*“Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more (Mark 10:48).”*

In the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, which was based on a 1938 play, Ingrid Bergman plays a wife whose husband attempts to convince that she is insane. When she notices that he has dimmed the gaslights (hence, the title) that illuminate their house, he tells her that she is imagining things—that the lights are as bright as ever. He offensively insults her but later denies having said anything. He kicks her legs when she sits on a couch but later denies having touched her. Reeling from the contradictions between his actions, his words, and her perception, she struggles with the thought that her mind may in fact be unraveling. Since then, psychologists have used the term “gaslighting” to describe how some people destabilize and control others by manipulating and overriding their perception of reality. There are a number of ways this can be done. Supposed there is a couple—it could be husband and wife, parent and child, or even pastor and congregation—and one says to the other, “I’ve always wanted to visit the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Let’s go.” If the other is a gaslighter, he or she would say, “The Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio! You don’t want to go to the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Only losers want to go to Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. And besides, when was the last time you asked me what I wanted to do? Why are you so terrible to me? What’s wrong with you?” In this gaslighting situation, some people will wonder whether, in fact, they do want to go to the Football Hall of Fame in Canton Ohio after all, and whether they are actually being selfish for saying what they want. Among other pernicious techniques, the most wicked is to trivialize a person’s thoughts, feelings, and requests: to treat the person as being so unimportant or stupid that it would be better for the him simply to remain silent. As a result, the victim so constantly second-guesses himself and undervalues his needs that he simply surrenders his will to his antagonist. Psychologists say that if we want to resist gaslighting (other than simply ending the relationship—which, sadly, is often necessary) we must insist that our experiences and desires are real and legitimate, we must walk away from any argument with those who would control us, and we must seek support and validation from other caring people. In short, if a gaslighter seeks to silence us, we need to speak, and to speak boldly.

Today’s Gospel reading can be understood as a lesson in gaslighting, what we need to resist it, and what freedom from it looks like. Traveling to Jerusalem, Jesus and His disciples pass through the ancient town of Jericho. A large mixture of Jesus’ followers and curious observers travel with them. As they leave Jericho, a beggar named Bartimaeus, who had been blind since birth, hears the commotion, learns that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, and begins to shout loudly, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me (Mark 10:47).” By the way, by addressing Jesus as the Son of David, Bartimaeus proclaims that He is the long-awaited descendant of King David whom God had promised would come as His Messiah. At this point in Mark’s Gospel, this is a shocking claim: prior to this, no other person had recognized Jesus this way. In response to his outburst, the crowd around him begins to shout him down and demand his silence: Scripture says they “sternly ordered” him to “be quiet.” The Greek word we interpret as “sternly order” is “*epitimao*,” which means to scold a person for being “uppity;” to shame a lower-class person for claiming upper-class privileges. It is as if they said, “You blind, worthless beggar: who do you think you are?” The Greek word we interpret as “be quiet” is “*siopao*,” which means “to hush,” like what we command unruly children to do when we require them to be quiet. When the crowd tells Bartimaeus, “Who do you think you are? Hush!” they not only want to silence him, they want to make him to second-guess himself and his right to call out to Jesus, and to make him believe that his desire to speak and be healed is trivial, invalid, and unimportant. After all, they find Bartimaeus’ noisy shouts to be obnoxious and disruptive—because of those shouts, the crowd cannot hear much less pay attention to what Jesus is saying as He walks among them. Like all narcissists, their empathy for others is dead, even when the needs of those others are greater and more legitimate than theirs. In order to meet their needs, they want Bartimaeus must sit down and shut up.

Bartimaeus will have none of it. He will neither be debased nor silenced; he will not be trapped in crazy-making gaslighting. Instead of turning his attention to the crowd and attempting to argue with them about his dignity and the dignity of his desires, he stays focused on the object of his desire: Jesus. He calls out to Him again and again. He knows who he is, he knows what he wants, and he knows that he wants what Jesus can offer him. When Bartimaeus is brought forward, Jesus honors the legitimacy and important of his desires, asking “What do you want me to do for you (Mark 10:51)?” It is as if He says, “What do *you* want, you who are beloved and therefore important? What do you *want*: you, whose our wants, which are important to you, are even more important to me?” In response to Bartimaeus’ request, Jesus restores his sight.

What Jesus asks of Bartimaeus, Jesus asks of us: we, who are so beloved by God that in Christ He died for us on the Cross; we, whose wants, desires, and yearnings come from God and which therefore are of obsessive interest to Him. You are a child of God, a child of His cosmic creation; you are of infinitely more value to Him than even the Sun and other stars, because you are made in His image and likeness and you are aware of your existence and your desires. You have a right to be here, to be alive; you have a right to speak, to be listened to, and above all to be heard. We may or may not be involved in a relationship poisoned by gaslight that would diminish and silence us, and I certainly hope that none of us is, but there is within each of us an inner gaslight voice that would have us second-guess our significance and hush our cries for help, for mercy, and for love.

Therefore, we pray for the grace to turn away from these toxic tones—to refuse even to argue with them—and we cry out to the Son of David that He will call us forward, ask us what we want, and lighten our darkness so that we will not be blind to our value but finally see how much and how permanently we are loved, and therefore are permanently loveable. And then, like Bartimaeus, with our true sight restored, we are free to follow Jesus on His way.