

Did You Hear What Happened on The Jericho Road?

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.

Mark 10:46

Jericho is one of the oldest cities in the world, occupied 10,000 years before you started make a fool of yourself on that roadside.

Water and palms made it always beautiful. Three perennial springs irrigate a thumbprint of green farms in the desert and feed the Jordan River. Sitting 258 meters below sea level, it's 19-miles uphill to Jerusalem, a steep walk through the Hasofim Forest, over the Mount of Olives, to the Lion's Gate at the eastern boundary of Jerusalem. After he healed you, Jesus set out on that road. It's a 40-minute drive in my Subaru.

Natufians hunted and gathered there. Canaanites and Mitannites poured through, fought, and ruled before Jews settled and Babylonians destroyed. Persians rebuilt. There Alexander the Great established his private estate. Greeks and Romans wintered there, fought there, assassinated each other there. Hasmoneans from the tribe of Levi called it home as did the regal Egyptian Cleopatra from whom she had received it as a gift from her Roman boyfriend Mark Antony. It was Palm Springs for Jerusalem aristocracy. Jewish synagogues and, later, Christian monasteries were built, worshipped in, revered. Muslims renamed it Ariha and brought irrigation, bananas, dates, and flowers. Christian crusades wrested the city from Muslims and brought sugar cane. Saladin, sultan of Egypt and Syria, an Iraqi-born of Kurdish ethnicity and Sunni Muslim proclivities, took it back from the Christians. The Ottomans, British, Jordanians, Israelies, and now the Palestinian Authority govern Jericho.

The Bible weaves a tale of Joshua and his army marching around the city seven times as the LORD instructed, and as the LORD promised, the walls came tumbling down. The prostitute Rahab and her family—because they helped Joshua—were saved. Others were crushed. According to the writer of this violent tale, God cursed the city.

It was near Jericho that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. On a cliff to the west stands the monastery of the Mount of Temptation. Jesus visited the city at least twice. In Luke's gospel he met Zacchaeus who sat in a tree to get a better view. In Mark's he met you. Sunshine, rich soil, and abundant water from the springs have always made Jericho an attractive place to settle.

You settled there on a busy roadside.

It was as good a place as any to beg.

* * *

Shush

When you started calling out for Jesus,
they shushed you.

Jesus was too important to be bothered.
He was a man with a mission.
You were a man with a seat on the side of the road.
He was going places, a mover and shaker.

His followers didn't understand what that mission was,
and they didn't know where he was taking him,
but they were coming along,
walking to who knows where and Kingdom Come.

They shushed you.
Let him pass in peace, they hissed.

Jesus was important. You, Bartimaeus, were *unimportant*, a man of no consequence who couldn't possibly be useful to Jesus in carrying out his mission. Your shouting was an interruption that a busy, *important* Jesus didn't have time for.

SHUSH!

BE QUIET!

Who do you think you are?

* * *

Beggar

I'll tell you who you are.

You are a beggar.

Nowadays, we mostly avoid people like you.
There are lots of reasons. We expect that the poor
should avail themselves of services offered by
government and funded by our reluctant taxes—
 food stamps, say, and various forms of
 rental assistance, medical aid, and support services.
We avoid you also because you remind us
how fragile life is; we see you and we know,

save for the grace of God, there go I.
We could *be* you; our child could *become* you.

You strike a terrifying figure.

You've got to know how you frighten us.

No offense, really, but we simply want you
 To go away.
 Be invisible.
 Beg politely,
 q u i e t l y .
 Blend in.

* * *

Healer

For the record,
I'm sorry for you.

And I'm sorry you're blind.
I'm sorry you are made to sit
on this Jericho road
like our vets begging on the median
of Main Street and at the entrance ramps
to the interstate.
I'm sorry I can't cure your ills.

I've seen Jesus take care of these things
with just a touch. It's amazing.
It's a touch I do not have and
I'm pretty sure I don't want.

I'm sorry you're blind.
I'm sorry I can't help.

I'm sick
and sorry
and perplexed
and more than a little angry
that I don't understand why some people suffer
and others walk in nothing but high cotton.
I know that you need so much more than my spare change.

