

It's Not Just What You See, But Where You Focus

We return this week to the Gospel of Mark for Jesus's healing of Bartimaeus. It's an especially rich passage, and our consideration of it will be better informed if we turn first to the Book of Job. You'll recall that Adonai has allowed the Adversary to destroy Job's good fortune and health. Job begs for an opportunity to prove to the Lord that he does not deserve his misfortunes. Our celebration of Saint Luke last week kept us from reading what follows, so here's the gist. Adonai appears to the suffering Job, but not as the disembodied voice that greeted Abraham or the burning bush that spoke to Moses. Adonai comes to Job as the mile-high tornado that led the Hebrew people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. He then asks Job a series of penetrating questions. Where was Job when God laid out the earth and contained the seas? Does Job know where light and darkness live? Can he count the clouds, bring the rain, or command the constellations? Can Job feed, much less bring to life, the wild animals of the earth? The questions continue, but you get the idea. So does Job, who humbly admits that he has wrongly asked to understand things too wonderful for any mortal to know.

Many Bible scholars and churchgoers see God's questions as a brutal putdown, imagining God scolding Job as an adult might browbeat a child. "Don't you argue with me, young man! Shut up and do as you're told!" That strikes me as a misinterpretation. Human parents, teachers and even clergy may fall back on "because I said so, you little twerp," but I don't believe that God does, any more than God would entertain himself by wagering the wellbeing of one of his precious children in a celestial poker game with the Adversary. Something else is going on here, and the fact that it's not immediately obvious to us what it might be is telling in and of itself.

Religious authorities who like to keep their flocks in line have historically portrayed the Father as a vindictive tyrant who foists unreasonable rules on his followers and punishes every

infraction no matter how small. It's lousy theology, but they do it anyway because guilt-stricken, terrified people are easier to control. Christians who don't want to bend the knee to an abusive dictator have historically countered by focusing primarily on Jesus's humanity. That's not wrong – Jesus *is* fully human – but it ignores his equally important divinity. If the Son is anything like the Father, he's overwhelmingly strong in his godly form. He had to compress all the power of a full-grown tornado into a human body to become Jesus. That power remains behind the gentle brown eyes and healing hands of the man who asks Bartimaeus, “what do you want me to do for you?” and heals the blind man the instant he replies.

If we read the stories of Job and Bartimaeus together, we're reminded that our God is mightier than we could ever hope to be, constantly occupied with things we can't begin to understand, and still loving enough to answer when we call. We can't manifest God's creative power any more than Job could, though we've done a remarkable job of proving how destructive we can be when we try to play God. (If you want proof, consider what European colonizers did to the indigenous people in the territories they took by force.) We don't know, any more than Job did, why Adonai allowed the Adversary to torture him; Job was sinless, so his sufferings can't have been a punishment. We know that Adonai restored Job's fortunes and then some when the ordeal was over, but I'm hesitant to call that a reward because this may not be a case of cause and effect. We can choose to see Job's story as proof that God is uncaring and capricious but, if that were true, why would God bother to come when Job called him? Why would the Son of God go to the trouble of becoming a vulnerable mortal and enduring unspeakable pain and humiliation for the sake of a fallen humanity? Why, for that matter, would the Word of God take the time to help a blind beggar whose own neighbors tried to shut him up when he cried out for mercy? Perhaps, instead of ascribing motives to the God who is infinitely beyond us, we would

do better to choke down our intellectual pride, stop demanding explanations for why God allows events and circumstances to unfold as they do and, instead, just admit that we need his help once in a while because there are things we simply can't do for ourselves.

This is where Bartimaeus sets an excellent example. Although he's the son of an important man, Bartimaeus lives, as Job did, in misery. If he has friends or family, they've made no effort to take him to Jesus for healing. Bartimaeus doesn't even know he's on Jesus's trajectory until the celebrated teacher and his friends stroll by. But when he learns that Jesus is in earshot, Bartimaeus begs for mercy at the top of his lungs. And when he gets the opportunity to speak to Jesus, Bartimaeus doesn't worry about whether his hair is combed or his sandals are polished. He jumps up, throws off his cloak, and runs straight to Jesus. And about that cloak. In Jesus's time, beggars wore cloaks to identify themselves to potential almsgivers. That cloak is a symbol of Bartimaeus' infirmity, essential to his livelihood, yet he tosses it aside in perfect trust that Jesus will heal him before they've exchanged a single word. I imagine that Jesus is greatly pleased when we're able to run to him with that same confidence.

Job and Bartimaeus have something else in common. Neither is fixated on the suffering he has had to endure. We can't know what would have happened if Job had greeted God with a torrent of bitter complaints, but it's doubtful that their ensuing conversation would have been a lovefest. Likewise, Bartimaeus doesn't confront Jesus with, "About time you showed up! How could you let me go blind like this? What kind of Messiah are you, anyway?" That may sound like an exaggeration but, when we're entirely focused on our grievances, it's easy to address God with just that attitude, if not with just those words.

Had Bartimaeus confronted Jesus with his grievances, our Lord might well have healed him anyway. Jesus knows our struggles, and I don't believe he condemns us when we have

trouble coping with them. But we do well to remember that Jesus was unable to do any great deeds of power when his former neighbors in Nazareth complained in bitter envy that he had performed miracles for other people but not for them. Perhaps it's not so much that Jesus can't do miraculous things when confronted with jealousy and skepticism. Perhaps it's that we can't accept or appreciate the miracles he does for us when we're so focused on our grievances that we refuse to look at his blessings.

Job and Bartimaeus have one more thing in common: they both *saw* God. The divine whirlwind must have been terrifying, but Job was brave enough to converse with Adonai and, when their talk was over, to live under a shower of divine blessings. When Bartimaeus' sight was restored, the first thing he saw was the face of our Savior. He responded by following Jesus on the way, whether that way was the road to Jerusalem, the path to salvation, or both. These men focused not on their grievances but on God, and that freed them to see how profoundly God blessed them, notwithstanding the troubles they had endured.

This tumultuous season through which we're currently living has been called many things, including the Age of Grievance. Popular culture assures us that we "deserve" to enjoy certain privileges and that we should be deeply aggrieved if we don't get it all, especially if someone else seems to have more. There's nothing wrong with wanting a nice life, but there's a lot wrong with focusing exclusively on our grievances. As Father Jean-Pierre de Caussade wrote, "All creatures that exist are in the hands of God. The action of the creature can only be perceived by the senses, but faith sees in all things the action of the Creator." We cannot possibly know everything that God is doing, not because he withholds that knowledge, but because we are merely human. But he is constantly at work in our lives. Dear Jesus, open our eyes. Teach us to focus not on our grievances but on your blessings, and to be grateful for all that you give. Amen.