

“On the way” What a great name for a summer series!

When Steph and I helped pull-off last year’s youth retreat we decided to give the retreat itself a name: Entayhado... we presented it as a single word but in reality en-tay-hado is actually three Greek words which literally mean “on the way.” In his Gospel, Mark gives certain section thematic thrust through the use of time markers. For example of the 60 or so uses of the word “immediately” in the New Testament almost half occur in Mark’s first 8 chapters – in the first half of Mark virtually everything happens “immediately”, but almost nothing happens immediately in Mark’s second and final 8 chapters. Almost at the exact center of Mark’s Gospel the author changes from using “immediately” to using “en tay hado.” Now the events of the story are happening “on the way”... to Jerusalem and the empty tomb.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 contain some of Mark’s most direct and explicit instructions about **HOW** to be disciples... and these instructions happen “on the way.” We figured that’d be a great name for a youth retreat: Entayahdo... where Jesus does his most focused discipleship training. And names are important. For the first few hundred years after the industrial revolution modern names lost some of their “impact.” The weight a name carried became more about designating an individual rather than providing some insight into their identity. Ancient names, however, are far more important than mere designations of individuals, they carry and may even steer some of the identity of the individual.

This ancient wisdom can be found in other cultures’ naming traditions like that of the North American indigenous Mohegan tribe. Mohegan tribal representative Brooke Wompsi’kuk Skeesucks explained in a 2011 interview with PsychologyToday that Mohegan names adapt throughout an individual’s life. Mohegan children might receive generally descriptive names at birth but are often renamed several times throughout their life as they change. In ancient wisdom, names hint towards identity. This shows up in the Bible too when Jesus contends with a demon in Mark 5 over naming power – “What is your name” Jesus asks, and he bonechillingly replies, “My name is ‘Legion’ because ‘we are many.’” The Gospel authors work hard to give us many names for Jesus: Son of Abraham, Son of David, Immanuel (one of my favorites – Hebrew for “God with us”)... but of course the name his mother gave him is Ye’shua – “The Lord Saves.” There are hints at Jesus’ identities. There are aspirations in those names. (We’ll try to sit in that ancient wisdom today, and perhaps we too will find ourselves being renamed along the way.)

Ironically, in the same way modern names can downplay identity in their pursuit of designation, ancient names can do the opposite – downplaying designation in pursuit of identity. In other words, an ancient name can tell you the essence of a person without telling you which individual they actually are... and I think that’s precisely what happens in this morning’s passage.

Let me set the scene:

We’re in the very last story of a section of discipleship training that has all happened “on the way” to Jerusalem. The journey started 3 chapters earlier and 210 kilometers away in Mark 8:27 and Caesarea Philippi – the northern-most border of ancient Palestine, right after Jesus restored sight to a blind man. Since then, Jesus and his followers have been trekking to Jerusalem and we’ve been hearing numerous lessons, predictions, warnings, encouragements, and conflicts along the way. For instance, the story just before this has James and John approaching Jesus with a request. He responds, “what is it you want me to do for you?” They request the positions of honor at Jesus’ right and left... Then Jesus uses the ensuing conflict between the other ten apostles and James and John to teach that true greatness comes in serving and laying down one’s life. Then they come to Jericho – the last city on the way to Jerusalem... the last scene in Mark’s Entayhado section, and, just as it began, the section concludes with a blind man in need of healing.

By the end of this encounter, Jesus will have mercifully healed a blind begger who was persistent in his pursuit of Jesus despite the opposition of the crowd. But, as always, the more we dig into this text, the more beautiful it becomes. In fact, my favorite Markan scholar, Tim Geddert, author of our commentary on Mark and to whom I’m deeply indebted for this morning’s sermon places this story near the very top of his favorites for how it demonstrates Mark’s theological and literary brilliance. If God grants us Bartimaeus-like attentiveness perhaps, like him, we’ll see too!

Here's how Mark sets up the story:

“As they were leaving [Jericho], the Son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind begger, was sitting by the roadside.”

The son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus... the NRSV as well as most modern translations reverse Mark's order of names. Most of the time you'll see it translated: “Bartimaeus, the Son of Timaeus...” but Mark actually ordered it the other way around.

