

Grace Episcopal Church
October 28, 2012
Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

"Restored Sight"

Texts – Jeremiah 31: 7-9 and Luke 10: 46-52

The road that leads from Jericho to Jerusalem was a dangerous place. From the town of Jericho, 850 feet below sea level, the lowest place on earth, this road ascends about 3,300 feet over the course of 17 miles, and winds through narrow passes. When I was there some years ago on a small bus that could navigate this road, the guide pointed out these perfect places where thieves and other ne'er-do-wells could lurk in wait for the unaware, the vulnerable. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was not a place where people hung out or took leisurely Sunday afternoon strolls. No. They attended to their business and moved along as quickly as possible.

It was at the beginning of this road, there on the outskirts of Jericho, that Bartimaeus sat. Bartimaeus. Bar – "son of" Timaeus – was likely a regular sight at the spot, a spot he had probably claimed as his own, where he spread his cloak out beside him in hopes of collecting a few coins from those passing by. And after supper, if he'd been lucky that day, maybe he rolled himself up in that same cloak to try to stay warm through the cold desert night. But for the most part, he was probably invisible, a part of the landscape. People either averted their eyes when they came upon him or just looked right through him. For Bartimaeus was a beggar, an annoyance, an embarrassment.

You've seen him. You've seen him maybe even in Galena, but certainly in Rockford, Dubuque, Chicago. Crouched in a doorway wrapped in a ragged blanket and a paper cup in her hand. Standing in an intersection holding a hand-made sign asking for something to eat or a warm place to pass the night. And you've hurried past, pretending not to notice, pretending not to hear the cry. Or, maybe, you've dug into your pocket and given a few coins, and then walked away not sure if you had done the right thing.

Bartimaeus was in exile. He was in exile as surely as the Israelites that Jeremiah addressed in this morning's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. These exiles had different causes, of course. Bartimaeus was in exile because he had lost his sight. He was blind. And as a blind man, he was of no use to his society. So, his society exiled him to the side of the road with his cloak where he was forced to beg to stay alive. There was no Braille then, no seeing eye dogs, no disability insurance, no medical procedures that might help.

The Israelites caused their own exile – or so the prophets told them. They were in exile because they had fallen away from their covenant with their God. They suffered another kind of blindness – not physical but spiritual. They had become blind to their faith. For that, they were conquered, taken from their homes, their Temple destroyed. And they were marched off into a captivity that lasted nearly forty years.

We don't talk much about being in exile today. And yet, it is all around us. It comes in all shapes and sizes – some exiles worse than others. For some, of course, it is an

exile from a place, a home, a country. An exile of oppression, exclusion, or poverty. For others, it is more an exile of spirit – an exile of loneliness or depression or pain and suffering, a captivity to drugs or alcohol, or just to the demands of the world around us that leave us drained and anxious. For some, there are things that help like Braille and seeing eye dogs. But not for everyone.

There is blindness, too. The beggars and street people in our city may not be physically blind. They may have other physical or mental disabilities that prevent them from being productive citizens. Or their exile may be caused by the blindness of others that makes them invisible. A blindness that is of epidemic proportions in our country today. A blindness that builds economic policies that favor the rich over those who are already in exile and those who are on the edge where just one more lousy break will plunge them into exile. A blindness that puts its money into defense instead of providing access to education, healthcare, living wages, and affordable housing. A blindness that averts eyes, that looks right through the presence of the exiles in our midst and does not see the causes. A blindness that may be a lack of awareness, a failure to care, or just plain ignorance. A blindness that does not see that it is the blindness itself that contributes to the exile.

There are advantages to blindness, of course. If you don't see something, you can't be expected to do anything about it. I remember a song – it's a 70s song, not exactly the kind of music we sing here at Grace. But the message applies, I think, to the struggles of all human beings. It is called "Sometimes I Wish:"

Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened,
Sometimes I wish I could no longer see_
All of the pain and the hurt and the longing
Of my [people] and me as we try to be free.¹

Bartimaeus wasn't blind all of his life – he asked Jesus to "see again" so he knew what he was missing, he remembered what it was like to have sight. The captive Israelites exiled to Babylon also knew what they were missing. They remembered their homeland, their Temple, either from their own memories or from the stories and songs they heard and learned. And they cried out to God for mercy. They cried out for their homeland to be restored. And God responded, through the prophet Jeremiah, with a word of hope that saw beyond their exile to a time of restoration and new covenant. God called the people to be joyful, for God is ever faithful and especially caring of the weak and vulnerable. The exile would end for *all* – the blind, the lame, and the pregnant would not be left behind. Some of the exiles, we learn later, did not return. They chose to remain in the country of their captivity. It was easier, perhaps, to accommodate to what they had than to face the uncertainty of the journey back home. Easier than facing the expectations of a new covenant with God. Easier to remain "blind."

As for Bartimeaus, there was no hesitation. When he heard the sounds of the crowd and discovered that Jesus was near, he began to cry out. When others tried to "shush" him, he simply hollered louder. And when Jesus called to him, he immediately

¹ From *Everflowing Streams: Songs for Worship*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Michael G. Bausch, New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981. The song by Carole Etzler, 1976, is from the album "Sometimes I Wish "

sprang up – so excited that he flung his cloak aside and left it behind. When Jesus asked what he wanted, he was clear – to see again. Jesus told him to go, that he was healed. Unlike other healings of Jesus, there was no laying on of hands, no touch. Just his word. There were no strings attached, just the free gift of sight, a free gift that gave him a way out of exile and back into human society. But, eyes wide open, Bartimeaus chose instead to follow Jesus on the way. A model of discipleship for us – the Greek for "on the way" can mean just following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem or it can mean becoming a follower of his ministry and teaching.

And this model of discipleship, I think, is important to what the writer of Mark wanted the readers to see. If we were to read these last three chapters of the gospel all in one sitting instead of just a few verses at a time, we might see a pattern emerge. They are chapters of Jesus' healing and teaching and telling the disciples what would await him in this final trip to Jerusalem. They are chapters that tell of becoming as little children, giving away possessions, and arguing for power and position. And they begin and end with the restoring of sight to two blind men. Physical blindness as bookends to emphasize the spiritual blindness of the disciples and others who would follow Jesus but do not quite "get" the import of his message. That following him, doing as God requires, must come first. Before wealth and position, before comfort and self-satisfaction, before our own ability to shape and control our lives. And that only by putting God first and following Jesus, do we come to really see.

See the way out of exile – our own exile or the exile that we have caused or allowed for others. But we fear speaking out, leaping up, and asking for what we want. Maybe it is the voices that try to shut us up. Sometimes, it is our own voices. It is easier, less risky, more comfortable to remain "blind." Easier to endure the "devil that we do know" rather than risking what we don't know. We are called upon to choose. We can choose to reach out for God's grace that is always present. We can choose, like Bartimeaus, to shout out, to leap up from our cloaks of blindness and shake off what holds us captive. We can choose – for ourselves and for those who are vulnerable – to follow, our sight restored, "on the way" with joy and thanksgiving for our God, whose faithfulness knows no end.

But now that I've seen with my eyes,
I can't close them,
Because deep inside me somewhere I'd still know
The road that my [people] and I have to travel:
My heart would say, 'Yes!' and my feet
would say, 'Go!'

Amen and amen.