

Presence, Transformation, and Participation

The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

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Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. That is the first sentence of today's Gospel portion, but it comes to us from the end of the tenth chapter of Mark's book. Mark's Gospel is the shortest one in the Bible—just 16 chapters of the *Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God*, as Mark titles his account. Mark is in a hurry to tell the story, so why would he care *where* Jesus offers God's mercy and healing to blind Bartimaeus? Jericho is a town rich in Biblical history by the time Jesus comes along. Maybe you remember the old spiritual, "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a tumbling down." If you sang it at Bible school, you likely remember a tangle of kids falling onto the floor at the end, and laughing and carrying on, but in the Hebrew Bible, it is a serious and challenging story: the story of God's presence with God's people even when human leadership changes. Moses dies and Joshua takes over. Eventually, with God's guidance, Joshua makes the walls of Jericho fall and leads God's people into the Promised Land.

Jericho is situated near the ford of a river and an ancient road that make it the entry point from the trans-Jordan to the highlands. Early in 2023, I was on a bus with a group of pilgrims from St. David's and we drove down from Galilee through Jericho, right past the tree that Zacchaeus climbed in Luke's Gospel—a favorite story even though we didn't read it today. I really hoped that we would stop and get out of the bus and maybe touch the rough bark of the huge trunk of that sycamore. But we did not, and as we continued to drive through that desert land from Galilee up to Jerusalem, we realized that our bus driver was pretty nervous, and our ride was pretty swift. We had a tense stop at a checkpoint on our way, and after that our driver relaxed a little. We never found out exactly what happened that day, about 8 months before the beginning of the current war that rages in the Holy Land, but when I think of it, and look at the photos from that trip less than two years ago, I realize again that our holiest places are also our most dangerous ones.

Mark uses his precious ink to tell us that today's story takes place in Jericho. To get to Jerusalem from Galilee, one goes through Jericho—a dangerous crossroads, but also a place full of God's promise that we humans are never left alone in God's creation. We are two-thirds of the way through Mark's account of Jesus. He tells us upfront that Jesus is the chosen Savior of God—that Jesus is God, come among us, and he tells us the things that God will do for us when God is with us—the healing, the feeding, the teaching. God makes relationships

with us. God loves us. God compels us to love one another in ways that often seem impossible.

And, to give us some idea of how that works, Jesus must go to Jerusalem. The disciples follow him—and perhaps the newly-sighted Bartimaeus is among them. And we know what happens there. We know about the betrayal, the arrest, the death. We know about the Cross. And in his very last verses, Mark tells us that after Jesus died, some women went to his tomb to mourn his loss. But the tomb was empty. And a young man there said, *“Do not be alarmed . . . He has been raised; he is not here . . . he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him (Mark 16:5-7).”*

People have been following Jesus back to Galilee for two millennia now. Mark’s quickly written story of the journey from Jesus’ home to the Cross and back again has been re-written and pondered and prayed over. It has been proclaimed—we proclaim it still. Jesus’ journey has persuaded millions to follow Jesus back to Galilee, hoping to see him there. In fact, that is what we will be ritually doing in just a couple of minutes, when we gather around the water of Baptism.

Almost as soon as the first followers of Jesus walked back to Galilee, it became a spiritual journey, because knowing and following the resurrected Jesus is different than following the man who lived in Palestine for 33 years some 2000 years ago. Those first early followers of Jesus were swept into the first journey back to Galilee because the angel promised they would find him there.

Mark doesn’t tell us what happened when they got there, I think because he doesn’t want us to get stuck in history. Mark wants us to find out for ourselves what will happen when we decide to follow Jesus. There are many accounts of the earliest experiences not written by Mark, though, accounts of the ones who were drawn into a movement to bring transformation to the marginalized, the weak, and the poor, and, by the way, to their own lives. And those accounts happen in many places, not just Galilee.

It seems that once the disciples saw the risen Jesus in Galilee, they could share the good news anywhere. And so, Galilee became not just that region where Jesus lived and ministered on earth, but the name for any place where the people encounter the transforming presence of God.

Get that—the *transforming* presence of God. Jesus did not become human and bring the presence of God to us merely to comfort us. It *is* comforting to know that God is present with us, even when the world feels chaotic, even when, like blind Bartimaeus, we cannot see what is coming at us. But being in the presence of God allows us to live lives that reach out of ourselves. Following Jesus allows us

to seek good for each other and for the whole world. Following Jesus brings transformation.

And all of this would be enough, and I could step out of this pulpit right now, but there is more. With God, there is always more! Presence, transformation—what more could there be?

There is another important detail in our Gospel story today: did you notice that Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants? Jesus doesn't just assume that Bartimaeus will want to see, instead, he calls him to participate in the change to come. Presence, transformation, and *participation*.

Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Bartimaeus asked to regain his sight. And Jesus told Bartimaeus that it was his faith that made him well. In other words, Jesus doesn't do parlor tricks. Jesus offers a changed life to those who believe in the possibility enough to ask for it, to consider it, to participate in it. *Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.* Bartimaeus doesn't get his sight and then go back to whatever it was he did before. Bartimaeus follows Jesus and finds out what God's presence and transformation will mean in his newly envisioned life.

"What do you want?" In just a couple of minutes we will baptize two little boys. They are not old enough to declare what they want, beyond letting us know if they are hungry or tired or bored. And we are not standing by the side of the Jordan river, on the outskirts of Jericho, either. And yet, Baptism is a sacrament of the church, a ritual action in which we know the presence of God among us, and in which we receive a spiritual gift. The spiritual gift of Baptism is *new life*. God is present with us. God transforms our lives. And in our baptismal ritual, we ask questions that affirm our participation in the life of God.

Presence. Transformation. Participation. These are God's gifts to our lives, today and every day. Amen.

Here is the Baptismal Covenant from *The Book of Common Prayer* (p. 304-5). These questions help us to focus on participation in our lives in Christ.

The Baptismal Covenant

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Father?

People I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

Celebrant Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

People I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

People I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and
fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the
prayers?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever
you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good
News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving
your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all
people, and respect the dignity of every human
being?

People I will, with God's help.