

## Psalm 115:2-8

Why should the nations say,  
"Where is their God?"  
Our God is in the heavens;  
he does whatever he pleases.  
Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak;  
eyes, but do not see.  
They have ears, but do not hear;  
noses, but do not smell.  
They have hands, but do not feel;  
feet, but do not walk;  
they make no sound in their throats.  
Those who make them are like them;  
so are all who trust in them.

## Luke 18:35-43

As [Jesus] approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. Then he shouted, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!* Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, *Son of David, have mercy on me!*

Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

He said, 'Lord, let me see again.'

Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.'

Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

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This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God. Join me in prayer. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

## The God Who Hears

This sermon is part three of a seven-part sermon series on Psalm 115. I shared the first two sermons with you when I was here three and a half years ago, but don't worry if you weren't here or don't remember them. I'll catch you up in a few sentences. In this series Psalm 115 serves as a framework for understanding *the incarnation*: the coming of God to earth as a man Jesus of Nazareth, fully God and fully human. We are using Psalm 115, because **it is true** what the psalmist proclaims: our God is indeed in heaven and does whatever he pleases. **But** 2000 years ago, what pleased God was to *leave* heaven and *come to earth*. In Jesus, God took on human flesh, with eyes, ears, a nose, hands, feet, and a mouth. We are considering the *impact* of the incarnation on the people *of Jesus' time* and the *implications* of the incarnation for people *today*. We are asking questions like the one for this morning: *what does it matter that Jesus had ears?* Did Jesus' hearing differ from the hearing of those around him?

We begin this morning on the Jericho Road, a road that was dangerous and was known for its *roving bands of robbers* as well as its *caravans of traders*. Yet despite the dangers, *priests* and *pilgrims* regularly walked the Jericho Road as they made their way to Jerusalem. That's just what Jesus was doing in our scripture: he was heading *through* Jericho on *his way to Jerusalem*, making his pilgrimage along this dangerous but well-traveled road, his face turned towards Jerusalem and crucifixion. Listen to how Jesus describes what's ahead for him. These are the verses that come immediately before this morning's text.

Then Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.' But they understood nothing about all these

things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (*Luke 18.31-34*)

And so Jesus approached Jericho. One more stop on his journey to the great Passover feast, the one we will remember in April: the feast where Jews remember how God brought them out of their bondage in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land of Israel. In the Passover, Jews remember how God led Israel with a cloud by day and a fire by night, and how they stopped when the cloud stopped and moved when the cloud lifted. After that Passover feast, Jesus would be betrayed, insulted, mocked, spat upon. He would be flogged and killed and it would look like he had finally been stopped, that this threat to the religious sensibilities of that day would be silenced. But no: Jesus would rise from the grave, having conquered death. And with all of that *national history* **behind** him and all of that *personal tribulation* **before** him, Jesus headed into Jericho, on his way to Jerusalem.

But while he was making his way into the busy city, a blind beggar was *sitting along the way*. This was a beggar who had no place better to be; a blind man who wasn't going anywhere. Betrayed by his body, this man was unable to make a normal living. He was outcast from society. He was rejected by his religious community. He was ignored and insulted; he was literally and figuratively looked down on as he sat by the side of the road. He was looked down on by the very people on whom he relied for the necessities of life. The world passed him by, tossing him some crumbs, a few coins ... enough to sustain him for another day, but not enough to satisfy him for long.

On the day that Jesus was walking the Jericho Road, this blind man, Bartimaeus, was sitting outside of Jericho; outside of the church; outside of society; apparently even outside of the Kingdom of God! Well, Bartimaeus may have been blind, but he wasn't deaf, and he heard an excited crowd going by in front of him. Now a crowd is a *good* thing for a beggar: there are more opportunities for handouts! So Bartimaeus asked those around him what all the commotion was about. They answered, "*Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.*" When

Bartimaeus heard that, he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

When the people in front of Bartimaeus heard his cry, they immediately told him to **be quiet!** Now why do you suppose they shushed him? [Pause] I can think of a number of reasons, but they all pretty much boil down to two things: they thought he was **annoying** and **embarrassing**. He was **annoying** because he was interfering with the exciting parade passing by. They were trying to concentrate on **Jesus** and there was **Bartimaeus**, shouting out, drawing attention to himself, asking questions, like a little kid, pulling at your sleeve. Maybe they were trying to hear what Jesus was saying as he walked along and Bartimaeus made it hard to concentrate. Not only was he annoying, Bartimaeus was an **embarrassment**. He was a **beggar**, and he was **blind**, which in those days implied that he had committed some major sin, in punishment for which God had taken away his sight. That's not the kind of person you want to show off to prominent visitors like this famous rabbi! When you and I are expecting company, we usually want the house and yard to look nice, don't we? I imagine it was much the same in Jesus' day. Wouldn't it have been particularly embarrassing for someone who was so clearly out of the loop, so clearly at the bottom of the social ladder, someone **SO CLEARLY a LOSER** to forget his place and speak up in the presence of someone important, like Jesus?

Let's take just a moment and let this scripture shine some light on our own lives. Is there a Bartimaeus in *your* life? Someone who is annoying or embarrassing? Is there someone you *hear*, but would rather not have to *listen* to? Let me give you an example. Before we had kids, I worked for large bank in Philadelphia and at one point I was the manager of a group of about 25 clerks who kept track of all the savings bonds and savings accounts. Whenever a customer had a question or problem with an account, he or she would take it into a branch office and the branch manager would then call my department. Branch personnel usually spoke to one of the two supervisors who reported to me. These two women were the ones who could answer almost any question and track down almost any

missing deposit. If they ran into roadblocks, they consulted me, and while I might be able to help think the problem through, they were the ones who solved the problems. I knew these two women were competent. **My staff** knew these two women were competent.

