

Saint Stephen's

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – October 27, 2024

Noise and Silence

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22, 25, 37b; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52



Christ healing the Blind Man (Sebastiano Ricci, 1659 – 1734, Italian)

[Mark 10:46-52] *Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

This story of the healing of the blind beggar appears in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and it marks the point where Jesus turns from his ministry in Galilee toward the journey to Jerusalem, where he will be arrested, condemned to death, and crucified. It is the last account of healing in the gospels.

Mark's version of this story is unique in that it names the blind beggar – he is Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Think about all the stories of Jesus healing people at the margins of society – the woman with a hemorrhage, the man possessed by demons, the man who couldn't walk. They are all exclusively named by their ailments, but Bartimaeus is known first by the name that links him to his father. Mark must have wanted early Christians to remember him.

Bartimaeus is worth remembering for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the way he maintains his dignity in a culture that has reduced him to begging. As a blind man, his role is to be barely seen and rarely heard, whose main purpose is to serve as a reminder to pious religious people of their obligation to give alms. He is allowed to beg, but he is not allowed to badger.¹ But badger he does, shouting to Jesus, "Have mercy on me!" even after he is told to be quiet by the able-bodied people around him.

Bartimaeus is also remarkable for his perceptiveness. Despite his blindness – or perhaps because of it – he is able to see and understand who Jesus is more clearly than Jesus's closest disciples. While other people identify Jesus by his hometown, Nazareth, Bartimaeus knows Jesus as "Son of David," the Messiah for whom people have waited for centuries.

And Bartimaeus is willing to risk everything for an encounter with the Savior. When he hears that Jesus is calling him, he throws down his cloak, likely one of only a few possessions and essential to his survival as a beggar, and rushes to meet him.

This story takes place in the middle of a large, noisy, crowd in the busy city of Jericho, a major crossing point for travelers in the 1st century. You can imagine the myriad bellowing voices selling goods or spreading news. In the midst of it, a man relegated to the dirt calls out to Jesus while others shout over him to pipe down. Yet of all those competing voices, it is Bartimaeus's that Jesus hears, the one that he recognizes as authentic and essential to respond to.

So Jesus calls him to come, a call that is as lifechanging to Bartimaeus as the ones Jesus issues to the twelve core disciples. Bartimaeus is healed, restored to wholeness, and when Jesus tells him

¹ Some of this discussion of Bartimaeus is informed by Timothy Adkins-Jones essay in *Christian Century* on October 10, 2021.

he can go, he stays instead. Already transformed, he follows Jesus to Jerusalem. He is an exemplary disciple.

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This week I spent several days in Chicago, attending a conference for leaders of non-profit healthcare systems. The schedule was packed with a range of speakers, including the physician and novelist Abraham Verghese, who wrote *Cutting for Stone* and *The Covenant of Water*; the Harvard Professor Arthur Brooks, who studies happiness and flourishing; and the political analyst Amy Walter, who discussed the complex dynamics of the upcoming presidential election.

Each speaker had the same amount of time -- an hour and fifteen minutes -- but I noticed that my experience of that time varied by speaker. While some presentations flew by, giving me concrete ideas for effective caregiving and vocational purpose, the political discussion crawled minute by minute and I found myself checking my watch to see how much more time remained. I later learned that others found her talk completely fascinating, so I'm sure my antsy-ness wasn't about the speaker but about me.

And in conversations with colleagues who live in battleground states of Michigan, Arizona, and Georgia, they each brought up their frustration and weariness from the constant barrage of

political advertising from both campaigns. "It's relentless," one said. "The texts, the emails, the phone calls, the billboards, the people knocking on my door, all catastrophizing about what will happen if their candidate is not elected. My stomach is in knots; my mind is rattled, and I can't sleep for worry about the future."

You don't have to live in one of those states to be impacted by the volume, intensity, and rhetoric of this election season. An American Psychological Association survey this year found that 77% of adult Americans report that the future of our nation is a significant source of stress to them, with 69% naming the presidential election specifically, a slightly higher number than the 2020 election,<sup>2</sup> and over half with concerns about the stability of democracy, civil unrest, and economic instability. Maybe you would count yourself in those percentages.

Fear is a powerful, primal emotion, and it can be protective in circumstances where we know what to fear -- think about hiking in grizzly country. But when fear becomes a diffuse mood rather than a particular watchfulness, it becomes harmful, sapping our energy and disconnecting us from daily experiences of love and well-being.

The Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes that our

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/stress-in-america/2024>

brains are wired to focus on negative information. This "negativity bias" makes us dwell more on worst-case scenarios than on optimistic ones. When faced with the noisy narratives of hyperbole and catastrophe, we overestimate the likelihood of bad outcomes and underestimate our resilience to handle them.<sup>3</sup>

Discerning which voices to listen to these days is essential for individual and community health. It is also a spiritual practice. I think about Bartimaeus and how he maintains his dignity in a culture that sees him as just a beggar who needs to keep quiet. How he is able to perceive God embodied in Jesus and how Jesus hears and responds to his voice. I expect both Bartimaeus and Jesus had a lot of practice in tuning out loud, intense, rhetoric intended to stoke fear or turn people against each other.

So, it is a spiritual practice to make intentional choices about which and how much news we take in. We must stay grounded in the knowledge that we are loved by God and each other, and whatever the outcome of the election, we will not respond alone. We are part of a community that cares for each other and prioritizes the needs of the most vulnerable.

I encourage you in the coming weeks to adopt a daily practice of quiet. Not

just a pause from the noise around us, but an active cultivation of silence. That can look like meditation, a walk alone with no phone, or 15 minutes of contemplating nature with no agenda.

Remember the prophet Elijah, to whom God said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, a sound of minute stillness. It was there that Elijah encountered God.<sup>4</sup>

Silence feeds the spirit and grounds our awareness of who we are in the giving and receiving of Love. Silence is essential in these days.

We will make ways in the next several weeks to practice stillness together and to offer a place of quiet contemplation to our neighbors. If that sounds like something you desire or would like to share with others, let's talk. It might be a ministry we are called to right now. Let's practice silence and listen together.

Amen.

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2024/1>

0/23/when-election-fear-goes-viral-staying-calm-amid-the-storm/

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 19:11-12.