“As they were leaving [Jericho], the Son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind begger, was sitting by the roadside.”

So, we know he's a beggar... a shameful - but in this case an understandable- occupation given his society's limitations and inability to accommodate those who are blind. There are few choices available to him aside from begging. **BUT today will be different!** Today he'll see an new opportunity come down the road. The Son of David, Jesus, is walking by.

And again, our modern translations reverse it. You're more likely to find it translated, “When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” But when Bartimaeus recognizes that it's Jesus coming down the way, Mark says that he shouts, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!” He calls out with one of Jesus' identifying titles first, then Jesus' name. I wonder why Mark wants title to precede name.

Presumably he's sat outside the Jericho gates often using his voice, pleading for people to “have mercy on him,” using his ears, listening for the plink of change to land on his cloak, which he'd have spread out to collect enough coins to live off. Everyday he'd pull the cloak in, listening and feeling to make sure not to drop a precious one. **But today will be different...** today he uses his voice to call out to the Son of David, Jesus; uses his ears to listen beyond those trying to silence him to hear Jesus say “call him here.”

Mark can't resist a little irony when the crowd which had been trying to muffle Bartimaeus' enthusiasm now says to him, “Be enthused! Take heart!” as if he needed the encouragement. Then comes another example of literary beauty...

So, throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

Throwing off his cloak doesn't quite convey the power of the moment. Mark literally writes, “completely abandoning his cloak” he sprang up and came to Jesus.

The cloak... this beggar's most cherish possession... it's his meal ticket. Like the fishermen in Jesus' group, this beggar would've used his cloak everyday, his whole career, to catch and haul in his daily income. Bartimaeus' cloak is what nets are to Peter, what Zebedee was to James and John, what the tax-booth was to Levi... the cloak is his life. And like them, without hesitation – purely on the invitation to be with Jesus – before any miracles... the cloak is abandoned. I wonder if perhaps Bartimaeus believes that regardless of how the next few minutes go, he sees no point in keeping the cloak.

When he arrives, Jesus asks him, “What is it you want me to do for you?”

... the exact same question Jesus posed to James and John in the preceding story. But that's not the only connection... there's a bigger theme playing out over these two stories and it all has to do with honor and identities.

If I asked how many individuals are named in verse 46, it's very tempting to answer “two!” Bartimaeus, the blind beggar; and his father Timaeus. But maybe Mark is doing more than designating individuals... Mark may be identifying who this blind beggar truly **IS**, as a character,... he's a “Son of Timaeus.” Now that doesn't mean much to us... it still sounds like we got the name of the beggar's father, but that's largely because we don't speak Greek (and our Biblical translators thought Timaeus is the name of the beggar's father).

Timaeus is, itself, a Greek word – a Greek word which means “honor.” Anyone have a friend name “Timothy”? The name “Timothy” means “honorable.” Rather than telling us the name of the beggar's father, perhaps Mark is telling us what

this begger's deep, ancient identity truly is. If it's an identity trait and not a "designation" then the verse would translate like this:

"As they were leaving [Jericho], a son of honor, Bartimaeus, a blind begger, was sitting by the roadside."

By the way, it's "by the way." That's where this son of honor, Bartimaeus, is literally sitting... not "en tay hado" but "para tay hado"... not "on the way" but "beside the way."

Now this is more than a story about persistence or Jesus healing blindness... it's an echo of the previous story. James and John come to Jesus with a request. "What is it you want me to do for you?" They want the positions of honor. HERE... beside the way, there sits a "son of honor"... Bartimaeus... so let's all watch what this son of honor actually does! There's no shame too great to overcome him... no cost he won't pay... no risk he won't take to be with Jesus... the Son of David and the Son of... Timaeus... two titles! So, he gets the same question from Jesus, "what is it you want me to do for you?"

Maybe... ..maybe it is his father's name and the whole thing is just poetic. We have family friends who have a daughter named "Grace." We have another family friend named "Faith." They're both gracious and faithful. Sometimes people just have serendipitous names. But I don't put it past Mark to draw the connection. In fact, I don't put it past Mark to make a completely different point entirely. For instance:

Perhaps the begger isn't even named "Bartimaeus!" This possibility is harder to see, not because we don't know Greek, but because we don't know Aramaic! Just as "Timaeus" means honor in Greek, "bar" means "Son of" in Aramaic! Mark might simply be translating between Greek and Aramaic:

"As they were leaving [Jericho], a son of honor, (Bar-honor), a blind begger, was sitting by the roadside."

