

"A Bouyant Utterance of Hope"

Psalm 34:1-4, 19-22

Mark 10:46-52

### **Mark 10:46-52**

**They 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 (courage); 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.**

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

What do you hope for? Is it something tangible or something more abstract? Can you explain it to your closest friends or family or do you hold it tight to your own heart? Does what you hope for leave you longing for more or does it feed you and inspire you?

To get at this a little further, I would like to begin today by talking about fear. Is there anything in life that scares you? Not that I am wishing fear on any of us, but it is likely there is something that causes us fear, right? Spiders. Snakes. Our kids have been singing about ghosts and goblins and big black bats- oooooooooooooooooo! On a serious note, think about what might scare you: a temptation looming large; death; disappointment; not having enough or being enough; you fill in the blank.

How do you handle that fear? Do you avoid it, hoping it will one day just go away or do you stand up to it, hoping to scare whatever it is back? Do you work harder to cover it up than you do to get rid of it? Do you try to control it yourself or is it something someone else can help you with?

In the face of our fears, there is something we can always lean on or turn to: hope. Hope is not just something made up as a counter to our fear, it is a belief and power found in

someone: God. Why God? Because God is the only one throughout all of history that has proven he can do more than sweep fear under the rug.

In thinking about our fears, were you aware that the phrase “do not fear or do not be afraid” appears 365 times throughout the scriptures? Yes, one for each day of the year. I am sure we could even dig enough to find the 366<sup>th</sup> needed for a leap year. Knowing this lets us know a little bit about the state of fear existing throughout history and knowing these statements were made in response to their fears let us know about the effort of God to deliver God’s people from their fears. All throughout history, God has sought to restore the hope of people, delivering and rescuing them from their fears, so their focus can be on God and God alone, and not controlled by their fears. How did God do it? The easy answer is in lots of ways. But the main way God provided for people to overcome their fears, was through the gift of grace.

There is a song written by a man that describes the joy and peace of a soul uplifted from despair to salvation through the gift of grace. The words written are an autobiographical commentary on how he was spared from both physical and spiritual ruin. The song seeks to illuminate the joyful ending of the tale of a defiant man who manages again and again to escape danger, disease, abuse, and death, only to revert to “struggles between sin and conscience.”

The man’s father, a merchant ship captain, was often away on sea voyages that typically lasted two to three years. During one of these absences, his mother fell deathly ill and passed away. It wasn’t long before he was sent to boarding school. To say the least, his religious beliefs initially lacked conviction, as he was raised away from the traditions rising at the time. The years of his youth are best described by religious confusion and a lack of moral self-control and discipline.

Despite the temptations and odds that filled his days and long nights, this young man’s life revealed a pattern of being miraculously spared. There is an account in which he was thrown from a horse, narrowly missing impalement on a row of sharp stakes. Another account had him arriving late to board a boat that was carrying his companions to tour a warship, and as he watched from the shore, the vessel overturned, and all the passengers drowned. Another account years later, on a hunting expedition in Africa on a moonless night, he and his companions got lost in a swamp. Just when they were to give up, the moon appeared, and they were able to return to safety. Near-death experiences seemed to have been commonplace.

Unfortunately, the deliverance from these near-death experiences did not change his attitude about life. He always seemed to relapse into old habits, continuously defying his religious destiny and attempting to dissuade others from their beliefs. It was one thing for him to not believe, but it was his effort at chipping away at the faith of others that remained his deepest guilt.

Like his father, he became a shipman. He was forced to join the Royal Navy and while at sea, he was disgraced, relieved of his post, and traded for another man from a passing slave ship. His next saga found him tempted by the profits of slave trading. Overcome by malaria, he became the victim of abuse at the mercy of a slaver's native mistress. He was reduced to merely nothing. Somehow, he managed to recover, but soon was to face another trial. Again, while at sea, a violent storm broke out. Moments after he left the deck, the crewman who had taken his place were swept overboard. He manned the vessel for the remainder of the storm, and later confessed, that it was through the danger of the storm he realized his helplessness and concluded that only the grace of God could save him.

Upon returning to shore, his voyages at sea inspired his personal voyage toward religion and faith. His call to ministry included the exploration of many expressions of Christianity, the discovery of God's continued deliverance (he would later experience a stroke that would keep him from the sea anymore), and the growth of inspiring and encouraging others to prayer and treating others with dignity and respect. In many ways, his tactics as a religious shipman were revolutionary, since it was during much of the English Slave Trade movement to America.

-excerpts from Library of Congress- "The Creation of 'Amazing Grace'"

With lines such as "dangers, toils, and snares"; "a wretch like me"; and "the hour I first believed"; we come to know the song as "Amazing Grace", written by John Newton. There is perhaps no other song in history that "describes the joy and peace of a soul uplifted from despair to salvation through the gift of grace" the way "Amazing Grace" does. The message of "Amazing Grace" is that forgiveness and redemption are possible regardless of sins committed and that the soul can be delivered from despair through the mercy of God. Originally written in 1772, the hymn "Amazing Grace" saw a resurgence in popularity in the U.S. during the 1960's and has been recorded thousands of times during and since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is estimated that "Amazing Grace" is sung 10 million times annually.

In the last several years, a chorus has been added to the original hymn, making it a contemporary version entitled "My Chains are Gone."

