**Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 24, 2021**

**Text—Jeremiah 31:7-9 and Mark 10:46-52**

The prophet Jeremiah was facing a dire situation. The land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem had just been conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. For decades, Jeremiah had been warning the people that this was going to happen, that they needed to repent of their sin and idolatry and turn back to the true God before it was too late. But the people had not listened, and so God raised up Babylon to punish his chosen nation. The Babylonians swooped in, laid siege to Jerusalem, and eventually took the city. They captured King Zedekiah and the rest of the elites of Judah, and then forced them to march back to Babylon with them to serve the empire for the rest of their lives. All that was left in Judah were the poor of the land, the people that the Babylonians didn’t want to bring back with them. They at least kept some semblance of freedom, but everything they once had was either taken from them or destroyed. And Jeremiah was the only prophet left there who could help the people pick up the pieces and give them a good word from God.

But if you’ve ever read the book of Jeremiah, you’ll know that he wasn’t necessarily the prophet you wanted to rely on to give you a good word from God. Most of his oracles were highly Law-oriented, criticizing the people for their sins and threatening punishment if they did not repent. Because the people didn’t listen to him, he just kept right on going with this message of gloom and doom. But at this point, the Judahites were broken. They had nothing left: they had lost their homes, their possessions, and their families. There wasn’t any point in kicking them while they were down; they needed some hope that there would be forgiveness and restoration for them. So, rather uncharacteristically, that’s exactly what Jeremiah gave them. The central chapters of Jeremiah, far from being oracles of gloom and doom, are actually some of the most uplifting and grace-filled chapters of the entire Bible. In today’s Old Testament text, we see a sample of one of those prophecies of God’s love and mercy toward his people. Through Jeremiah, God encourages the people to sing with gladness and raise shouts of joy, because he was going to save them from their distress. He would gather them together from all the places where they had been scattered: not just Babylon, but everywhere else they had been forced into exile as well. He would not just save the healthy and strong; no, he would pay special attention to the blind, the lame, and pregnant women, the most vulnerable among his people. He would bring them back to the Promised Land and help them to rebuild, and he would restore to them everything they had lost. He would keep them on the straight and narrow path and not allow them to stumble again. God would do this because he was the Father of the people of Israel, and as their loving Father, he would not allow them to suffer forever. He would bring them back to himself and grant them peace and prosperity, and then they would worship him in purity and holiness, as he had always intended for them.

Well, as we all know, God does not break any of his promises, and this one was no exception to the rule. Eventually, about seventy years after the exile, God raised up Cyrus the king of Persia to attack Babylon and defeat it, and then the Persian Empire inherited all the lands and peoples that had once belonged to Nebuchadnezzar. Cyrus was a very different king from Nebuchadnezzar: he had compassion on the people of Israel and allowed them to return to their homeland and rebuild their cities. No longer were they forced to stay in exile in a foreign land, and no longer would they be forced to live among pagans who did not worship the true God. God was finally making good on his promises to them through Jeremiah, and he was restoring the fortunes of his people of Israel. Everything was so much better than it had been while they were in exile in Babylon.

But everything was not as good as it had been before the Babylonian exile. For one thing, the people of Israel were still not free; they were still subject to the Persian Empire and required to pay tribute to them. They could not make their own way in the world, and if they defied the Persians, they would be attacked in the same way as they were by the Babylonians. For another thing, the city and especially the temple that they had rebuilt were nothing close to what the original structures had been. The old men who returned to Jerusalem who had been alive at the time of the exile actually wept when they saw the new temple, because they knew that it wasn’t anywhere nearly as splendid as the first one. God had indeed done much to help his people, but he had not completely restored everything to the way it had been before. So in some sense, his fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy was still incomplete. The Israelites would have to wait longer, much longer in fact, before they saw what God was ultimately planning to do for them.

