Would you be willing to use your imagination for a moment this morning? Close your eyes. Keep them closed for a minute. Feel the darkness enfold you? Do you feel the images and sights that surrounded you a moment ago begin to withdraw? How does that feel? Perhaps it relaxes some of you. For others, the lack of your usual sensory overload may help you focus your mind, and become more present in this time of worship before God. There is certainly something to be said for a time of quiet reflection, momentarily unplugged from the bright world of continuous visual input.

But what about if you had to go the rest of the day with your eyes closed? Forced to navigate your way home in the dark, to prepare and eat your meals without the help of eyesight, and to spend the rest of the day cut off from sight of the smiling faces of your family, the beauty of nature, and the simple delight of reading a book or watching a TV show as the evening came? Now the darkness becomes a burden, turning the
familiar world of your home into a foreign land. And even worse, imagine if you were unable to open your eyes for the rest of your life, forced to spend the rest of your days in a continual pitch-dark night. Now the darkness begins to close in, to suffocate, to oppress, doesn’t it?

Think about it. Imagine a life in total darkness. Overwhelming, isn’t it? Yet this is the very experience for 40 million people in the world today. And according to the World Health Organization, another 245 million people on our planet are severely visually impaired—making a total of almost one-third of a billion people worldwide, who cannot see! Imagine if you could not open your eyes this morning. That is the reality of life for millions of our global neighbors today, and everyday. Of course, let’s be quick to recognize that some people who cannot see have nevertheless found ways to live remarkable and productive lives. The names of famous musicians Ray Charles and Andrea Boccelli; and just earlier this year, the talented and beautiful Connor Boss, who placed third in the Miss Florida Pageant, come to our minds. These heroic and exceptional people remind us that, as tragic
and challenging as blindness may be, it is not enough to silence or sideline a great soul. But what if it was you living in the darkness? How would you cope? What would you give, or what would you do to regain your sight?

If you haven’t done so already, open your eyes. Look around. Take in the light, the myriad images of the sighted world around you. Wow, that feels good doesn’t it? Makes you want to pause and thank God for a gift usually taken lightly, doesn’t it? Go ahead, take a moment in the silent sanctuary of your heart to thank God for the remarkable and beautiful gift of sight.

This exercise of imagination helps us enter the world of our Gospel for today; to glimpse a bit of the pathos, the urgency, and the wonder of the story Saint Mark tells us. Bartimaeus was blind. We do not know if he was blind since birth, or if his blindness was due to injury or illness. But this we know about Bartimaeus, his blindness had reduced him to begging in order to survive. His was a world without modern medical
care, without Social Security, without handicap accessibility. So he
scratches out a meager living squatting beside the road often traveled by
those who were on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Beggars
soon learned that the sighted religious folk who usually ignored them
and passed them by, might be a bit less “blind” to their plight on their
way to, or from, worship. Life for Bartimaeus was a marginal existence
on the edge of the sighted highway, so close he could hear the laughter
of the sighted passersby, he could smell the fragrance of their good life;
but alas, that world was just out of his reach, passing him by.

And then it all changed. Jesus walked down the road where
Bartimaeus had staked out his spot. Just how Bartimaeus knew about
Jesus, we do not know. Perhaps he overheard the excited chatter of the
pilgrims that day, or maybe he had heard the rumors of how Jesus had
healed lepers, cast out evil spirits, and most important of all, how he had
even restored sight to the blind. But we do know that when Jesus and
his entourage drew within earshot, Bartimaeus decided this was his last
shot, his only shot, to join the sighted world. So with uncharacteristic
boldness, the beggar shouted in the direction of the sound surrounding Jesus, risking the heckling and silencing forces of those who managed the crowd around our Lord. Like ushers trying to maintain proper decorum in church, they tried to get Bartimaeus to stop his frantic urgent yelling. But to no avail. Bartimaeus couldn’t afford to be polite, or courteous. Sometimes profound urgency trumps good manners. Like emergency vehicles who deliberately disobey normal traffic rules in order to save a life, Bartimaeus knew this was a matter of life and death, of light and darkness. We can’t blame him, can we? Remember how the darkness felt for us just a few minutes ago?

When Jesus stopped the crowd, and turned toward this beggar who had interrupted the parade, Bartimaeus wasted no time making his way in the darkness toward the sound of the inviting voice of Christ. Saint Mark tells us that he even left his cloak behind. Bartimaeus left his one and only possession, his cloak, which was his protection from the elements, and his one piece of human dignity. And in this single and bold act of faith, leaving everything behind, Bartimaeus bet his entire
life on the hope that Jesus was worth trusting. Like a baseball player attempting to steal second base, stepping off the safety of first base, and running across that 90 feet of uncertain and unsafe space toward second, or a cliff diver jumping way out into the air toward the water way below his feet, Bartimaeus had no back-up plan. When you think about it, is there any other way to come to Jesus? Not really.

And this boldness and trust is precisely what Jesus blessed, saying to Baritmaeus that his faith had saved him. How do think Bartimaeus felt when Jesus restored his sight? It must have been beyond words, don’t you think? We get a clue how he felt by watching what Bartimaeus did next. With his new sight, he did not go back for his cloak, or to pick up his begging money. He did not even go back home. He followed Jesus “on the way,” as Mark put it. On the way to Jerusalem, on the way to a cross, on the way to the moment when the Light of the World would face the forces of darkness at their worst, and vanquish them for good. Curing the blindness of one beggar was just the opening skirmish, foreshadowing the great battle, and the greater
victory against the darkness, that lay just ahead “on the way” just one week away. Thanks be to God!