

## THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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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." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. (Mark 10:49-50)*

Of all the things going on in the world, the recent news story to catch my attention was the one about the wild elk with the car tire around its neck.<sup>1</sup> It was over two years ago when residents of a small town in rural Colorado began calling in reports of the animal's predicament. Apparently, when the elk was younger and still growing out its antlers, it had come across a discarded tire in the wilderness. Something about the tire proved alluring to the elk, so irresistible, in fact, that it pressed its head through the center of it. From an elk's point of view it must have seemed like a good idea at the time. But the tire promptly slid down the animal's neck and became stuck. Unable to shake off the tire or lift it over its head and antlers, the elk stoically carried on with the business of being an elk as best as it possibly could.

Meanwhile, the strange sightings of an elk with a tire around its neck continued. Video cameras posted along trails even recorded occasional film of the animal lumbering through the woods. Officials from the Colorado Parks and Wildlife department wanted to help, but they knew it would take several close-up shots from a tranquilizer gun to immobilize the six-hundred pound creature long enough to free it. Finally, the opportunity presented itself when the elk wandered right into the front yard of a wildlife official. The officer texted a colleague who rushed over with the necessary equipment. After one successful shot of a tranquilizer dart, the chase was on. Forty-five minutes and a few darts later, down went the beast. The tire turned out to be a steel-belted radial that broke the saw blade. The only way to remove it would be to cut the elk's antlers with another saw. This they did and at last lifted the tire over the elk's head, just as the animal was awakening. It stood up and stumbled off into the woods, unsteady on its feet. The elk's newly found lightness of being must have been amazing, even disconcerting. At least, that is my theory about the elk.

Strangely, today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (10:46-52) reminds me of the elk. Mark tells us about Bartimaeus of Jericho, who wore the weight of existence on his shoulders like a yoke around an animal's neck. Bartimaeus' burdens were physical, social, and even theological. It began with his blindness, which would mean he couldn't work and likely would have to beg. What is more, in those days people generally assumed that bad things happened to bad people. The blind were blind, the sick were sick, and the widows were widows because someone sinned. Bartimaeus was blind, they would have reasoned, because either he or his father Timaeus, or some other family member had broken a serious commandment or two. Thus, since God was punishing sin through Bartimaeus' blindness, people would have been reluctant to help. To do so would be to interfere with God's justice. So the sightings of Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside wearing the weight of blindness, poverty, and sin, would have continued. But no one could or would have done anything about it.

Nevertheless, Bartimaeus was about to have a lucky day. Jesus was in town, passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. As he was leaving a great crowd was following him. They went by Bartimaeus and the blind man cried out, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*" The grace of God in the story is not only that Jesus heard the cries of Bartimaeus, but *stopped and said, "Call him."* So the people *called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is*

*calling you.*” Bartimaeus sprang up and came to Jesus. We’ve heard how Jesus restored the blind man’s sight and rescued him in every way so that he could follow Jesus out of Jericho, out of the predicament in which he was trapped. But Mark includes one detail in the story that we should not overlook. When Jesus called to Bartimaeus, the blind man threw off his cloak before coming to Jesus. The cloak may have been a beggar’s cloak, symbolic of his status. It was probably his only possession apart from the clothes on his back. Nevertheless, he threw it aside to answer the gracious call of Jesus. It’s almost as if the cloak was the thing weighing him down, hindering his approach to Jesus. So Bartimaeus took it off, cast it aside, let it go. Bartimaeus’ newly found lightness of being must have been amazing, even disconcerting.

What do you think: Do we resemble Bartimaeus? Or are we more like the elk? It’s true that Bartimaeus was incapable of casting off the mantle of his blindness, just as the elk could not free itself from the tire. But the one thing Bartimaeus was able to throw off, he did. In so doing, Mark presents him as a role model, even a foil to the rich, young, ruler whom we heard about two weeks ago (Mark 10:17-31). If you recall, that other young man came to Jesus wondering what he could do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to “go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow me.” But the rich, young, ruler went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions. Jesus concluded that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for one who has riches to enter the kingdom of God. Or how about this: it would be easier for the elk to extract its head from the tire than for one who has riches to enter the kingdom of God.

