

Sermon – Proper 25 - Ascension Rockville Centre, NY

Jeremiah 31: 7-9, Psalm 126, Mark 10: 46-52

One of the overarching themes in the canon of scripture is restoration and healing. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve God has been calling us back into full relationship. This theme is woven into the accounts of people from Abraham and Sarah, to the great prophets, to Moses and the whole people of Israel to the disciples and various people Jesus heals in his years on earth.

This theme permeates the readings we have set for today. We hear the words of the great prophet Jeremiah who proclaims the Lord's declaration that the exiled people in Babylon will be restored to their rightful place, as will the remnant communities left behind. We know that when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem they enslaved the wealthy and productive members of that community and took them back to Babylon but left behind the weak, poor and lame to fend for themselves. The Lord promised restoration of all his people, who he calls his "first born," to their rightful place and also promised to console them as they worked to re-establish themselves and heal from that traumatic period in their lives.

In today's palm we also hear the palmist proclaiming gratefulness at the restoration of Israel. It was to be a dream fulfilled that they had been returned to the land promised by God all those years before. It made them happy and joyful to be home at last. And why wouldn't it! "Those who sowed with tears, will reap with songs of joy," the palmist declares.

The power of transformation of an enslaved and discarded people, from desperation to their rightful inheritance, must have also been personally transformative. The relief felt by each person as freedom arrives must have been powerful and life changing. It probably was also a time of anxiousness, as they needed to find their place in society again and re-establish their families and homes.

These powerful stories from long ago are for us today illustrations of hope. Even though we might despair at our current circumstances we stay strong in our faith that God's purpose for us will eventually be made clear. All things are indeed possible if we hold to our faith and believe in the power of God to right all wrongs in God's time.

The faith that we hold requires us to endure periods of waiting that can be frustrating and energy sapping. When our health is taken from us, when our economic security is taken from us, indeed when our freedom is taken from us, restoration to what was our normal state can seem far away. A new state of normal has to be found.

For Bartimaeus, living with blindness must have been a trying period. In Jesus day, anyone who was not whole was considered a second rate person. Purity and wholeness was the state that kept you in good standing in the community. Begging was a large part

of the life of anyone who was blind or lame and couldn't work. Patience was required from them as they waited for their bowls to be filled.

Jesus was not immune from the feelings of frustration as he waited for his disciples to come into a deeper understanding of who he was, what his ministry was all about and what his destiny was to be. Jesus knew his life would end and he would return to his father but in the meantime he had work to do to encourage others into his ministry and into a new life transformed by his teaching.

The gospel reading we have for today is not just a story of Jesus healing of another person. It is not a stand-alone story but must be understood in the context of the journey Jesus was on. Today's passage is a bookend to a series of stories of Jesus' life that began with the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida. This was told in Mark 8:22-26.

The man healed of his blindness in Bethsaida is not named. He is brought to Jesus by some of the crowd who believe Jesus would be able to heal him. Jesus takes two goes to heal him but once he has succeeded he sends the man to his home telling him to go into the village.

In today's story of the blind man we know the name of the man – Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. There must be a reason his name is remembered. In this story Jesus and the crowd that is following him are leaving Jericho which is located on the plain adjacent to the Jordan River, and are embarking on the climb up the mountains toward Jerusalem.

The blind and the lame nearly always begged at the edge of the city near the gates where the most people would come and go. Bartimaeus must have heard the sound of the great commotion that would have accompanied Jesus as he made his way through the streets toward the gate to leave Jericho. As the rumble of the crowd crescendoed and the smell of dust in the air overtook him, Bartimaeus leapt at his chance to encounter Jesus, who he knows to be the Son of David, a descendant of royalty.

However, unlike the earlier story of the blind man being brought to Jesus, here the crowd that encapsulated Jesus ordered Bartimaeus to be quiet. Undeterred he yelled even louder – “Son of David, have mercy on me”. Jesus heard him this time. His persistence paid off. Reluctantly those close to him called him forward to meet Jesus. By Jesus words affirming the man's faith he is healed and follows the crowd with Jesus out of Jericho.

You may notice a difference in the efficacy of Jesus healing of the first blind man and his healing of Bartimaeus. In the first instance Jesus physically touches the man's eyes twice to restore his sight. In this healing narrative Bartimaeus' expressed faith is all that is needed for Jesus to restore his eyesight. It is this deep level of faith that I believe results in us knowing the name of the healed man. It was his faith that resulted in the miracle.

In this latest story Jesus also does not chastise the crowd or his disciples or Bartimaeus for their actions. Jesus accepts the situation and the royal epithet and wears them openly whereas before he always ordered those he healed to not say anything and declined labels

that elevated him above others. But Jesus understands his destiny now as he begins the physical and spiritual climb to the cross. The waiting is over and his passion begins.

The transformation of Jesus and his disciples seem to be heading in two different directions. Jesus is transformed to accept his destiny that will lead to his torture and death upon a cruel instrument of pain and suffering. His disciples though have been transformed from following a humble teacher who had called them from their simple lives to following someone who they thought would be recognized in Jerusalem as the messiah and crowned as King. For them they were to be his closest crew, a position of privilege and power.

The trajectory of their transformations would intersect on the cross, in Jesus' resurrection and in the days that followed before Jesus ascended into heaven. The pain they experienced in witnessing the betrayal of Jesus, his arrest and torture and finally his crucifixion was so great they largely abandoned him. Peter even denied knowing him.

No one but God truly knows the arc of our lives. We try our best to shape our lives to our own desires and needs but sometimes our lives take directions we never thought we would have to experience. In some cases these turns are positive and in some cases they are negative. In my experience it is the turns that are negative that really hit us hard and require us to really dig deep into our faith to sustain us.

We can learn a lot from Bartimaeus and from understanding how lives are transformed under God's reign, both individually and as a society. What can seem like very dark times will end eventually. God as we know has promised not to burden us with anything we cannot bear. Holding on to our faith and crying out to Jesus to have mercy on us is what sustains us and helps us to heal and be restored.

Scripture reveals to us how God works in the world and from this we can draw hope that God is working always in our own lives as we hold to our faith and support others in their journeys of life. As we are healed let us be like Bartimaeus and continue to follow and proclaim Jesus to the world that is in desperate need of healing and transformation.

Amen.