

“The Cloak That Roared”
Mark 10:46-52
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Aspiring writers might wish to analyze the Gospel of Mark for how to construct a compelling story. First you introduce a theme like spiritual blindness with an episode of the healing of actual blindness even if it takes a couple of tries. Then you add in some object lessons on faith and discipleship, like those about giving up everything and following a great teacher (who happens to be the Son of God), and those that suggest that the weakest in earthly society have a special place in the heavenly one. Finally, you not so subtly drop hint about the end of your story, not once but three times but you let your characters misunderstand it. Then you wrap up the whole section of the story with an episode that tidily pulls together all these elements and echos most of the recent encounters of the main character so that your readers go, “Wow! Now I get it.”

The story of Bartimaeus is the culmination of a long section of stories about Jesus’ ministry immediately preceding his suffering and death as Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for the endgame. Three times he must announce his death and resurrection. The gravity of this announcement is hard to fathom, hard then, and still hard today, and Mark takes us through these stories to show us how we come to believe the unbelievable and follow the unfollowable. We have our own eyes opened to Jesus as the characters in the stories have their eyes opened, both

literally and figuratively. And so in this concluding episode we hear the echoes of the healing of the first blind man, a healing which did not happen immediately, but which took Jesus twice laying his hands on the man. We hear echoes of the stories about who is the greatest and the first, not kings and princes but children and blind beggars. We hear echoes of the challenges of leaving things behind, wealth, family, property. Finally, in Bartimaeus, we see the epitome of a disciple after having viewed the challenges of becoming and being one.

Given the role of this story as a wrapup to this section on discipleship, there are any number of elements of the story to which one can point and say, “that’s the moment of faith.” One moment could be when Bartimaeus’, though blind, “recognized” Jesus as Son of David. Another could be when he persisted in calling out to him, and another when he followed Jesus after being healed. But for me, there is a more compelling element of the story, one which speaks louder than Bartimaeus himself shouting to Jesus from the side of the road. It is that line in the story that reads, “So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” Leave it to Mark, that great storyteller, to add a vivid detail that both captures the imagination and provides us a point of entry to take a look at our own response to God’s call to us. It was the cloak that roared.

Before I say more on that, I want to say a few things about Bartimaeus that may shed some light on the power of that act of faith. Especially given his pivotal role, it is tempting to romanticize Bartimaeus, to ascribe to him virtuous attributes

based on his poverty and disability and thus his openness to receiving what Christ had to offer. But I think it would be a mistake to do that and place too much distance between him and ourselves. I think he was probably a person who suffered a great deal, who did things to survive he was not proud of, and who sought out whatever advantage he could to stay alive, including using his blindness to garner sympathy. His life on the street may have helped him depend more on God, but more likely it just made him a little more bitter each day, as the mercy and abundance of God only seemed to trickle down to him in the smallest of denominations, from the stingiest of believers.

We are told that Bartimaeus is a beggar, meaning that he survived according to the mercy of those who would deign to help him. We might imagine his blindness would make it all the more difficult for him to beg successfully since he would have been dependent on his benefactors to draw near to him, rather than he to them. He probably spent the day doing what he did in this story, yelling out to passersby to have mercy on him, to drop a few coins in whatever receptacle he could wave in their general direction. And so on this particular day, along comes Jesus and the routine was no different. Buzz on the street told him it was a noteworthy person passing by; yesterday it might have been Jericho's rising business tycoon, someone like the rich man who went away sorrowful when Jesus told him he had to give up his wealth, today a Rabbi with a faithful following, a not uncommon occurrence in those days. Calling out to celebrities could bring a little

bit of extra coin, but there were also risks posed by the entourages that surrounded the famous en route. They tended to be a little overprotective. And so the cry from the side of the road on this day was the same, "Have mercy on me." It was, however, the response that was different this time.

The response was different because generally if there was any response at all it was probably a few clinking coins heaved from a distance, or a lecture on getting a job or on being a responsible citizen. Jesus did neither. From Bartimaeus' perspective, perhaps the most extraordinary difference was that Jesus actually stopped -- the text says he "stood still," -- and requested Bartimaeus' presence at his side. The successful rarely stop for the peons who want an audience. Seekers must keep up with the pace set by the pacesetters if they want to get a few words in before the next solicitous person nudges them out of the way. But Jesus does not expect Bartimaeus to keep up with him. And so it was that others in the street said to Bartimaeus, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you," an extraordinary difference indeed. Perhaps this was the payday he had hoped for, for if this man would stop for him, perhaps he would really help him in a meaningful way.

But once at Jesus' side, instead of hearing something he might have expected, like, "Take this money, go and eat," Bartimaeus heard the nine words which would change his life, "What do you want me to do for you?" He could not see the mouth which uttered them, but we can imagine he was melted by the tone with which they were said, if not the very fact they were spoken at all. The

difference in Jesus' response to his cries from the side of the road, and to his presence, give rise to a sudden courage and honesty that likely not only surprised him but that allowed him to say, "My teacher, let me see again," instead of the safer, less vulnerable answer of, "Give me some money so that I may eat."