My chains are gone, I've been set free,  
My God, my savior has ransomed me  
And like a flood His mercy rains  
Unending love, Amazing Grace.

God's amazing grace is our greatest source of hope for all of what life has to throw at us. (2x)

A few moments ago, we read two scripture texts that are just two of many throughout scripture that also speak to hope. Psalm 34 is an utter praise and thanksgiving to God for deliverance from trouble and the fear of what comes next and Mark 10 is the repetitive loud cry of the blind beggar sitting by the roadside waiting in hope and faith for Jesus to heal him. These two stories from scripture, alongside the journey of denial and destruction, reconciliation and redemption, of “Amazing Grace” are all more than personal prayers. They are **“a buoyant utterance of hope”** (Louis Stulman, FOTW, 201).”

One of the greatest written sources of hope we can turn to are the Psalms. The Psalms are a compilation of inspirations that instruct us to praise God for unsurpassable glory, to trust God for unquenchable love, and to rely on God for unfailing nurture and grace. What they teach us is that amidst the challenges over the course of our lives, God will answer our prayers, dwell with us in our fear and loneliness, and give to the faithful every good thing.

The psalms remind us of a God who has a reputation for listening to the cries voiced by the hopeless (Abel in Genesis 4:10, Ishmael in Genesis 21:17, the Hebrews in Exodus 2:23-24). Throughout the Old Testament, God’s identity, and that expected of the covenant people, revolves around protecting those most vulnerable in society: widows, orphans, foreigners, the fearful and seemingly hopeless.

Psalm 34 is just one example of goodness for the brokenhearted. This psalm offers instruction on coping with life and negotiating its many twists and turns. God is responsive to human needs. The petitioner cried out to God for help and God intervened. In its entirety, Psalm 34 is a survival story, a joyous response of gratitude to unexpected deliverance from disaster. God redeems, drawing us out from one world into another. God saves, delivering and rescuing us from what restricts or oppresses us.

Another great source of hope we can turn to are the gospels, which seek to share the good news of Jesus Christ as God’s Son sent to save the world. Just a few moments ago we read a story in Mark about Jesus encountering a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Rather than ignoring the cry of the man, he stops, and restores his sight. Ultimately, this is a story about the compassionate Christ who brings the good news of God’s victory over the physical brokenness of the world. It is a story that brings together faith, wholeness, and discipleship.

One thing for us to recall is that ‘blindness’ would have been considered a curse to the Jews of the age. If one was blind, it was because they or their parents had sinned in such a way for them to have been made blind; a consequence to a sin. But instead of remaining trapped in his blindness, Bartimaeus shows explicit faith and courage by crying out to Jesus, “Have mercy on me. You can make me see again.” His act of throwing off his cloak when Jesus calls him, as one scholar notes, is the very suggestion of one who is looking to leave his former life behind. And what does Jesus do? He doesn’t push him away or shake him off. He stops and listens and heals.

This encounter with Jesus reminds us of the transforming effect of the gospel to call forth a life of renunciation and dramatic change. It does so, not only through the healing of Bartimaeus, but in the disciples present as well. The story of Bartimaeus serves as the bookend to a section of Mark's gospel focused on blindness. This entire section encompasses not only the physical blindness of Bartimaeus being healed, but the spiritual blindness of Christ's closest followers who have failed to fully grasp the upside-down kingdom that Christ has brought near to the world. Perhaps the irony of the text is that Bartimaeus, in his physical blindness, can see what others who can see do not. Bartimaeus really does see Jesus for who he is and declares him the Son of David, and it is this declaration which reveals his faith and hope in Jesus, that saves him and gifts him sight. The ultimate message of hope we can take away from this passage is that not even the blindness of his closest followers can impede the work of Christ in the world.

One late Fall several years ago, I was traveling to the beach with Barrett and a back seat full of teenage boys from the youth group. About half way through our travels, our conversation took an interesting turn. Halloween was the next week and they began discussing scary experiences they had all had and wonder about what this Halloween would bring. They all admitted having frightful experiences in spooky woods and haunted houses. The conversation carried for a few miles down the road before it shifted again to what to do when you are scared and nervous. It was then my ears opened wide. The boys in the back seat, who were juniors in high school with athletic and academic accolades to brag about, began to talk about their fears. They mentioned the nerves that swelled up in their stomachs and the weight of expectations and anticipations they received from their parents, teachers, coaches, and peers. They admitted they didn't have a clue about what was next for them and how that scared them. Before I could say anything, Barrett chimed in to offer that whenever she was scared, the first thing she did was pray the Lord's Prayer. She commented how that prayer made her feel the presence of God with her immediately, and with God's presence, she trusted everything was going to work out.

The Lord's Prayer is a great remedy for nerves or fear; whether it is the line in the Lord's Prayer that says "and deliver us from evil" or the prayer in its entirety. The Lord's Prayer is about God and God is about grace and hope, not fear.

I ask us again, what do we hope for? Where do we place our hope in times of distress, anxiety, or fear? Before anything else, let's all be quick to remember and have faith that God is there; God hears our cries; God stops to pay attention; God delivers and fulfills.

So... Go! Live! Just like it did for John Newton, Abel, Ishmael, the Hebrews, the psalmist, and Bartimaeus, our faith and hope, fueled by the grace of God, will make us well.

Let all God's people say... Amen.