But eventually, God did indeed reveal the fullness of his plan to his people. He finally showed them how he would restore everything they had lost, and how he would show special regard to the vulnerable and suffering among them. We see in today’s Gospel text just a snapshot of that promised restoration coming to fruition. One day, while the prophet Jesus of Nazareth was walking through the city of Jericho with his disciples, a man named Bartimaeus came up to him. Bartimaeus was blind, and in those days being blind meant that you couldn’t do much of anything except beg for help. So when Bartimaeus was told that Jesus was in the vicinity, he ran up to him and did what he had been doing for his whole life: he begged. He cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Although others in the crowd rebuked him, he shouted out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” So Jesus had his disciples bring Bartimaeus up to him, and then he asked the man, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus said to him, “Rabbi, let me recover my sight.” Jesus simply said, “Go your way; your faith has made you well,” and Bartimaeus all of a sudden could see, perhaps for the first time in his life. So he joyfully left his beggar’s bowl behind and began to follow Jesus in his journeys.

What Jesus showed by healing Bartimaeus was that he was the one by whom God would fulfill the promises he had made to his people through Jeremiah. In Jesus, God was restoring sight to the blind, and he was also healing the lame, driving out demons, and giving hope to those who had none. Jeremiah had promised that God would do all of these things, and now here was a man sent from God who was finally doing them. He was doing something far greater than leading God’s people back to the Promised Land: he was defeating their spiritual enemies of sin, death, and the devil, and he was giving them the hope of eternal healing and restoration in his kingdom. And of course, the greatest miracle of all that he performed was rising from the dead on the third day after he had been crucified. He broke the chains of death and thus defeated the most powerful enemy that has plagued humanity ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the Garden. Now everyone who trusts in Jesus are heirs to the promises God makes in our text from Jeremiah, that he will gather us all together from the farthest parts of the earth and lead us along a straight path back to his kingdom. We who were once separated from God by sin and death have now been brought back to him through the work of his Son. The healing that Jesus did for Bartimaeus in our Gospel text was only a small taste of what he plans to do for his people on the last day. On that day, he will raise us all from the dead and grant us eternal life in his kingdom, and he will fix every problem, sickness, and sorrow that has ever plagued us. He is our Father, just as he was the Father of ancient Israel, and he will give us all of the blessings that he has reserved for his dear children.

Perhaps some of you out there today feel like the ancient Israelites who had been ripped from their homes, or like blind Bartimaeus who was seeking healing from Jesus. I don’t know of any exiles or blind people at our congregation, but there are plenty of us who are struggling with various things right now. Some of us may be dealing with chronic illness, and we wonder if we’re ever going to feel better. Some may be feeling very depressed, and we wonder when things are going to start looking up again. We may be having trouble making ends meet, and we wonder when financial relief will come. We may be grieving the loss of a loved one who died recently, or even a long time ago, and we wonder if we’ll ever be able to cope with our grief and move on with our lives. You don’t have to be blind or be a homeless exile to suffer; there are all kinds of ways people hurt in this life. And those situations, for us believers, often make us cry out the prayer of blind Bartimaeus: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Thankfully, though, we know that God does indeed have mercy on his faithful people. He led his people back from Babylon to the Promised Land, he sent Jesus to heal Bartimaeus of his blindness, and he anointed Jesus to die on the cross and rise again to atone for our sins and defeat the power of death. He has promised that all who trust in Jesus will inherit these same gifts of healing and restoration that he has displayed in the lives of his people. Whatever all of you may be dealing with right now, whatever you are suffering in this life, Jesus has the power to fix it. And he will fix it when he returns on the last day and raises us up to eternal life in his kingdom. No matter the problem, he is powerful enough to solve it, and he has promised us that he will when the time is right. So take heart, everyone who suffers now, and trust in Jesus Christ to bring you relief. He has proven himself willing and able to give healing to those who need it, and so we will not hesitate to ask him for whatever we need. He hears the prayers of his faithful people, and he will hear all of your prayers as well. Amen.