

Close your eyes for a moment. No, seriously. Go ahead and shut them. Hold them closed for a minute—no peeking. . . .

Okay, now open. Wasn't much fun was it? *That* was just a minute. Imagine an *hour* . . . a *day* . . . a *year* in such darkness! If you lived your whole life like that, then you'd know what it was like to be blind Bartimaeus.

We don't know much about him. Just that being blind was kind of his thing. So much so that it's the *only* thing mentioned about him in our Gospel text. It's even become a nickname of sorts, Blind Bartimaeus—like Tiny Tim or Chatty Cathy. Imagine a life like that—blind. He probably had no chance at finding somebody to marry him, no chance at raising a family of his own, no chance at building a career for himself. I mean, where do we find him today but sitting by the roadside, waving his tin cup around and begging each passerby for their spare change. Worst of all, the book of Leviticus prohibits him from ever entering Jerusalem. It was thought his disability might defile God's holy city. So, when everyone else packed up and went on pilgrimage to the temple for a high holy day, Bartimaeus got left behind. As if his blindness wasn't isolating enough, he's not only left out of his community but even His own God seems to have abandoned him.

But as bad as that must've been, as bad as it is for *anyone* to be blind, there's something far worse—a deeper, darker blindness. It's the blindness of seeing . . . but never really taking notice. The blindness of viewing . . . but without any real depth. The blindness of examining . . . but with no understanding, grasping, or comprehension. That's a worse sort of blindness, because the joke's on you. You think you have two eyeballs that work properly, but without recognizing who you truly are or living in your world as it really is they're not doing you much good. Your own eyes betray you, and make you play the fool.

This existence we've made for ourselves kind of does that. These days there's no rest for the ol' eyes. Everywhere we turn, there's another flashing sign; another bright shining light; one more dazzling, eye-popping, visually-stunning image. Just watch almost any video clip and it's barely two seconds before the camera jumps to a different angle or another picture altogether. I can't even pump my own gas without having some TV come on and start talking to me.

Of course if we want to get away, we can always find respite . . . in our smart phones. Sure, that blue light stimulates our brains and energizes our senses, but hey, at least it's an environment we can control. It's like we can bury our heads in the sand of technology, and forget all about the world that's actually taking place around us. But overfed with this kind of image-salad, we've forgotten how to actually look—how to perceive, regard, interpret—haven't we? Such overstimulation has gotten us confused about what's real and what's not; about how we are to be and how we are to act; we've gotten so mixed up it's enough to make us do some strange things, bad things even. Just look at the disciples, they can't see things clearly either. If we were to read the verses just preceding today's text, we'd find them arrogantly, greedily, selfishly arguing about who will be the greatest in God's kingdom. Now, think about that—here they are, traveling with Jesus, and *that's* what they're talking about! Could they *be* any blinder? Yes, as bad as Bartimaeus had it, there's a worse blindness yet.

And as blind as we all are, we know there's one who isn't. We know someone who's never blind, but who's always watching, who never blinks. His gaze is deep, penetrating to our very souls even—there isn't anything that isn't exposed before Him. We're talking about God of course, and the thought of Him surveilling all of our blunders as we stumble around in the dark, bumble about in our blindness, can be *terrifying*. He might seem to be far removed, not really paying attention to what goes on with us, but make no mistake—His eyes are wide open. Did you ever hear about the one Holocaust survivor at Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem? When she gave her damning testimony, she had on these dark glasses. It was said that, "She appeared . . . to be blind (though she was not), an impression all the more striking as the dramatic force of her testimony found focus in the words, 'I saw everything.'" On the day of our trial, when our survivor God takes the stand after having to endure our offenses, He will say, "I saw everything!"

That's how one set of townfolk felt about God. When the famous preacher Tom Long visited a fellow pastor, he got a tour of his friend's church campus. Sure enough, it was beautiful! The architecture was grand, the furnishings impressive, and the décor inspiring. But when they walked back outside, Dr. Long looked up and noticed something strange. At the top of the bell tower there was a spot all boarded up. Long asked his pastor friend what had happened there. His friend said, "Oh that? That was a stained glass window. It used to be a picture of the all-seeing eye of God—y'know, like on the dollar bill." Well, apparently some vandals from the town didn't like God watching them all the time. It made them nervous, like they were being judged. Maybe after today's sermon you feel the same way. It's like the Christmas jingle, *He sees you when you're sleeping; He knows when you're awake; He knows when you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake.*

But if that's how we see God, then we couldn't be blinder. That all-seeing eye of God was never meant to be scary, imposing, judging. No, that couldn't be farther from the truth. It was supposed to be a symbol of comfort, like a concerned Father watching over His children. It's like the psalmist says, "Behold, the Lord your Protector will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4).