**Some of the branch managers** knew these two women were competent. But most of the branches insisted on speaking directly to me right off the bat. I don't think it was because I was the boss; I think it was because of how my staff sounded over the phone.

The one woman, Scarlet, had two strikes against her: she had a strong African American accent and she stuttered. The other woman, Yolanda, had a strong *Puerto Rican* accent. The branch managers from the white suburbs preferred to speak with me, because I *sounded* like them. The thing was, I just turned their questions right over to Scarlet or Yolanda because **they** were the ones who could help, not me! Eventually, we solved this dilemma of "voice prejudice" by going out into the suburbs to area meetings, introducing Scarlet and Yolanda **in person** to the branch personnel, and letting these competent ladies lead training sessions. The branch staffers may have been a little prejudice, but they were not stupid. They quickly realized that these two women knew what they were talking about even if the way they talked sounded strange to white suburban ears.

Until they were given the opportunity to really listen to these women, what they heard over the phone made them think that they were speaking to someone who was uneducated, not too bright, and not competent enough to handle their problems. That prejudice goes back years in our cultural history. Think how many years it took for Christians to listen to the voices of the slaves, to recognize them as human voices, and to work for the end of slavery! It has happened over and over again as new immigrants fight this same kind of prejudice: Irish, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, Asians, and the list goes on and on. How easy it is to ignore the voices, the pleas of those in need, especially if those voices don't sound like ours. Stop for a moment and think: are there voices **you** hear every day without really **listening** to what is being said? What would they have to say to get you to listen?

And that brings us back to our text, where Bartimaeus has the words to say that get Jesus' **undivided attention**. That must have been a bit tricky, given the fact that his first cry was summarily shushed and that Jesus was in the midst of a noisy procession heading into a bustling city.

There were animals clomping along and people walking and talking. There were merchants barking their wares and beggars pleading for handouts like Bartimaeus. There were children darting in and out shouting and laughing ... all in all the usual sounds of a city crowd. Bartimaeus has to cry out a second time, *Son of David, have mercy on me!* And in the midst of that *chaos*, that *cacophony* of sound, despite the shushing of those who disapproved, Jesus *heard* Bartimaeus' cry, and he **stopped**, and he **listened**.

It was a **prodigious** stop and everyone behind Jesus stopped. Maybe it took those who were a little ahead a moment to notice that something had happened—maybe they had to double back—but suddenly all movement ceased, and the noise died down, with just a lingering buzz of people whispering,

**"What's going on?" "Why did we stop?" "What's up?"**

Gradually all attention was focused on **Jesus**.

And all of **Jesus'** attention was focused on **Bartimaeus**.

This **huge** crowd, this **royal** procession with its requisite entourage came to a screeching halt for this audacious *outcast*. And once he had everyone's attention, Jesus asked the blind man,  
**'What do you want me to do for you?'**

That question seems a little silly, don't you think? Obviously the man would want his sight back. But I think Jesus was making sure He understood what the man really wanted. In asking Bartimaeus that question, Jesus made it abundantly clear that he, the *famous teacher*, the *renowned healer*, was **listening** to this *nobody*, this

*outcast, this sinner.* And, **unlike** the people surrounding Bartimaeus, Jesus didn't appear to find the man annoying or embarrassing. He listened to the man's request for healing, he healed him, and he continued on his way, as if what he had just done was perfectly normal. And Bartimaeus and the crowd followed along behind him, praising God.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if listening to people seemed like a perfectly normal thing to do? And wouldn't it be wonderful if listening to people would lead to healing? Well, I think it can. Ignoring people by not really listening to them can cause a great deal of emotional damage. Children grow up insecure and angry, marriages dissolve in disillusion. Families and partnerships are divided by misunderstandings. Working relationships are strained by feelings of distrust and suspicion.

On the other hand, listening, *really listening* to someone can turn a situation around. Look at what happened in the story I told earlier. Once the branch personnel were able to get past the accents, they found that Scarlet and Yolanda were competent, willing workers who could solve any number of problems for their customers. Scarlett was the descendant of slaves, people whose voices were finally heard, who were able to, generation by generation, able to build better lives for their children and grandchildren.

Who do you know who is **heard** but not **listened** to? Who in your life needs you to *stop* and really *listen*?

- Is it someone in your family?
- Your children or your spouse?
- Your parents or a brother or sister?
- A neighbor, perhaps?
- A client, or an employee?

Is it someone at work or someone at church?  
Maybe even the person sitting in the next pew.

As a church, in this interim time, who needs to be heard because their voice has been silenced? The youth? The elderly?  
New members? Long-time members? Visitors?

As Psalm 115 reminds us, we worship a God who is in heaven. And the New Testament reminds us that our God was once here on earth as a human being. And as a human being, Jesus of Nazareth—**the Son of David, the Messiah**—took time over and over again to *listen* when people spoke to him. His listening brought healing, and he calls **us** to listen with his ears today. Even in the midst of the chaos within our families, the concerns we have about our own futures, and the ongoing demands of our everyday lives, God calls us to **listen** to those who **speak** to us. In doing so, we can bring the healing balm of Jesus Christ to a broken and hurting world.

AMEN