

Proper 25B

Most of this sermon is a 'retread' from nine years ago. There is so much in there I think we need to hear again, especially right now.

However, I do want to be clear that the references to the defeat of Jericho hit our ears a little differently now, when that part of the world is in such violent turmoil. The narrative comes to us from the perspective of those who won the battle. Those who wrote these stories down tended to see victory as a sign that "God is on our side." Emphasis on OUR.

It's troubling theology when we're talking about our favorite baseball team. It's tragic, when it leads to violence and war.

So I'm going to ask you, before I start, to travel with me to the end of this sermon. The warfare is not the point.

The point is what happens when Jesus shows up.

"Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho."

Do you know the story of Jericho in the Hebrew Scriptures? I remember learning the song "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho" as a kid, but little else 'stuck,' so I thought I'd refresh your memories about the importance of Jericho in the biblical narrative.

To set the scene: Moses has died and Joshua is now the leader of the Israelites. (And because I need to make this point somewhere, I'm going to remind you now that "Joshua" and "Jesus" are the same name—on in Hebrew, one in Greek—meaning "The Lord is Salvation.")

So Joshua's job is to lead the Israelites into the land promised to them by Yahweh. The problem, of course, is that those lands are already inhabited. The Israelites are encamped across the river Jordan in the plain of Shittim. Joshua sends spies into Jericho, a large and well-established city, to find out what they can about its defenses and people. The king hears about the spies, and sends soldiers to arrest them at the house of Rahab, the prostitute. She hides them under piles of flax on her roof, and misdirects the soldiers. While they are looking elsewhere, the spies escape out a window and scale a rope down the walls of the city. The big, solid, impenetrable walls of the city.

Joshua hears the spies' report, and turns to God for guidance. He is instructed to parade the Ark of the Covenant around the city, led by the priests. For six days they process around the walls of Jericho, blowing their horns but not making any other sound—not a word was spoken. I've often wondered how the people inside the city responded. Laughter at first, but then an increasing discomfort. It must have been a little eerie to

watch this parade going around the city day after day, the silence broken only by the sound of the ram's horn.

On the seventh day, the priests circle the city seven times. After the seventh trip around, Joshua tells the people to shout in triumph, for God has given them the victory. "So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat." The people rush in and destroy everything except Rahab and her family. Rahab is saved, and marries one of the princes of the tribes of Israel. She is an ancestor to Boaz. Which means she is an ancestor to Jesus. The rest of the city is burned to the ground and no one is spared.

It is outside the scope of this sermon for us to consider how history is written by the victors, and to question the interpretation that the utter devastation and destruction of a city is somehow God's will.

What I want you to focus on for now is the idea that the people shouted in victory *while the walls were still standing*.

This is the history of Jericho; these are the images conjured up when we read "Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho."

Jesus—Joshua—and his disciples came to Jericho.

Are you beginning to feel the dramatic tension? Jesus and disciples came to Jericho—and something big is about to happen. Suddenly the story of Bartimaeus is not just another story of Jesus healing the sick.

Suddenly, this story is about liberation and new life.

Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. We are told nothing of what they did there, but we do know that as Jesus and the disciples prepare to leave, they are followed by a large crowd. Can't you just picture Jesus surrounded on all sides by people? Can't you just imagine how they tried to shush Bartimaeus as he shouted out for Jesus? "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Bartimaeus is nothing, no-one. He doesn't even have a name, really. Bartimaeus isn't a first name, it means "son of Timaeus." He is identified only as the blind son of Timaeus. He is defined solely by his disability, by what he lacks. The blind beggar, so poor he can't even see.

Remember a couple of weeks ago when Jesus was confronted by the rich young man, who had everything? Jesus tells him, "You lack one thing. Give up everything you possess and follow me." Bartimaeus may be so poor he doesn't even have a name of his own, but does have one thing—a voice that could cut through the thick walls of people and reach Jesus' ears. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And once again, the shout of faith brought down the walls. Jesus stands still. Imagine how that looks, a great crowd of people suddenly brought to a halt by the voice of one beggar on the sidelines. Jesus stands still and calls for the blind man to come to him.

We are told Bartimaeus throws off his cloak—the only thing he owned. Bartimaeus did what the rich young man couldn't, he put aside all his possessions. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and comes to Jesus.

Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” Do you recognize that question? It's the same one Jesus asked James and John in last week's Gospel reading. What do you want me to do for you?

The request this time is much different. “Master, let me see again.” Jesus tells him that his mere desire to see and his belief that Jesus can restore his sight was enough. “Your faith has made you well.”

The story of blind Bartimaeus is an echo of the story of Jericho. His shout, “Jesus, Son of David” was an echo of the shout that brought down the walls all those generations before. This is not a story of one person's blindness; it is the story of every person's blindness.

We live in a culture that relishes in pointing out the walls that divide us; that encourages us to point out the blindness in other people's sons. This story tells us again that there are no walls so broad and thick that God

cannot bring them down. This story tells us again that each of us needs Jesus to restore our sight. All we have to do is shout out for the Son of David to have mercy on us all.

God is already bringing down the walls that keep us from entering the Promised Land. This is the hope of the story of the blind beggar Bartimaeus. God is already restoring our vision of the world as it could be. All we need to do is shout out to the one whose very name is a promise—the Lord is Salvation—and claim that promise for ourselves. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy.

Amen.