

Throwing Off His Cloak  
First UMC of Pocatello  
November 21, 2021

Mark 10:46-51

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Speaking personally, today is significant because it marks the end of the first collection of sermons that I felt led to preach among you back when I was far away and just imagining what it might be like to be here, back when I was wondering, as so many of you were wondering in your own ways, “What does it look like and feel like to begin again with God?” In that first sermon out at Ross Park, I told you that I wanted to arrive here talking about *Jesus*. Since Mark was the first of the four Gospel writers, I gravitated toward his telling of the story, which itself begins, if you’ll remember, after the same manner of Genesis, with the explosive first word: “beginning!”

Now, we haven’t made it through everything that Mark has to say. We’ve read only about a quarter of his gospel. But I hope that each of you has come to both notice and experience more fully the power of trusting in Jesus the Christ, God’s new beginning with us, for us, and in us.

Blind Bartimaeus’s healing is this good news in condensed, narrative form. We hear a desperate and courageous voice crying out over and over again for mercy, and we know that it speaks for us all. We see the ignorance of the crowd as they seek to suppress and quiet that voice, and we recognize our own neighborly numbness and spiritual blindness. We see the teacher stop and command the crowd to bring the man to him; we watch as the people are captured by and aligned to the vision of Jesus, as they go to tell the blind man, “Take heart,” and we remember our own stories of awakening and repentance. We hear Bartimaeus quietly name the very desire of his heart - “I

want to see *again* - before his Lord, and we recognize that there is in each of us some lost original gift that only Jesus can return to us. Most important, we come to know a God who privileges the single cry of distress over the mass movements and impulses of the crowd, who stands still for us, calls for us, asks us what we want, and blesses our faith. With Jesus, there is always room, always time for one more - for you, for me.

Because we're at a turning point in the focus of our worship, it can be a good time to linger over how God has been working in your life. I would encourage you to take time this week to prayerfully examine the stirrings of your heart and the meanderings of your mind and your felt sense of things as they pertain to these stories of Jesus from Mark's Gospel. Following the form of a traditional prayer of *examen*, you may start by noticing and giving thanks for whatever you're grateful for when you think of this church. Then, call to remembrance your experience of worship over the past several months and ask yourself, "When and where did I experience moments of personal insight, of felt closeness to the Spirit, of excitement about God's work in my life, of vision for greater involvement with my neighbors?" Then ask, "When and where did I feel perplexed, challenged, distant, or resistant in my relationship with God?" Talk about some of the more significant moments, or any perceived patterns, with God. And finally, look forward to the next season of our worship life - Advent and Christmas -with renewed intention.

Today is also significant for liturgical reasons. We are gathered here on Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the church calendar. Before we descend into the shadows of Advent, before we enter into that peculiar Advent mood of longing and waiting and quiet, resilient hope, we remind ourselves one final time that, as Julian of Norwich once wrote, "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" because of our God, the one "making all things new" (Rev. 21:5). As the Apostle Peter proclaimed in his first sermon, "God has made him both Lord

and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Christ is King.

Admittedly, the metaphor of kingship, when applied to God, is one of the more difficult to swallow, or to translate into our own experience. We don't live in a monarchy, so the notion of kingship is not only foreign, but also militaristic and abusively hierarchical - things antithetical to the way of Jesus. Yet Jesus was born into a world of emperors and kings, and the Bible is suffused with royal characters and contexts and ways of speaking. One way or another, as readers of the Bible, we must deal with the kings.

It's good to remember that God never wanted to grant Israel a king in the first place. The Israelites were afraid of the mighty armies and fortified cities of their neighbors, so they pleaded with God for an earthly king who would give them those things as well. God listened to their prayer, and God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint a king for them, King Saul. But God also promised the people that having a King would eventually lead to their ruin. It was a misplaced trust. It violated that first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). God told Samuel: “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ...only, you shall solemnly warn them... [I]n that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day” (8:7, 9, 18). When we speak of God or Jesus as the King, it is in a manner altogether different from earthly kings, rulers, emperors, and authorities.

Remember, Jesus was enthroned on a cross and coronated with a crown of thorns. Whatever authority he has comes from his dependence upon his Heavenly Parent and the anointing with the Holy Spirit. He banishes evil by identifying in his own humble, suffering person with the Other, the one who suffers,

and by dignifying them again as a person. He comes to be a ruling principle, an authoritative influence in the lives who have trust and hope, not fear, because he has proven himself faithful and good and kind. He makes peace with the thief on the cross, and makes this scoundrel the first subject of this heavenly kingdom. Jesus' kingship *undoes* the curse of worldly kings and kingdoms. He restores us to a proper relationship with God as our trustworthy provide. To *provide* means to *see before*, to *look ahead*, and therefore to anticipate the needs of others and prepare care and protection. Provision is at the center of these hierarchical metaphors like King and Master and Lord, around which so much ugliness and misuse has congealed.

So, we must confess with the Bible, "Jesus is King." He exposes the abuses and absurdities of worldly kingship, and he relativizes the claims of others on our lives. He establishes a kingdom of friends, and he finds all to be worthy of compassion and communion. He raises others up to his status, first by coming down to theirs. And he takes care of us by looking ahead and understanding what we need. Jesus is our true provider, the giver of all grace.

Bartimaeus knew that Jesus was the spiritual Son of David, the true King. Bartimaeus was the first to stand and throw off his cloak and lay it down at the feet of his Lord. And when he did, he kickstarted a royal procession; the great crowd of people mimicked his enthusiasm and initiative. Some ran off to grab a donkey. Some ran to cut palm branches from the trees. All cast off their outer garments. Thus, Jesus entered Jerusalem, the city of God, atop an animal, across a pathway of cloaks, surrounded by a crowd singing and cheering as for a coronation.

Now the cloak is a symbol of external appearances, worldly identities, personal defenses. It says to the world, "this is who I am," no matter what's really happening underneath. All these external markers of class and caste, position and vocation are thrown off before the donkey-riding King. As Mark says just

moments after Bartimaeus is healed, “Many people spread their cloaks on the road...” (11:7-8).

Friends, look at the ground strewn with coats and cloaks.

The tattered, patched, dusty cloak of the beggar is there on the ground, at the start of line, abandoned because Bartimaeus is more than a blind beggar in the eyes of Jesus, he is a child of God, and his innermost personhood has been validated and blessed by the attention and mercy of Jesus.

And just after it, look, the long white coat of the doctor, scuffed with dirt and left behind.

And there! The blue jacket and shining badge of the officer!

The red jumpsuit of the Death Row inmate!

The slim Italian wool suit, tailored to fit!

The slightly ruffled, slightly ill-fitting coat pulled from the thrift store rack!

The waitress’s stained apron!

The overcoat of the undertaker!

The varsity jacket with its furry letters on the front!

The torn denim vest studded with spikes and adorned with patches and pins!

The crisp green service shirt with its multicolored bars!

The superhero’s cape!

The white alb and collar of the priest!

Where is yours? What color is it? What did it feel like, how did it fit?

What stock did you place in it? What did it protect you from?

What will be possible for you now that you know longer have to bear its weight?

Perhaps this, more than anything else, is why Jesus is our King. Not by coercion or pressure, but by love and mercy, he inspires people to join the coat-casting procession, in which the external things about us, all categories and labels and performative identifies, are laid aside for a more naked, human knowing of ourselves, and a more naked, divine perception of God. It is almost comical, probably painful, and eventually, certainly joyful, that these things are ridden upon by the man from Nazareth and his donkey.

Amen.