22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.24.21

Jeremiah 31:7-9
For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Mark 10:46-52
They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (292)

Bartimaeus means "son of Timaeus." "Bar" means "son of," so Bartimaeus means "son of Timaeus." Mark writes here of a certain, "Bartimaeus, Son of Timaeus," which literally means "son of Timaeus, son of Timaeus." It's a strange rhetorical choice. Scholars say his including "son of Timaeus" is to interpret the name, to make it clear to the reader as to what this name means. The thing is, I'd imagine most of the audience, as Mark imagined it, would have known this is what "Bartimaeus" means. It means "son of Timaeus."

I always think of the skit from Saturday Night Live whenever we come upon this story in church. It was from a while ago, this skit was, a decade or so back when El Nino was causing such weird weather. The name, "El Nino," was on every weatherman's lips. The skit has it that one weatherman actually landed an interview with El Nino, as if this weather pattern were personified. Played by Chris Farley, he's amidst a whirlwind on the screen. The weatherman is thrilled to have him joining the program (via satellite) and finally asks him the question whose answer everyone in their broadcast area wants to know: what does the name "El Nino" mean? With grand anticipation, the embodied weather pattern is ready at long last to explain. It means "the Nino."

Yes, Mark, we know "Bartimaeus" means "Son of Timaeus." But, as it happens, the real mystery as to this meaning lies with "Timaeus." There's little sense of what *that* means. It's not a known name in the history of this people or this region, it's not a construction of this language,

which is to say all we seem to know of this man is that he's someone's son, though whose, we don't know, and which moreover doesn't help since everyone is either someone's son or someone's daughter, someone's child if we aim to cover all the possibilities.

It's this, then, *I* think, that Mark here means for his audience to notice. This: that here is a man who is someone's son, a fact that, obvious, our gospel writer also wants us to *notice,* to recognize.

This section of Mark's gospel is about three chapters long. It follows when Jesus has called and commissioned the twelve, the apostles, whom he then sent out in pairs. They would teach and heal and work wonders, just like Jesus. Then they'd return and talk of what they did. And once everyone was accustomed to this new authority, Jesus, in this middle section of the gospel narrative, began to teach them about the larger point of this whole venture, that is, the cross. He would teach them that, see, he was going to Jerusalem and there he would be handed over to the Gentiles, and they would mock and flog and spit on him, and at last they would kill him, and on the third day he would rise again.

Three times in this section Jesus teaches of this—these three times being the through-line for this middle section of Mark's gospel. Three times teaching this—this most impossible thing, this most confounding thing. And three times someone from Jesus' inner circle would have the absolute wrong response. Peter would hear this, that first time Jesus spoke of it, and he would move to prevent it from happening: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" James and John would hear this, that third time Jesus spoke of it, and they would aim to get the best seats with Jesus in his glory, one at his right hand and one at his left. This, while paying no mind, it seems, to the mocking and flogging and killing part. (And it's important here to remember who did indeed end up being at Jesus' right hand and at his left: two thieves, crucified along with Jesus. It's worth also noticing how that story echoes here with Bartimaeus, as both have Jesus asking the very promising question, "What is it you want me to do for you?") The middle time Jesus spoke of this had all the twelve in a state of misunderstanding or non-hearing, now arguing amongst themselves as to who was the greatest.

And framing it all was Jesus' healing two blind men. Framing this middle section of Mark's gospel is Jesus' making two blind men to see. The earlier healing happened in stages, the blind man given sight at first just enough to see people but have them look like "trees walking." This time, the healing happens all at once, "immediately," in fact, as Mark imagines so much of what Jesus effected—immediately. And this not because of anything Jesus did. Unlike the earlier time,

there's no mud or spittle or Jesus laying hands on him. There's just the encounter, which Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) himself brought about, he whose *faith* has made him well.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"My teacher, let me see again."

I want to say here, this story has been interpreted in such a way as to become a torment to people.

