

## **You Are the Son of David**

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Think of a time when it seemed that you had no hope at all. Perhaps it was a job layoff; or being cut from a sports team; or being told that a special person didn't love you any more; or feeling like the gifts you have are not valued anymore, that what you have spent your whole life doing is now a thing of the past.

I dare say that all of us have had a hopeless experience; a time when we were severely disappointed, when it seemed that the ground underneath us had shifted and our whole sense of reality was disturbed. It may have come to you individually, it may have come to you as part of a community; but whether it was all by yourself or with a group, a sense of hopelessness can be devastating.

In a way, it can also be blinding. It can take away our vision of what is and what can be, leaving us to grope in the darkness, looking for something to hold onto lest we fall. We are constantly seeking something to hope for, something that will give us our vision back.

We come to the Fifth Sunday in Lent, and we have here a story that is specially made for the Fifth Sunday in Lent. It is not quite Palm Sunday yet – that is next week – and Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Jerusalem. They are getting close - they are in Jericho, just a short distance away. You get the idea in Mark's narrative that this is a big procession, people on the move, a grand parade.

But then the parade comes to a complete halt. It is stopped by a blind beggar, the only one whose name we know – Bartimaeus. That name literally means “son of Timaeus,” and you have the idea that this man became a part of the early church, the fellowship of Jesus Christ. But when we meet him, he is blind. He is a beggar. He is hopeless.

He hears that Jesus is coming, and he knows about this Jesus. So he calls out to him – “Jesus, Son of David,” he cries. We might wonder ‘why not say, Jesus Son of Joseph?’ But this beggar has eyes to see something else – he sees a vision of hope, for himself and for his people. He cries out to Jesus as the Son of David, the One who brings hope to a hopeless people, the One he yells to for sight. He gets some resistance at first, but when Jesus stops the parade and calls for him, the crowd parts and the beggar comes to the One in whom he has hope. He is given his sight. But rather than going back where he came from, Bartimaeus falls in line in the procession, going to Jerusalem with Jesus.

It was a new day for Bartimaeus, a new time for hope. And for us, this is also a new time for hope, if we really know where our hope is. The problem is that many of us in the church haven't always known where that hope is – and where that hope is leading us. Scott Hoezee, director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, wrote a series of entries for worship during Lent for Reformed worship magazine. In the section on this text, Hoezee noted: “Christ, the Son of God, is the incarnation of hope, of

restoration, of joy – especially to those who need such precious commodities the most. Yet so often we in the church seem content to celebrate all that hope by ourselves, not allowing the overflow of gospel abundance to leak much past the walls of the sanctuary and out into the streets – where so very many invisible people cry out for the ‘Son of David’ and all the signals of hope and joy that that name can bring.”

When I reflect on hope I can’t help but notice how little of it seems to be coming from the church. Bartimaeus and those like him are fervently motioning us to follow the One who gives them hope. But we seem to lag behind.

In reflecting on how to give this hope a new twist, I remembered a book that I have worked on in my course work. Its title is *The Present future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, and it is written by a Baptist minister named Reggie McNeal. In the book McNeal points out that the new times in which we live have left the church behind, mainly because we are still dealing with wrong questions instead of tough questions that would help us to follow Jesus into a new world. When I shared this book with some of our new officers, their response was such that I felt that I couldn’t keep these gems to myself. So in the name of being like Bartimaeus and following Jesus who is our hope, here are those questions:

Wrong question #1: How do we do church better?

Tough question #1: How do we convert from Churchianity to Christianity?

We have forgotten that what we are following is not the institutional church. I love our denomination and I love and value our heritage. But we are not to be followers of John Calvin or any other Presbyterian saint. We are called to follow Jesus, to follow him into the world and to take his good news and live in his hope. Too many parts of the body of Christ have spent too much time seeking institutional survival, instead of missional excitement. The sons and daughters of Bartimaeus are still calling to Jesus. Do we tell them to be quiet, like those in the story, or can we be those who bring them to Jesus, or perhaps may we be taught by them how to love Jesus and follow in the way he leads?