We tend to be like the elk. We tend to be like the rich, young, ruler. We have many possessions that own us as much as we own them. Clothing, shoes, books, homes, cars: acquiring it all seemed like a good idea at the time. So we wear them as status symbols, markers of our identity. If you see the pictures, you have to admit that the tire around the elk’s neck distinguished him from all the others in the herd. Such a fashion accessory could not have been easy to find, and was rather fetching in a peculiar way. However, what the wildlife officials discovered in removing the tire was that over time the inside of it had accumulated dirt, debris, and putrid mystery moisture that increased its weight. To me, the elk presents a parable of how our relationship to the material order goes awry. The things we once found irresistible pile up where moth and rust corrupt. “Who will rescue me from this body of death,” wrote St. Paul in considering his own predicament (Romans 7:24). “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord,” is what he concluded. “Thanks be to God through the wildlife officials,” is what the elk would have written if an elk could write. At least, that is my theory about the elk.

Now bring all this to bear on the business at hand today. As you know, today is Pledge Sunday. 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 24<sup>th</sup> day of October in 2021 we launch the 2022 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 salted the pews with more of the same. The chase is on! 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 a 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 open the Broadway doors during a fearful time in our nation’s history. But instead of talking about the budget and the work

of the church, even more, our challenge today is to claim Bartimaeus as our peculiar role model of faith.

What is it that's special about Bartimaeus? Why should we emulate him? Quite simply, because Bartimaeus recognized the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. Somehow he discerned that the call of Jesus was a call to life, but to answer it, he would have to fling off his cloak. It was all that he had and it may have been comfortable, but in order to receive the new life that was on offer, he had to let go of the old security blanket. I like to think that the Pledge Campaign (in which the Waring household participates, by the way) is an annual opportunity for us to hear with new clarity the voice of Jesus calling us to life. It is an invitation for us to experience the lightness of being, which is a phrase we might use to describe certain aspects of eternal life. In the kingdom of God, instead of being weighed down by worry and anxiety over money and possessions, the promise instead is to experience a lightness of being. Bartimaeus “sprang up” and came to Jesus.

Lately I've been foretasting the lightness of being that Bartimaeus experienced when he threw off his cloak. Stacie and I have lived in the Grace Church rectory now for seventeen years. When we moved in our two sons were just five and two years old. Now they are in college. The house is such that as the years go on it's easy to put accumulating possessions in a closet, or the basement, or the attic, close the door and forget about them. We've suspected for some time that a mounting decluttering task awaited us. We were sorrowful because we had many possessions – too many, in fact, that we no longer needed but that someone else could use. Well, this past summer we finally began to get serious about it. We've been loading up boxes and boxes of clothes, shoes, toys, books, knick-knacks, working appliances, and other household items.

Whenever we have four or five boxes ready to go, I strap them to a hand-truck using bungee cords and wheel the load over to Goodwill on 8<sup>th</sup> Street. I love going to Goodwill! It's a wonderful, benevolent organization, and donating things there is nothing short of good, clean fun. At the drop-off door you put your items on a chute and slide them down to the basement. Away they go – no questions asked! Let me tell you: it's a beautiful feeling to let go of possessions. The lightness of being is palpable. I walk home again, wheeling the empty hand truck, with a spring in my step.

The elk walked home again into the woods. Shorn of some antlers and free from the tire around its neck that had weighed him down for years, the elk must have experienced a lightness of being that it could scarcely recall. In the weeks since, wildlife officials report that they have wondered how the elk is faring. “Been keeping my eyes out,” said one of the officials involved in the rescue. “We want to make sure he will do well.”

Strange as it may sound, the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Department's continuing concern for this one wild animal reminds me of how much more God cares for us. We heard the prophet Jeremiah (31:7-9) speak the promise of God to the people in exile and despair: *I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.* Such a promise is good news for you, me, Bartimaeus, the rich young ruler, and even an elk.

Take heart; get up, Jesus is calling you.

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<sup>1</sup> “Elk With Tire Stuck Around Neck Is Finally Freed,” by Christine Hauser. *The New York Times*, October 13, 2021.