

Take Heart

Mark 10:46-52

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Today's sermon is entitled, "Take Heart," based on the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus, which Jane just read. When I think about this passage, I remember a line from the famous hymn "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." Blind people are important to the Gospel of Mark too.

In the middle part of Mark, chapters 8-10, there are two healing stories of blind people, one in chapter eight and one in chapter ten. In chapter eight Jesus is in Bethsaida, near the Sea of Galilee. People bring a blind man to Jesus. Jesus spits into his hands and then puts his hands on the man's eyes. The man says, "I can see people, but they look like trees walking" (8:24). Then Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes again, and he sees everything clearly.

In the second healing, which takes place in Jericho, just outside of Jerusalem, the man is named. He's Bartimaeus. He's sitting by the roadside, and he calls out to Jesus, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" A lot of people try to hush him. But he cries out even more loudly: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" So Bartimaeus was looking for someone to deliver him and his contemporaries from the Roman oppressors, just like David had delivered the Israelites from the Philistines. Jesus stopped, "Whoa! Call him here!" So, these same people who tried to shut him up said, "Take heart; get up, he's calling you!" So, he throws off his cloak, springs up, and comes to Jesus. Jesus says, "What do you want me to do for you?" This was what he had said to James and John in the passage that Amie preached on last week. Bartimaeus said, "My teacher, let me see again." This time, Jesus doesn't touch him at all. He heals by his word: "Go; your faith has made you well." Or literally, your faith has saved you. Jesus has already said this to the woman with a hemorrhage. She felt in her body that her hemorrhage had stopped, and Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has saved you" (5:34). Jesus says the same thing to Bartimaeus, "Your faith has saved you." And suddenly he regains his sight. He sees again. And he follows Jesus on the way, on the road, on the journey to Jerusalem. What's going to happen in Jerusalem?

Jesus has already told us and the disciples. He's going to die and rise again in Jerusalem. He gives these passion predictions three times in this section of the gospel, once in chapter 8, once in chapter 9 and once in chapter 10. And each time the disciples misunderstand. In chapter 8, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying that he's going to die. And Jesus rebukes Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan." They are having a little rebuking match there. In chapter 9, Jesus predicts his passion, and the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. They were arguing about who is the GOAT. The greatest of all time. But they weren't talking about Tom Brady or Babe Ruth. They were talking about who was the GOAT among the disciples. "I'm the goat, no, I'm the goat, no I'm the goat." Then in chapter 10, in the passage that Amie preached on, just after Jesus predicted his passion for the third time, James and John ask for the best seats in glory. Those disciples! They are a bunch of numbskulls, or to use a theological term, they are knuckleheads!

But it's important that we see what Mark is doing here: He frames these passion predictions and misunderstandings with these healings of blind people. While these blind folks go from

blindness to sight, the disciples go the opposite direction, from sight to blindness. That is the literary level. But what is going on at the historical level? In other words, were these blind people cured of their blindness so that they received back their sight? This is a big question, and I used to teach a course on the historical Jesus in which I discussed these questions over an entire semester. I can only offer a few thoughts here.

Roman historians, who were not associated with the Christian movement, indicate that Jesus had the reputation as a healer. Scholars make a distinction between illness and healing on the one hand and disease and cure on the other. Healing involves the full restoration of life in social, psychological, and emotional dimensions. Cure involves the removal of disease in the biological sense. So, one can have healing without cure. Jesus healed illnesses without always curing diseases. And sometimes it took some time for people to be healed. Yet as the gospel miracle stories were told, they were told as stories of spontaneous cures, just like here where Mark says that Bartimaeus "immediately regained his sight." It may have been, though, more of a gradual process in which his blindness was not cured, but it was healed.

How do we need to be healed? In what ways are we blind? Perhaps you remember the Ray Stevens song from the 1970s: "There is none so blind / As he who will not see. / We must not close our minds. / We must let our thoughts be free." So for Stevens, blindness is closed-mindedness, and seeing is free thought. After the sermon today, the choir will sing, "Open My Eyes That I May See." It says in part, "While the wave notes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear." Blindness is seeing things that are false. And healing from blindness is seeing things clearly.

What things need to disappear for us? What things do we need to see clearly? In this stewardship season, this season of generosity, I would like to recommend one point at which God wishes to heal us. God wishes to heal us from the blindness of the myth of scarcity, and God wishes to give us the clarity of the truth of abundance. Let me say that again: God wishes to heal us from the blindness of the myth of scarcity, and God wishes to give us the clarity of the truth of abundance.

The myth of scarcity. I'm using here the term "myth" as foundational story, and scarcity is the foundational story of our 21st century U.S. way of life. Advertising is based on it: You don't have enough, you can't do enough, you are not enough. So, you've got to buy, buy, buy these things that you never knew that you needed until someone on the radio or TV or social media told you. Ads or commercials are little conversion narratives: someone's life is terrible, but then they get a certain product, and their life is wonderful. Such is the myth of scarcity, which leads us to buy more and more and more and feel less and less and less satisfied.

There is, however, the truth of abundance. It says that you are enough, that you have enough. Jesus talked about the treasure buried in a field, and you are that treasure. Jesus talked about the pearl of great price, and you are that pearl. The kingdom of God--or the "kin-dom" of God is at hand. It is already and not yet. We see the kin-dom in our relationships, here in church and around the world. We hear the kin-dom in every bird that sings and every child who laughs. (And yes, when I wrote this, I was looking out at children on the Academy playground.) And we feel the kin-dom as we breathe in fresh air into our nostrils, that invigorating blast of the Spirit, which renews us and refreshes us.

As you pledge in this stewardship season, this season of generosity, may you do so from a standpoint of abundance. That is the reality in which we live.

A few years ago, I was serving as interim pastor in Madison, WI, where they do ice-fishing. I was fascinated by it. I went to make a visit to an apartment building beside a lake where there was a whole swath of ice-fishers, many of whom had little shacks in which they lived for a while. After I made my visit, I decided that I needed to go talk with one of these ice-fishers to find out what would make him do something so crazy. (And all of them were "hims". I saw no women out on the frozen lake.) So, I started to walk out on the lake to go talk with these guys. But suddenly I became scared. I'm going to fall through the ice. I momentarily fell prey to the blindness of scarcity. But then I looked around and saw all these guys, standing on the ice with their shacks. I realized the truth of abundance. There was plenty of ice to hold me. So, I went to talk with one of these guys and found out he was just as crazy as I thought. But he caught an abundance of fish.

Abundance must be the reality from which we give. It must be the reality from which we live. We do in fact have sufficient time, talent, and treasure, although we often say that we don't.

I would like to conclude with a poem from Kaitlin Curtice in the book that several folks are reading, *Native*. She writes:

God is more soul than us.
God is more time than schedules,
more grace than boundaries,
more everything than the imaginable.
...
What, then, is God?
God is
exactly everything that is
and everything that we do not know of--
Mystery stacked upon Mystery,
Sacred enveloping the Sacred,
Treasure buried within the pebbles
of our earth-kingdoms.¹
Amen.

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¹ Kaitlin B. Curtice, *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020), 78-79.