First of all, it lends itself to the larger assumption that blindness is invariably something that needs to be fixed. Forget that this is what this one blind man wants most from Jesus: "My teacher, let me see again." He's often taken to speak for all blind people everywhere, for all "disabled" people everywhere—that there's something of them that needs to be fixed. This can then feed a whole value system that certain bodies need some fix—a whole value system, not to mention a whole economic system, a fundamental lack of acceptance regarding the body, or at least some certain bodies.

For all this, the prophecy of Jeremiah comes as a corrective. Here, the Lord is celebrated for promising to gather in all his beloved people, bringing them from the land of the north, and gathering them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, the aim being not that people will be fixed of their bodies' dynamics and hindrances but that they would be gathered, no matter the condition of their bodies. The point is they would all be together, and they would live and feel at last as they are, beloved, beloved of God.

Second, as to how this story tends to play out among people of faith, it's a torment because it's to suggest that people suffering some malady suffer this for an attendant lack of faith. So, now not only are they unwell, they're made to understand themselves as unwell because of this also shortcoming, they're not faithful enough.

But this is to imply that faith is a matter of will. This is to understand faith as a matter of will-power, even willfulness. But it's not. Faith isn't something you will but something you fall into. Having come to the final stop of your agency in the world, faith is what you're left with when all other possibilities come to nothing and yet there remains a sense of justice, a sense of hope. Faith is what you resort to when it's the only thing you have, when even resignation proves too limited to rely on.

There is no content to faith.

Faith is the fullness of itself, and the emptiness of itself.

Faith is apophatic, a thing obtained through negation.

It puts me in mind of the writing of Christian Wiman, a poet who broke out of his religious, church-going childhood, grew up into a more precarious way of faith. A cancer diagnosis brought the crisis, but he'd been bound too tightly in his plastic church-world for a long time. The world the church of his youth had given him, had insisted on his believing in, had for a long time not corresponded with the world as he felt it to be.

He describes the American church as an enormous shopping mall, full of things he doesn't want but which insist upon their own value, though they crack and break and fail at their purpose all the time.

He speaks of apophatic language, this is, language that negates its own meaning—which he thinks is the true language for any speaking of God. He writes in an essay entitled "Varieties of Quiet," in his collection of essays, and some poems, *My Bright Abyss,* "We need to be shocked out of our easy acceptance of—or our facile resistance to—propositional language about God. [God is this. God is that.] Besides being useless as any definitive description of God, such language is simply not adequate for the sacred spiritual turmoil that so many contemporary people feel."

Apophatic language—language that empties itself that it might be true to what mystery it means to speak of. Apophatic language: it is the language of such faith as has no object. It is only faith—surrender, submission. It is only a falling into intimacy and ultimacy in the faith that this ultimacy will catch you, this intimacy will hold you and recognize you and even call your name. But even if not, you fall anyway.

Remember the days early in the quarantine? That sudden falling away of all the busyness and business of life? That feeling of time? That strange, wanting quality of time?

Wiman seems to think this is the Way Jesus leads us in—not that we will know, but that we will hope; not that we will be convinced, but that we will desire; not that we will be full of the Lord (which is actually more often to be full of ourselves as people who have ideas about the Lord), but that we will be empty as the Lord, which is a sort of fullness as well.

This is the way. And interesting, isn't it, that Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) is remembered to have joined Jesus, following him on the way? He had been sitting along the way, where he was already in a state of surrender, and now he was able to follow him on the way, having thrown off even his cloak, this most valuable thing he'd have owned, in order to follow him along the way even more freely? (And remember the rich man of a few verses ago who was loathe to do anything like that, to liberate himself from any of his many possessions?)

It would be a short walk. This is the last thing remembered before Jesus entered Jerusalem. It would immediately follow this story, Jesus' entry into the city, into the Temple. And five days hence, he would be crucified. And seven days hence he would rise. One of the earliest things Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) would have seen as a once-again-seeing man was Jesus crucified.