Mark translates between Greek and Aramaic several times in his Gospel. When Jesus resuscitates a 12-year old girl he says, "Talatha cum" ... and - perhaps so we won't think those are "magical words" - Mark specifies that "talatha cum" mean "little girl, get up." Jesus' final words from the cross are a quotation from Psalm 22 in Aramaic, "eloi, eloi lema sabachthani" which Mark seems to translate for us so we'll know why the bystanders thought he was calling for Elijah. Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane includes an Aramaic word "abba" which Mark tells us means "father." So it's not abnormal for Mark to translate between Greek and Aramaic... what **would** be abnormal is for Mark to tell us the name of someone Jesus healed. Throughout the entire Gospel of Mark no recipient of Jesus' healing ever gets named... Bartimaeus would be the first, last, and only...

Maybe Mark names him... ..maybe today is different and the whole thing is serendipitous. Can you believe it!? Just after an episode about honor... here's a guy who's dad is named "honor" and his name... "Son of honor," how cool! Maybe... But maybe we see a blind begger, beside the way, and this man encapsulates honor... a true son of honor. So watch this:

Persistence, calling, request, response, healing... (by the way, this begger is the only other person besides Mary Magdalene to call Jesus "rabbi"), and then what happens next? How does this episode end?

What a way to bring this segment to a close. After the section in which things happened "immediately" This section, where discipleship training happens "on the way"... a section preceded by the healing of a blind man and kicked off by Jesus' most explicit directive for would-be disciples to "follow him," Mark concludes this story and section with:

Immediately (ah... Mark...)... immediately he regained his sight and followed him... en tay hado. (You see why I love Mark?)

So... where's this landing with you? Who are we in the story? Where are we in relationship to "the way?" Are we on it? Beside it? Moving towards it or away? What's the thing that defines us... what's our name... At what points during our presence in the world are we like Jesus – pausing to bless? When are we like the crowd – blocking the way? what's our

“cloak?” The items or ideas which we rely on to anchor us but also threaten to entrap us? (Personally, I wonder if it’s our view of the Bible as threatening because it’s been used so often and powerfully to threaten, that we miss its beauty and power to emancipate.) When are we like the beggar – shamelessly persistent in our pursuit of Jesus? You know... like what’s his name... the Son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus.

If that’s actually his name at all.

Alright... we could leave it there... but I’m not persuaded we’ve actually touched the rest of this story. If you’ll be children of grace for a for more moments, let’s conclude by asking one final question... what really IS the point if we don’t actually know the beggar’s name? If Mark’s just translating between Greek and Aramaic, explaining the beggar is a “Son of Honor” in both languages... why? What’s the point of telling us that “bar” means “son of?” “Bar” isn’t some kind of magic word like “talatha cum”... it’s not clearing up a misunderstanding like why people thought Jesus called for Elijah at his death... if anything it produces a misunderstanding. Why do we need to know that “bar” means “son of” in Aramaic?

Perhaps it has to do with where this is all headed... to Jerusalem... to the cross... and exactly whose cross that is. James and John want the positions of honor to Jesus’ right and left. But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking... to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” A few chapters later, Jesus is crucified, “The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right... and one on his left... he was derided... and they made fun of his name... yeshua, “The Lord Saves.” “He saved others; he cannot save himself.” Mark tells us it was 9am.

Just a few verses earlier in the chapter however, when Mark tells us it was 6am... no more than three hours prior, Jesus’ cross was meant for someone else... a man with a different name than “the Lord saves.” At 6am that good, Friday morning... the cross Jesus hangs on was destined for a man named Barabbas.

... and maybe that’s why Mark thought it’d be important to know that “Bar” means “son of...” So that we might see through Bartimaeus eyes – how a man named Ye’shua saves... first by taking on the destiny for someone identified as “Bar...abbas.” Then by making “Bar...abba” the name... the identity... God gives to each of us. May we live into it... entayhado.