My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our God of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, God of our dreams and hopes and possibilities for justice, peace, compassion, and mercy, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

All of the usual healing story elements are present here. Someone has an ailment, this person has been unable to find a solution, and Jesus provides the cure. But this story is different. Earlier in Mark (8:22–26), another blind man is healed, but that man is passive and unnamed. Here, we have both a name, Bartimaeus, and that same man who is shouting for Jesus’ attention.

Bartimaeus had a role in Biblical Judea. It was a role as a blind man, to be barely seen and not often heard. His quiet presence should remind pious community members of their obligation to give alms; he does not have a right to be obtrusive. He is allowed to beg but not to badger.

Yet Bartimaeus cries out, and then he cries out even louder when he’s told to be quiet. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”, he says. It’s unclear whether it is the volume, the desperation, or the specifics of his words that stop Jesus. But Jesus stops and commands that the man be called.

The transformation of Bartimaeus begins before he is given sight. Yes, he ends up receiving a physical healing in this encounter with Jesus, but before he’s healed, he is able to perceive Jesus more clearly than almost anyone else Jesus has encountered in Mark’s Gospel up to this point.

Notice that Bartimaeus is told that it is “Jesus of Nazareth” who is coming by—a title that identifies Jesus only by his peasant hometown. But when Bartimaeus cries out he says, “Jesus, son of David”—identifying Jesus by his messianic designation. So far in Mark, no one else has been able to perceive Jesus this well with so little data. This is the only passage in which the title “son of David” appears in the Gospel of Mark, and it’s worth noting that Jesus does not silence him. Mark’s Jesus, who has been so secretive about his identity, not only allows Bartimaeus to refer to him this way but rewards him with sight. “Your faith has healed you”, Jesus says.

The Bible doesn’t record our guy JC answering a lot of questions or engaging in small talk. He didn’t give explanations for why he did what he did. We know he pushed the limits of societal norms, and he gave folks with power fits over their rules, expectations, and rituals for rituals’ sake. He didn’t know his place, this guy without proper rabbi papers from that town of Nazareth from which nothing good ever comes. He loved playing tricks on the seriously churchy ones who tried to attack his faith by turning questions around, dodging them altogether, or answering questions with questions of his own that stunned all who heard his words. His reward for getting people to go deeper with God? They killed him for it.

We often conflate faith and belief. Belief for my parents, and maybe yours too, meant knowing the Bible, knowing what God asked of us, and knowing what God wanted you to believe. Knowing the Bible and what it said was central to relationship with God and being able to know how others also lived their lives in God’s sight.

They, and we, valued knowing, comprehending, and solving quandaries about God. Our reformed church tradition put these values center stage, emphasizing preaching, sola scriptura and study, and credos. And better schools and more books gave us the opportunity to learn even more about God on our terms. Even in seminary, there is this thing called systematic theology, which aims to put Christian truth and doctrine into a self-consistent predictive model, where any one things points to something else. We can know God if we just are logical about it all.

But our modern world has changed our relationship to knowledge and learning. We can now find anything about anything, and not have to have the answer at our fingertips. Maybe the good news about our Christian life and faith today is less about knowing and re-engaging our relationship to awe, what our parents called “the fear of God”, and what I call “God is bigger than that”.

The word know could mean “to be acquainted with”. But we probably mean it to be having practical knowledge of an object or subject. But can we really know God? The mind of God? What can we know about God? St Augustine said “if you understand it, it’s not God”.

If there’s anything I’d like to leave you with as you journey through Advent and into winter darkness, it’s that there is value in not having it all figured out, and not knowing is okay. Knowledge is good, but it doesn’t invite wonder or contemplation in a way that leads to loving the mystery, the beauty, and the delight of the big-ness of God’s grace. It’s a way of embracing prayer and letting go of our assumptions, opinions, and conclusions to free us to new possibility, and with it, compassion for others and their new ideas.

If we can meet each moment with openness and curiosity rather than a threat to our ways of doing things or how our trusted patterns of thought and movement, we can move forward even when it seems like we want to return to a more familiar, safe time in our memory. “I don’t know” can make space for those who enter our church from new places and traditions. New space for our minds and the world as it is, right now, in that person sitting across from us at coffee hour. “I don’t know” is loving our neighbor, and might be the truest creed we have right now in 2024.

To become loving and wise people of God, we may need to let go of knowing, not hiding in ignorance but also no longer defending our righteousness. Remember what Jesus did with those folks. And more importantly, what those who knew everything did to him.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Bartimaeus’ faith healed him. But what makes faith *faith* is not that we know God or comprehend what just happened. We don’t get clear answers to life’s existential questions, although there’s plenty of churches who will give you a creed to say so or a pithy Joel Osteen quote to live by. We too often make God into an idol because we have eyes that have seen what we want, not what God does, and we too often make God in our image, not the other way around.

When Job wonders why all that awful stuff happens to him, God doesn’t give explanations. God tells Job that’s not his to know. The “I don’t know” gap is this prayer and confession to not give up, but witness that only God will fill that gap in our relationship with the divine, and not the other way around. The surprise of not knowing, just going someplace new with a bestie you trust, can capture the delight that is our God, who has given us all the teachings we need to pray, see, hear, and serve this beautiful creation. And just like Bartimaeus did, may we follow God with new eyes this day and each day.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.