.

I wonder if Bartimaeus made a habit of sitting at this patch of road during this part of the day. Perhaps this was a routine, a schedule he had worked out. Did he live in Jericho, heading out to the road each morning and then back into the city each evening, as familiar to the community and to those on the road as the shape of the city gates? Or did he pick a new location each day, searching for the best spot, someplace that felt right or allowed him to be best seen by those most likely to help? The text doesn't tell us. All we know is that he sat by the side of the road, and that he listened.

The sound of the crowd approaching out of Jericho must have been dramatic. Jesus, the disciples, and "a large crowd" would make quite a bit of noise. How did Bartimaeus know that it was Jesus in that crowd, I wonder? Perhaps people were calling Jesus' name as they all walked, clamoring to get his attention. Maybe they were talking about Jesus in small groups or pairs as they walked.

Somehow, Bartimaeus had known about Jesus before this moment, such that he would know that it mattered who was in this particular crowd of travelers. Knowledge of Jesus had spread as Jesus' ministry moved around Galilee, so he may have heard about this "Son of David" that way. Or perhaps he had heard Jesus speak in Jericho, while Jesus was there, presumably teaching and maybe healing. And now, perhaps to his surprise, or perhaps according to his plan, Jesus is right there, walking past him on the road.

The notion of a road, or a path, features heavily throughout scripture. Isaiah's words prefigure John the Baptist: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our

God.” Jeremiah asks us to stop at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in them, and find rest for our souls. The psalmist speaks of searching out the path of God, and of the Lord leading them along a path to still waters; and Proverbs speaks of the path of righteousness, which leads ever up.

Mark makes the path, or the road, or the way, a central part of the story of Jesus and what it means for discipleship. Much of the Gospel shows us discipleship as following Jesus on his way to the cross. In the very first chapter, Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, and James and John, and they follow him, leaving behind family and nets and a familiar way of being in and understanding the world in favor of a new way, always moving with Jesus along the road.

Now, it is Bartimaeus' turn. He realizes that he is sitting on the path Jesus is walking. He acts, and calls out – “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Despite the shushing from some in the crowd, Jesus hears him, and stops on this road. He invites Bartimaeus to come to him, an invitation repeated and amplified by people in the surrounding crowd, perhaps even those who had just told Bartimaeus to be quiet. Bartimaeus accepts that invitation to come to Jesus on the road with alacrity, throwing off his cloak and springing up. And when Jesus asks him what he wants, Bartimaeus asks for renewal. “Let me see again,” he asks.

How often have you felt like you once could see the way forward, but somehow now find yourself by the side of the road, wondering... what next? What am I doing? Where am I going?

Paths are funny things, especially in the Gospel story. The path to Jerusalem, the cross, and new life beyond runs through the Holy Land in a fairly sense. You can go there, and physically walk paths that are described in the Gospel stories. But the path to Jerusalem and all that comes next is also a path that runs through eternal space, outside of and within the everyday, through all times, and through all places. It runs past your door, along your street, and through your life.

We’re always on a path of some sort, headed somewhere. But sometimes we find ourselves sitting beside the road, unsure, stuck, sitting in the dust. Maybe the road you’re sitting beside is a road that once was beautifully paved, that fed you as you walked it. But somehow, it became dusty, and you've found yourself sitting beside it. Waiting, and listening.

For Bartimaeus, this was literally the road to Jerusalem, but as the story opened, he wasn’t able to walk it. At the end of this story, following his encounter with Christ, Bartimaeus is no longer sitting at the

side of that road. He did not experience renewal, and then go back to his old spot, his familiar ways. Instead, he follows Jesus on the way. Those who hear this Gospel, now and back in the 1st century, know what comes next for Christ: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem followed by the cross. But we also know that beyond the cross is resurrection to new life. How heavy that is! Perhaps in some way that is the journey that Bartimaeus has just made, in this story -- at the end, he follows Christ in a renewed life. Jerusalem represents the next set of mountains, but this time Bartimaeus isn't alone: he walks towards those mountains with Christ, on the way.

Christ calls us to something more than we are or can be alone, by our own power and will. It's not always an easy way -- this year's Adult Forum is inviting us into the powerful dis-ease of the way. It is instead a way of confronting the difficult things in life, both the everyday and the existential, calling us to go into them and then, with Christ's help, through them and into new life in the Kingdom of God.

Our world is full of nay-sayers, who sometimes tell us that being stuck is good, actually -- that job, that relationship, that house, that life looks good on paper. How could you possibly be malcontented? It's scary to acknowledge being stuck, sometimes. But the way to which we are called is the way to not sitting on the side of that road, under a cloak, in the dust. Instead, it's the way of crying out when you're stuck and scared, and listening -- sometimes in prayer, sometimes to the prompting of friends, family and neighbor -- for the invitation of Christ calling you to pick up that cross walk the path with him anew. The way might be hard, but the cross, that dark night of the soul, which we've all encountered at least once in our lives, leads also to resurrection, to new life.

The path is before you, always, is Christ's invitation. Listen, throw off your cloak, and follow Jesus on the way.