I could give you a fish,
but unless I teach you to fish,
you will need another fish tomorrow,
and it's not about fish,

and I'm rambling here, Bartimaeus,
but I know you need more than my fishy handouts.
Have mercy on me for the ways I buy a little peace of mind
by tossing you my leftovers.
Forgive me for being content to pass by on the other side.
We both know where *that* leads.

Jesus stopped in his tracks when you called out.
Maybe I should at least slow down and say hello.

Maybe I should explore how a little discourse may
contribute just a tad to your wholeness—and to mine.

Your limits remind me of my own
and of my potential to fail,
 to fail,
 to washout.

And our limits though dissimilar are formidable.
For the record, I'm needy, too, in my own way.
Passing you by should tell you something about
the anemia of my heart. I'm practically drowning in stuff,
which doesn't make me poor,
but doesn't mean I am not impoverished.

That I am differently blind and poor should make us siblings.
Instead, like the crowds seem to be doing with you on the Jericho Road,
I'm looking the other way
and pretending

I

can't

hear

you.

* * *

But you're not going to be quiet, are you?

When you hear that it is Jesus of Nazareth
heading your way up that road,
you can't help but to call out.

Jesus, Son of David.

Some people are
calling Jesus the Messiah.
Many are talking about what he teaches,
how he heals.

Rabboni! You say, My Teacher!

I'm glad you didn't go along with the crowd.
They told you not to yell as
it disturbs his communion with the angels.

Shut up.

Cease and desist.

But you'd have none of that.
You are brave and persistent.
If Jesus isn't going to listen to you,
it's not because you aren't being loud enough.

* * *

Action Verb

The word “sprang” appears only once in the New Testament.
And that’s what you did. When the disciples called you over to Jesus,
Throwing off your cloak, you sprang up and came to him.

Some who follow Jesus are stuffy and too polite;
these frozen chosen are always shooing children away
and telling people like you to be quiet. I am one of those people.

And these are my cousins:

They have dedicated their pews to dead aunts and confederate generals.
They air condition the empty sanctuary all summer long,
ushers, like docents, show up for an hour on Sunday
quietly nodding people to empty pews for stately, stale services
where the saints take liturgical stabs at friendship,
awkwardly passing the peace to strangers,
fighting to stay awake through hopeful sermons.

Some followers are timid—like the rich ruler who wanted
to follow Jesus, but didn’t want to give up his comfortable life.
(That sounds like me.)

Some are lukewarm followers.
Eager at first, then losing interest.
(Sounds like me, too.)

Some followers are full of judgement,
some with faith,
some tentative joy.

And some are filled with desperation,
which, also, sounds
familiar.

We all would do well to learn from you, your eagerness, your faithfulness,
your springing up to answer Jesus’ call,
your springing up to follow him.

* * *

Sermon to Myself

*Poor blind beast, I sang softly as I left the park,
poor blind me, poor blind earth turning blindly on its side.
—Billy Collins, Central Park, from
Aimless Love.*

There's a lot of calling in your story.

You call Jesus.
Jesus calls his disciples to
call you.
The disciples call you to Jesus.

See, shouting sometimes yields results.

You got what he called out for—
Jesus had mercy on you, and,
you got your vision back.

Jesus got we he called for, too—namely you,
who became a sighted and, we presume,
glad follower.

If I cry out there is a risk I'll be heard.
There's an even greater danger I'll get what I ask for.
Problem is, do I really want what I say I want?

I want a lot of petty, ridiculous things.

Some days I want to win the lottery, but I don't play.

Some days I simply want not to be bothered.

And some days I want what I have come to believe is impossible,
so I've stopped asking, things like—no kidding—peace on earth.

Perhaps I've become like a lot of cynics:
content with the way things are
instead of the way they could
be.

I've gotten too cozy with silence, lazy with resignation

What if I called out to God and God answered?

What if God showed up?

Like a lot of folk, I usually prefer to take my religion anonymously,
from the back row, near the exit,
in such small doses as never to risk letting
the Spirit all the way in. That kind of
holy intoxication is almost always unseemly.

There is a lot of calling going on in this text.

Is anything or *anybody* calling *to me*?


What is this story calling out for me to do and be?

Who do I need to stop in my tracks to listen to?

Who have I been shushing?

What do I need to raise my voice about?

Did you hear what happened on the road to Jericho?

⁴⁶ 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. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ 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.” ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ 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.” ⁵² Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.