And if any of us ever have trouble seeing God for who He is, so do those in today's Gospel text. In fact, the irony is that the only one who truly sees God rightly is the blind guy! I mean, nobody else is able to recognize who Jesus actually is—not even His disciples!—yet, here is Bartimaeus, crying out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Now, "Son of David," that's a messianic title—and in Mark's Gospel, Bartimaeus is the first to use it. He might not be able to make out Jesus' features, gaze into His Lord's eyes, but Bartimaeus' vision couldn't be clearer.

Now, how is that? Well, they say that when you're blind you have to rely more on your other senses instead. You might not see with your eyes, but you can see with your hands, for example—running some fingers over a person's face. Or you can see with your nose, picking up a distinctive scent that others might miss. Or you can see with your ears, seeing through the world of sounds.

Our text today tells us that Bartimaeus saw with his ears. He must've heard about Jesus before, how He hadn't come into the world to condemn it but that it might be saved through Him. Already in Mark's Gospel Jesus has cast out demons, cleansed a leper, healed a paralytic, called a tax collector into discipleship, calmed a storm, raised the dead, fed thousands, and predicted His own death and resurrection. So, could it be that word had gotten around to Bartimaeus and he believed? Perhaps such words didn't go in one ear and out the other, but sank in . . . deep down . . . in his heart. It's like Paul says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ." By the power of the Gospel, faith blinked wide open in Blind Bartimaeus. Like ocular implants, he could now see deep into things—penetrate even spiritual matters. He could see a thing for what it truly is, see Jesus for who *He* truly is.

So, how do you see God? Many miss Him. For example, most people, when they see the processional cross go by, they just see a stick of wood with a brass top. Or, when words get tossed around this room, they just think it's mumbo jumbo. Or, looking on this altar they only discern wafers and wine. But you—come to think of it, maybe you see more. Maybe as you sit helplessly here by life's roadside—you might call it a pew—like Bartimaeus, you actually see your Savior fast approaching! Maybe for you the processional cross is more than just a processional cross, but a symbol of Christ drawing near to you! Maybe for you, the Word and the Sacrament, are nothing less than the real presence of your merciful Lord, coming to save. I mean, this morning you did borrow the words of a blind beggar, calling out, "Kyrie Eleison/Lord, have mercy!" Could it be that you see something more? If so, then it could be that your faith's awakened too. Like Bartimaeus, you also see by hearing.

Like, how about this other detail? Most people would've just skipped over the setting for today's Gospel. *Jericho? Sure, this whole Bartimaeus miracle happened at Jericho. Okay.* But you're not most people. You're able to see how this isn't just some detail, no, this carries weight! Because you remember what happened at Jericho! There was just one thing keeping God's people from entering the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey, and that was Jericho. Its great big walls stood as a huge roadblock, enough to make anyone see it was hopeless. But not the Israelites. Their faith gave them eyes to see God's salvation at hand. And at His peculiar direction, with just some

marching and a few toots of their horns, the walls came tumbling down and Joshua led the people into what was to become Jerusalem, the Holy City of God!

Well, you might've felt like you were watching a re-run today with Blind Bartimaeus. Like the Israelites, there was something keeping him from getting into the Holy City, Jerusalem, his defiling blindness. And anyone else would've thought it was hopeless, but Bartimaeus was the only one who could see otherwise. He could see that His God hadn't ever abandoned him, no, but was coming to him, seeking him out in the person of Jesus Christ. And this Jesus—whose name, by the way, is the Greek equivalent of Joshua—had arrived to bring down the blindness that stood in Bartimaeus' way. Now, we hear that this all happened by the roadside, so where was Jesus going? Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, so when He tells ol' Bart, "Go your way; your faith has made you well", which way does he go? We find Him following Jesus "on the way" (the text says)—Bartimaeus is now on his way to the City of God. You see that now, right? Many miss it, but not you.

And you're on the way too. If you've ever worried about what you've done while you were fumbling around in your blindness, don't. If you've felt defiled and unworthy by such things, you're not. If those sins ever seem like giant impediments keeping you out of the New Jerusalem, God's Holy City in the heavens, they're not. Because you know why Jesus was going to Jerusalem in the first place? [*Make a cross with hands*] He's going to tear down your walls—bring sin, death, and hell crumbling down. And clear the path for you to enter the land God's promised to you.

So c'mon, let's go! You, me, Bartimaeus, we're all on the way. Following behind He who is "the way, the truth, and the life."