Another thing that characterizes this middle section of the gospel is a lot of emphasis on people cast as sons or as daughters, which is to cast people as essentially in relationship: we are because of our relations to others. Like, a ruler went to Jesus on behalf of his dying daughter in order that she might be saved, and she was. Or a man who went to Jesus on behalf of his (apparently epileptic) son that he might be healed, and he was. A Syrophonecian woman went on behalf of her daughter that she might be healed, and she was. A woman went to Jesus on her own behalf, touched Jesus' hem so to be healed, whom he then called "Daughter." And a whole crowd kept gathering around Jesus, whom he in teaching them called then time and again, "Children. Children." Even James and John, asking to be seated next to Jesus, are called according to the story "the sons of Zebedee." And then there's, of course, son of Timaeus, son of Timaeus.

As for what Jesus is remembered in this section to have taught, twice he exalts (you guessed it) children. Once: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Another time: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And I've spent tons of time as a preacher wondering what it is about being as a child that makes a person more predisposed to entering the kingdom of heaven. People have wondered about this for decades, centuries: what is it about children that makes them so especially open to entry into God's reign?

That they need a parent. I think Mark means for Jesus to suggest that children are predisposed to the reign of God because they act in the world on their need of a parent. It's not even that they *understand* themselves as is need of a parent—for children, of course, don't really understand themselves at all. It's that they simply act on their need of a mother, of a father.

How lonely "modern man" has become in insisting upon *not* acting on that need.

We are our relationships. These are fundamental to our constitution, without which we as come to nothing.

Moreover, about *that* relationship, parent-child, I picked up a book this week, Peter Berger's book, *A Rumor of Angels.* It's been on my shelf for a couple years, my shelf of books I'm going to read. For reasons of its slimness, I chose this one among them all. I've been so distracted lately. Subtitled *Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, it's so far so good.

Berger imagines this scene: "A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats. At such a moment the contours of trusted reality are blurred or invisible, and in the terror of incipient chaos, the child cries out for his mother. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, at this moment, the mother is being invoked as a high priestess of protective order. It is she who has the power to banish the chaos and to restore the benign shape of the world."

And in meditating on this, Berger concludes, among other things: "To become a parent is to take on the role of world-builder and world-protector." And supposing that this mother has said, or at least implied, in soothing the child, "Everything's in order. Everything's going to be alright," Berger notes that she could be understood as lying to the child, because, as I noted last week, everything's quite often *not* going to be alright. But she's better understood, Berger claims, as speaking a larger truth to the child. In speaking or reassuring this, that everything's going to be alright, Berger realizes that this could be "translated into a statement of cosmic scope: 'Have trust in being.'"

It's not for nothing that God's name is Being, YHWH, that is, "I AM," which is to say Being.

This is, according to Berger, what can be in being a parent—that a parent is enacting a truth, as world-builder, as world-protector. By implication, then, it might have something to say about what can be in becoming as a child or in remembering ourselves as children, a daughter of someone, a son of someone, for in every case a child of God, our world-builder, our world-sustainer, and ultimately our world-redeemer, in whom everything is going to be alright. If Mark is to be believed, as I think he is, that Jesus urged upon all a being as children, it might be to become as this—trusting in being, trusting that somehow, somehow, everything's going to be alright, this which Julian of Norwich discovered in her intimate encounters with the risen and mystical Christ, that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

(Want to know more? Want to know more artfully the terror of this, and the utter reassurance of this? Then go see "The Chairs," at Shakespeare & Co. You have one more week to see Barbara sweetly, frightfully, faithfully bring this truth to life.)

But maybe you already know something of this. Maybe this is what brought you here this morning. Maybe this is what brings you to church whenever you come—a seeking of the sheltering love of your Father, your Mother.

If so, welcome. We've been waiting for you.

Thanks be to God.