

## CAUTION TO THE WIND

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Grace Church in New York  
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*And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."  
(Mark 10:49)*

Last Tuesday the New York Daily News ran an opinion column in the sports section. The author, a Wallace Matthews, had the audacity to suggest that in the current World Series, both Yankees and Mets fans could unite in rooting for the Dodgers over the Red Sox. Matthews argues that since the Red Sox are the archrival of the Yankees, the choice is clear for those whose affections lie with the Bronx Bombers. I don't claim to speak for Yankees fans because I am not one of them. But as for Mets fans rooting for the Dodgers, Matthews is out of his mind. He calls the Dodgers the grandfather of the Mets. I'm sorry, but the Dodgers are nothing more than the team that tore the heart out of Brooklyn when they departed for Los Angeles. If they are a father at all, they are like the father who deserted his adoring wife and children to run off into the arms of a Hollywood lover. Root for the Dodgers? Never.

What is more, the current Dodger's roster includes a particularly unlikable character who will remain anonymous, except that his initials are Justin Turner. Justin Turner used to play for the Mets. One day some years ago the four of us went out to see a Mets game. The boys were much younger then. They wore their Mets gear, and because we had great seats at field level behind the Mets' dugout, they even brought their mitts in hopes of catching a ball. Before the game we saw the blessed David Wright, then in his prime, out by first base doing his stretches. Luke threw caution to the wind and excitedly waved to him. When David Wright saw this little kid in the stands trying to get his attention, he pointed right at Luke and waved back. It was like being singled out and blessed by a god!

Then between innings we noticed that some younger fans would go down to the dugout, hold up their mitts, and shout, "Here, here" in hopes that one of the players would toss them a ball. We encouraged Luke to give it a try. For reasons that I don't recall, Justin Turner was the one lobbing the baseballs to the fans. He threw them to kids and adults. He threw them this way and that way. He threw them everywhere except to Luke, who was right in front of him. Inning after inning it was as if he were trying deliberately to deny Luke a baseball. So now Justin Turner stars for the Dodgers, and he sports an outrageous beard that makes him look like a mountain man. Root for the Dodgers, the team that turned its back on Gotham, God, and goodness so that Justin Turner can wear a World Series ring? Never.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark reminds me of our day at the ballpark. Mark introduces us to a man named Bartimaeus of Jericho. It would be understandable to say that the universe had conspired against tossing any good fortune in the direction of Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus was blind, which in first century Palestine meant that unless he had a wealthy family to take care of him, he could do little other than beg for a living. To make matters worse, in those days people generally believed that bad things happened to bad people. The blind were blind, the sick were sick, and the orphans were orphans because someone had sinned. Bartimaeus was blind, they figured, because he himself, his father Timaeus, or some other member of the family had grievously broken a commandment or two. Thus, since God was punishing sin through Bartimaeus' blindness, people would be reluctant to help. To do so would be interfering with God's justice.

Nevertheless, Bartimaeus' luck was about to change. As he sat by the roadside begging from people entering and leaving Jericho, he heard that Jesus of Nazareth would be passing by. I note, with amusement, the way Mark describes Jesus' visit to Jericho: *He came to Jericho; and as he was leaving Jericho.* That's it. He came, he left – which doesn't say much for the cultural attractions of Jericho. No sights to see. No local cuisine to sample. No important people to meet. Jesus came to Jericho, he left Jericho. It would be a short visit; Bartimaeus would have to act fast. So he threw caution to the wind and shouted for Jesus to have mercy. "Here, here," he must have cried. The people around Bartimaeus rebuked him. They told him to be quiet and mind his place. But Jesus heard him. Jesus saw him. Suddenly the townspeople did an about-face and said to Bartimaeus, "*Take heart; get up, he is calling you.*" For Bartimaeus, the words must have been as if a god had singled him out for a blessing. He threw off the only possession he had, his beggar's cloak, and came to Jesus.

Imagine: after a lifetime of misfortune, now Bartimaeus stood before Jesus and heard the Lord of life ask him an extraordinary question: *What do you want me to do for you?* How would you respond? When Jesus recently put the same question to his disciples, James and John asked for power and influence (Mark 10:37). Others might say health, or wealth in the form of that winning lottery ticket, or true love, or perhaps even the return of a departed family member who died prematurely. What would you say? What is the thing that inhibits you from living fully into the person you believe God created you to be? Bartimaeus didn't need to think about it at all: *My teacher, let me see again.* You heard what happened next. Jesus said, "*Go, your faith has made you well.*" Immediately Bartimaeus received his sight. "Immediately" is Mark's favorite word. What's the take-away here? It's neither the healing itself, nor the miraculous timing of "immediately." Rather it's something about Bartimaeus' faith that Mark wants us to emulate. Bartimaeus chose faith, threw caution to the wind, and received his heart's desire.