But back to the Cloak that Roared. If I were making an overblown TV melodrama about the Gospels, I'd send Bartimaeus' cloak flying off in slow motion with a dramatic whoosh and much flapping of its tattered edges. I'd do that because that action is the moment of hope that makes the rest of the story possible. Before Jesus calls Bartimaeus to him, he has the opportunity to simply become a blind beggar with a little bit more. Instead, Bartimaeus hurls aside the one thing that is keeping him alive so that he might obtain the one thing that will enable him to live. Communicated through Jesus stopping and calling him is the hope that enables him to do such a rash, but faithful, thing as that. This is not like leaving behind your favorite old sweater; that cloak was this man's only protection from the elements, the only thing keeping him from wind, dust, garbage, cold, it was his mat, it was his tent, his backpack. To see how valuable is this garment, we need only look to the Old Testament to find laws specifically protecting these cloaks and their owners from greedy moneylenders. In Amos, we hear that the cloak may not be taken in pledge, which is to say, as collateral for a loan. That's because foreclosure meant depriving a person of their last or only protection and essentially leaving them for dead. That Bartimaeus tosses away this thing of great value is

evidence of the hope he can see not with his blind eyes, but with the eyes of the heart, the faith that comes once he has experienced the dignity which Jesus has accorded him.

What is significant about the casting aside of the cloak is that it affirms that hope encourages utter dependence on God, and the leaving behind of old and secure ways to follow unknown and possibly hazardous new paths. It means risking exposure to the elements, not just the weather related ones, but all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, all the taunts, all the persecution, all the sacrifices. It means being willing to live instead of just being alive, thriving instead of surviving. That Bartimaeus was healed of his blindness is like gravy to this act of faith, for though what he sought from Jesus might originally have been money, what he received was dignity and hope, and that quite possibly could have been enough. But God gives more abundantly than we dare to hope and so Bartimaeus is given not only hope but sight.

I am not going to suggest to you tonight that the next time you see a beggar on the street that you engage that person in conversation and ask them what you can do for them. No, tonight I am going to suggest that you take Bartimaeus' place and consider what cloak you need to cast aside to follow Jesus, to encourage you to seek from God what you really need to live, and not just what is needed so you can stay alive. Mercifully, few, if any of us, find ourselves in the position of having but one possession that stands between us and the grave. Furthermore, most, if not all,

of us, have already responded to Christ's call and claim on our lives. But even already knowing Christ as savior doesn't mean we are living the abundant life we may have hoped for, it doesn't mean that we are fully enjoying the fruits of life in the spirit. It may be that like the blind man in the first story, we need a couple of treatments before we see fully and clearly.

So what is your cloak? What is it that is keeping you alive that you need to cast down so that you can really live? In our Wednesday evening Bible study on grace, we read the story of a woman whose anger at the person who violated her fueled her actions for years. She made it her mission in life to make sure that her attacker paid for his sins. Her anger played a very vital role in her life. You could say it was what kept her alive, for without it she might have sunk into a despair from which she could not rise again, so painful was the trauma of her ordeal. It was not until she forgave her attacker, even without his repentance, that she began to live, for in the act of forgiveness, she herself was liberated. When she cast aside her cloak of anger, she found the abundant life promised by Jesus Christ.

My hunch is that until we meet Christ face to face, we will always have a cloak or two in our spiritual closets, places in our lives awaiting conversion, parts even of our very identities that we don't even recognize are keeping us alive. For some people, the cloak may be a feeling that they are responsible for the emotional or financial well-being of their family. They are afraid to grow and change for to do so will rock the family boat, and rocking the family boat will cause those they

love to be in pain. For some people, clinging to a certain self-understanding makes a great cloak, the belief that I am weak, or I am a victim, or I am a worker, or I am indispensable, or I am an American, or any other I am statement that does not end with “loved by God.” For some people, it will be a commitment to a cause or issue, for that is how they can make sense of the world around them, how they can do something to make sure no one else suffers as they have.

When we choose to cast aside our cloaks, it is because we have decided to believe in the hope offered by our God in Jesus Christ, a Christ who wants us in his presence to share in that hope, and so calls us to himself. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks us, just like Bartimaeus, and with a little grace, we are able to reply honestly with, “I want to thrive,” instead of safely with, “I want to survive.” We might wish that God’s power could be added to our own to punish perpetrators, or to help us to be more responsible, or to reinforce our own view of ourselves, but that would be like Bartimaeus just asking Jesus for a little money. All it would do would help him survive a little longer instead of living.

In a story like this one, it all looks so simple, for Jesus just does what Jesus does and Bartimaeus is healed. Would that it were so with the wounds of the hearts and soul! But friends, know that even though it might take a little longer for each of us to experience the healing we need, it is not only possible, but a sure and certain promise on which we can depend that God desires for us that we thrive and not just survive. May God help us all to cast aside our cloaks and make our way toward life in Jesus Christ. Amen.