Wrong question #2: How do we grow this church? (How do we get them to come to us?)

Tough question #2: How do we transform our community? (How do we hit the streets with the Gospel?)

This has been mentioned in here before, and maybe you think you’re preacher needs to get a new song. But the reality is that this is the song of the culture in which we live. We get all bummed out because people don’t come to church anymore. Then we develop a victim mentality that doesn’t help at all. We need to recapture – or better, be recaptured by – the call to be so in love with God and in what God is doing in our lives that it permeates every pore of who we are, it touches every part of what we are doing. Rather than sitting back and waiting for people to come in here, we need to live out the Gospel out there, to discover where are the places, who are the people, who most need to be touched with Good News.

Wrong question #3: How do we turn members into ministers?

Tough question #3: How do we turn members into missionaries?

In my previous pastorates I used to post a line in the directory that read: “Minister – Every member of the Congregation.” I then proceeded to have to back that up with certain members. But now I see that even that line didn’t go far enough. It’s not enough to say that we are all ministers to each other. We are called to be missionaries, just like the early church was. They didn’t keep all the good news to themselves. They took it to those on the outside, to all those in the community. They didn’t worry about offending anyone with their religion. They just praised God and shared that praise with others; they lived the good news everywhere.

Wrong question #4: How do we develop church members?

Tough questions #4: How do we develop followers of Jesus?

Is the only thing about being a Christian whether you are in church or not? About how many committees you are on? How many times you have served as an officer? We will be receiving new members into the church in a couple of weeks. I wonder what would happen if instead of just expecting them to show up once in a while we made it a part of their membership – and mine and yours – to evaluate how many lives we have touched with the love of Jesus Christ?

Wrong question #5: How do we plan for the future?

Tough question #5: How do we prepare for the future?

As one of my pastor colleagues would say, ‘Now you’re meddlin’.’ We take great pride in our long-term strategies, in our planning for the future. But can you really plan for the future? Do you really think that the future will only look like what we have planned for? McNeal holds out that rather than planning for the future, what we need to do is to prepare ourselves for the future, to prepare ourselves for the new thing that God is already doing in our lives. We open up ourselves so that when opportunities for sharing the good news come we won’t be running around asking, ‘Now, who’s responsible for this area, anyway? How does this fit in our strategic plan?’ If someone needs you to take them for a cup of coffee, just go. If a teenager is going through an identity crisis, don’t just expect Beau to do something. If you’ve got the relationship, you reach out to them. The future is in God’s hands. But God has given us opportunities to work with God in bring about what the Lord intends.

Wrong question #6: How do we develop leaders for church work?

Tough question #6: How do we develop leaders for the Christian movement?

The goal of leaders in the church of Jesus Christ is not keep the church going. It is to extend the love of Jesus Christ in all that we do, with everyone we touch, in this place and on the outside. There were those in the parade who wanted Bartimaeus to keep quiet so that Jesus could keep going. Sure, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. But Jesus also came to give recovery of sight to the blind, to lift up the fallen, to preach good news to the poor. The task of leaders in the church of Jesus Christ is not for self-preservation, not to keep the church

functioning. It is to point the way to the One whose body we are, who calls on us to pay attention to the needs around us, both inside and outside of these walls.

I know it's dangerous to talk so much about a book in a sermon, because all you have here is a very brief snapshot. But I think these are issues worth considering, especially in the new world into which we are moving. Our call is not to give people hope in the name of the Presbyterian Church; it is to share with others how we have hope in Jesus Christ, who is really the One we are following.

As we follow him, may we help others – not hinder them – as they struggle with their own lack of vision, so that together we can follow Jesus where he leads. Amen.

Bible Text is Mark 10:46-52.

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