

Pentecost 23, Proper 25, October 28 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church
Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

You know that old saw about being cursed with living in interesting times? We are not living in interesting times, my friends; we are living in dangerous times.

When the President of the United States and his acolytes promote violence against fellow citizens, and then he and they express surprise when bombs show up in the mail boxes of those he and they continue to target as "evil" and "enemies of the people" - genuine bombs containing not only glass shards designed for immediate, deadly effect but also fascist sentiments designed for a more long-term, more damaging, no less deadly effect - we are living in dangerous times.

When some (many) within our nation ferociously attack defenseless minorities - or, in fact, any who disagree with them, with either implied or actual violence- we are living in dangerous times.

When we watch - with horror (I hope) the unfolding events that began yesterday in Pittsburgh, when a Synagogue- a JEWISH synagogue - JEWS - 11 at least – murdered and others severely wounded - we are living in dangerous times. If nothing else has set your alarm bells ringing, this should do it. All these people – prominent politicians of one party, African Americans, Jews - were attacked because they are members of groups, not because of who they are as individuals. This is how fascism works – this is the face of fascism in 21st Century America.

Don't say "it can't happen here, it can't happen again"; it can happen here, again. In fact, it is happening here, again. The dark voices of hatred are raising their shrill cries, again; evil stalks our human community.

At the same time, the cashiers at Payless continue to talk about sore feet, or what they're planning to do when their shift ends: "have a nice day," they say (as usual), in parting. People are still walking their dogs at the Greenbank Farm; still filling the commuter lots and grouching about ferry-wait-times. I'm still fighting the US Postal Service over whether they're going to deliver my mail or not.

At least on the surface life goes on as it always has.

This week - really most of this month, for me - has heightened my sense that I'm trying to live in two worlds, ones that are distinctly different, but that I'm pretending to myself that they're not. It has a strangely schizophrenic feel to it. And I don't think I'm alone in this. It seems like we're sane people trying to live in a world going mad.

And we're still coming here. What did you hope for, when you came here this morning?

I'll bet that seeing familiar, friendly faces was a big part of your decision. There's something that's very comforting about perpetuating a routine that's familiar, that feels safe. I hope that's part of it: friendship and safe, familiar routines are important parts of healthy living - they are for me, and I'd be surprised if they're not for you.

We're each of us here for a variety of reasons, but most obviously, we're here to worship - to hear God's word and respond with thanksgiving, and share in a common meal that unites us to each other and God, through Jesus Christ.

How does this – our worshipping, our presence, our relationships, our familiar, ordinary, everyday lives - connect with the world I described? What, specifically, does the story of a blind beggar miraculously receiving his sight have to offer us? Because in the midst of social and cultural turmoil, when our national intercourse continues to fracture and devolve down to a base human behavior that's so obviously lacking in the higher values that underpin healthy human societies, it has to offer something, or we're all wasting our time.

Well, first, this is a very special story. Out of the 40 or so healing stories in the four gospels there are only two that contain the name of the person healed – this one – Bartimaeus – and one other, in John's gospel – can you think who that is? Martha and Mary's brother, Lazarus! The fact that we have their names is significant: they were clearly both known personally to the early community that came together after Jesus' resurrection because their names were passed on, ultimately to Mark and John. Given the secrecy of the early community, hiding in upper rooms, these two – Bartimaeus and Lazarus – would only have been known – and continued to be known – if they were trusted followers of Jesus and companions of the first Christians. More significantly, and easily missed, is the last sentence of today's gospel, that Bartimaeus “followed [Jesus] on the way.” The earliest Christians didn't go by the name “Christian” - that was originally a Roman insult. They were called “Followers of the Way.” Mark is identifying Bartimaeus as a Follower of the Way” - he's saying, “he's one of us Christians.”

Another reason this is a special story – along with that of Lazarus – is that the story of their healings each come at the same pivotal moment in Mark's and John's gospels – both are the last stories of healing before Jesus enters Jerusalem; they're the exclamation marks on his public ministry of healing.

Of the two, Bartimaeus is the most active: he hears that Jesus is coming and he won't shut up; he's so keen to meet Jesus he throws off his robe and almost runs. And unlike the story just prior to this one, where the disciples are arguing about which of them should have the most prominent role, Bartimaeus asks only for mercy. The metaphorical freight here is remarkable. What was it that inspired Bartimaeus? Hope. Real hope. Despite those around him telling him to shut up Bartimaeus moves toward Jesus with a hope for healing – for being made whole.

There are other healing stories - most of them - where those who are healed thank Jesus (the 9 lepers are an obvious exception!). Some of the healed even start telling others about him. Bartimaeus goes further; Bartimaeus follows him, even though the next stop is Jerusalem, and the Passover. And we all know that the Passover in Jerusalem ends badly for Jesus. Yet Bartimaeus persisted - on beyond the pain and loss, on beyond the frightened secrecy of the upper room, on into the memories of the early Christians and ultimately, into the Gospel of Mark. Bartimaeus persisted, because he saw; he saw what the future could be, and despite the challenges, the dangers, he wanted in on it.

We're living in dangerous times. Not that different than the times that Jesus – and Bartimaeus – faced under Roman domination.

Our Presiding Bishop has talked a lot about the Jesus Movement, and how its centered on love. The thing is, it's not a mushy, sentimental love that has that shimmer around it; it's the hard-nosed love of those who see the struggles that lie ahead, and still step forward. It's the hard-nosed love that hopes. Do you have hope? Real hope? Are you willing to follow to the difficult places? Are you willing to speak up and speak out, when the narrow voices of hate raise their shrill cries? Are you willing to be like Bartimaeus, to open your eyes and see what's going on, and stand up and be counted, rather than simply just slipping away into the footnotes of history?

Standing up and being counted as people with a "Jesus Perspective" – as Christians – is how we link our world of faith - the world in here - with the world outside. If what happens to Bartimaeus means anything, it means this: that hope is born in the encounter with Jesus, an encounter that transforms us, and it is us - we - who are then called by him to be agents of transformation in our world.