In today's Old Testament reading from the Book of Job (42:1-17), we can detect a similar dynamic. Many of us know the story of Job. Job was a man who had it all: wealth, health, and a fine family. Job's enviable state was a clear sign that God was tossing blessings his way, and in abundance. Then chaos intruded in his life, suddenly and violently. In a rapid series of calamities Job lost all of his wealth and his children. Soon Job grew seriously and painfully ill himself. He became like Bartimaeus: one from whom the blessings of life were denied. Why do bad things happen to good people? Well, reasoned the friends of Job, bad things don't happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. The friends counseled that God was withholding blessings and fortunes from Job because of sin. Job had broken the Commandments of Moses and the only way he could beat back the chaos and regain God's favor would be to repent of the wrongs he surely must have committed.

Job would have none of his friends' spiritual direction. Indeed, throughout the forty-two chapters of the book that bears his name, we hear Job's denouncing his friends' anemic attempts to explain the mystery of suffering. He had done nothing wrong to bring such misery on himself. We even hear Job's throwing caution to the wind and raging against God for the way God was running the universe. What would Job want God to do for him if God so asked? We can imagine the list: health, wealth, and family restored. And one more thing: an explanation. "Here, here," Job cried out in prayer to God. "Toss me the ball. Tell me why you are treating me unjustly." Job was simply not going to sit quietly along the roadway of despair. Therefore, Job is a role model of faith for us, as is Bartimaeus. Job chose faith, and clung to the notion that God not only should, but would restore his favor. He declared (19:25): *I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger.* The reading we heard today is the very ending of Job's book. It's a happy ending. We hear how God restored the

fortunes of this ranting, raving person of faith. Granted, Job never received quite the explanation he demanded; the mystery of suffering remains a mystery, and the Book of Job is an enigma in its own right. But God came through in the end with blessing upon blessing.

You may think it's an awkward transition to pivot now to the business at hand that is Pledge Sunday. Bear with me; the fun is only just beginning! Every year at this time we encourage all members and friends of Grace Church to make a pledge, or promise of financial support for the coming year. Therefore, on this 28<sup>th</sup> day of October in 2018 we launch the 2019 annual campaign. To this end we've mailed out letters and brochures, and in case you've haven't paid attention to your conventional mail, we've peppered the pews with more of the same. Today, and if not today, then in the days and weeks to come, my hope is that you will give prayerful attention to a financial gift that is faithful and sacrificial. We ask you to put a number on it even now so that all of us can plan: both you and your church. We all need to operate on budget.

The budget of Grace Church on its revenue side is like a three-legged stool. The three legs are a responsible draw on the endowment, rental income, and annual giving. These three provide us with the resources we need to do the work we believe God calls us to do. So every gift is vitally important, yours and mine, whether you are a college student or a hedge fund manager. I could go on at length about the budget, and how your giving helps the church shine the light of Christ into a dark and angry time in our nation's history. Once again, yesterday in Pittsburgh, chaos of a Jobian proportion burst suddenly and violently into a peaceful gathering. This happened at the end of week in which numerous pipe bombs were mailed to various elected officials and outspoken persons. Meanwhile the homeless languish in despair on city streets. Now more than ever faith communities like ours need to let our light shine to counter the hate and hopelessness.

But instead of talking about the budget and the work of the church, even more, our challenge today is to claim Bartimaeus and Job as our peculiar role models of faith. Both chose faith over fear. Both persisted with God through suffering. Both held nothing back, and even threw caution and decorum to the wind until God would bless them. So with your pledge, stand and shout like Bartimaeus. Rant and rave like Job. With your pledge, speak bold words of thanksgiving to God for all the blessings of this life. Let your pledge declare that you know your Redeemer lives, whom you expect to see at some latter day, and not as a stranger. Set your pledge in the context of your faith. Be like Bartimaeus and Job and say, "Here, here! Throw me the ball!"

Finally, as you might expect, the story of our day at the ballpark some years ago has a concluding chapter to it (and I do have Luke's permission to tell you these things). Luke persisted for nine innings in his quest to obtain a major league baseball. Did Justin Turner, now the Dodger, ever toss such a blessing his way? No, he did not. But then in the middle of the ninth inning, suddenly and miraculously, someone else did. A man named Tom Goodwin, who at the time was the first-base coach of the Mets, spied Luke by the dugout, heard his shouts of "here, here," and tossed a ball directly into his mitt. Luke was so moved that he wrote a thank-you note to Tom Goodwin the very next day.

I should add here that today, Tom Goodwin is no longer the first-base coach of the New York Mets. Tom Goodwin happens to be the first-base coach of the Boston Red Sox. It would please me no end to see a World Series championship ring on that lovely man's finger.

Likewise, the annual campaign is an opportunity for us to praise God, from whom all blessings flow. It is an opportunity to write a thank-you note to our Redeemer, who lives. Go ahead. Throw caution to the wind and make a pledge – or raise your pledge – so that the words spoken to Bartimaeus can be ours as well: "*Take heart; get up, he is calling you.*"