

Do y'all remember the movie "Back to the Future?" You know, that time travel film starring Michael J. Fox? Well, the other day, a friend of mine posted a Back to the Future themed question on Facebook: "If you could do your own time traveling and go back to 1985, what advice would you give yourself?" Well, you might think the premise is a little dorky, and maybe it is, but my friend got a whooping 145 responses. As you might expect, there were stock tips and bits of relationship advice. Several people reassured their younger selves that, "It's going to be OK" and at least one said, "It's going to be so much worse than you can possibly imagine." One response in particular caught my eye: "Mulletts will probably be back...but not in full force by 2021." Remember mulletts? Business in the front; party in the back?

It's interesting to look 30 some-odd years back and consider what's endured and what, mercifully, we've managed to let go of. Some ideas just don't hold up over time. But others manage to stay fresh and relevant and true, not just through changes in fashion, but through complete upheavals in the way we understand the world. So what would you tell your 1985 self, your 1885 self, your 1585 self, or even your 85 AD self? And I wonder what those long ago selves might see that they want to tell us?

You know, every time we read the Bible it's kinda Back to the Future 'cause it's hard to read without doin' some time travel to understand the context. Often we can't see what a story's trying to challenge or celebrate or disrupt until we also see what the undisrupted, unchallenged world looked like then. And sometimes it's more than hairdos and investment choices that are being altered. 'Cause sometimes it's the very structure of the universe itself. And that's where we land today. You see, in the Greek-speaking world, by the time the Gospel of Mark was written, there was a description of the universe that everything else rested on. It was laid out in a book by the philosopher Plato a few centuries before Jesus came along, and it told the story of how the heavens came to be, how humans were made, the nature and order of all created things. It was the single most read thing in Greek, second only to Homer. And it's had, according to one scholar, "the longest continuous influence of any of the dialogues of the West." Its importance can't be overstated. It affected what almost everybody in Plato's world thought about the shape of the cosmos for hundreds, even thousands of years. So, Plato's universe was carefully stratified with a clear hierarchy, from the highest realm of pure forms, down to our less than perfect physical world. There was the Demiurge, or Creator, who created and instructed the gods to make human souls. And they did so using leftover, low grade parts. And these sad, malfunctioning bodies we carry those souls around in? Well, according to Plato, they're the work of even lesser gods. The point being that some things are higher orders of being than others, and some things, like most of us, are very, very low. That's just the way it is. Some things, and even some people according to Plato, just matter more.

But here's where it gets interesting, and I owe this insight to Gordon Lathrop, a professor at Virginia Seminary. You see, according to Plato, human beings weren't all created equal either. Not at all. Some were created a little higher than others. And among humans, one order was highest of all. Any guesses which one? The philosopher. Shocking, isn't it? That Plato the philosopher would come to such a daring conclusion. Anyway, the dome of the philosopher's head was a little replica of the dome of the heavens. And the philosopher was the kind of person who could take in the universe through the senses, really understand it. Only the philosopher could order it rightly in the mind, choosin' the good life and livin' well. And to attain these insights, one sense was more important than any other. One sense was crucial to the great and high philosopher's understanding. You guessed it: the sense of sight. And to be an ordinary, non-philosopher human, well that was as bad as being blind. And in Plato's universe, the literally and metaphorically blind were simply

lesser beings. I just realized I haven't told you the title of Plato's book! Well, it's the main character's name, the enlightened, high order philosopher who sees everything, and so understands the structure of the cosmos, is wise enough to choose the good life. His name, and the name of the book, too, was Timaeus.

And now it's Back to the Future, back to Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd leaving Jericho, when "Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, was a blind beggar sitting by the roadside." Now, remember, by now, Plato's story of Timaeus was ubiquitous. It was like, I don't know, if the entire structure of the known world was based off of the philosophy of Harry Potter or something. Everyone had seen it, read it, at least heard of it. Now, I know we took a minute to get here this morning. But this is a story that needed a good setup. "As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside." Bar-Timaeus. In Hebrew, "Bar" means "son of." But "Timaeus" is not a Hebrew name. It's Greek. Something's going on here. As if that's not enough, in Mark, Bartimaeus is the only person who gets healed by Jesus that gets a name. Everyone else is anonymous. But not Bartimaeus. Consider also that this healing sits right where the story turns from Jesus's teaching and healing in Galilee, and heads toward Jerusalem and the cross, a moment when the world'll turn upside down. And it's at this hinge moment that Jesus stops, and helps the son of Timaeus see. Bartimaeus is the perfect inversion. He's not the wise, all seeing, enlightened philosopher, free to choose the good like his daddy was. Bartimaeus is blind. Sitting by the roadside. Begging for mercy from a man he'd only heard might make him well. He's everything that Timaeus is not. He's everything that Plato says is nothing. He's low-order, malformed, ignorant, and broken.

To feel the force of a story like this one, we need to do some time travel. We need to reenter Plato's world, the world Jesus entered. To really get it, we need to believe that the person who is wise and can see is the one the gods are most pleased with. We need to understand that this person is of a higher strata, a higher order of being than one who sees nothing, someone who's only hope is little ol' mercy. And once we understand that, the story begins to tell itself. Jesus stops. He takes that established cosmos and flips it around. He actually notices, reaches out to a blind beggar as though he mattered. Jesus says to the man, as his sight is restored, "Go; your faith has made you well." He doesn't say, "I had pity on you, you poor thing." No. He says, "Your faith, Bartimaeus, something within you that's good and high order in and of itself, that is what made you well." He's sayin', "Bartimaeus, the Kingdom of God is for people just like you. The last shall be first. The meek shall inherit the earth. The blind shall see. You know all this. Because your faith has made you well. Go."

So let's go, back to the future, back to now. A little time travel shows us just how much is at stake. 'Cause back here in the future, so many of us are still living in Plato's universe, not God's. In too many ways, this is still a world made for the smart and the strong and the ones who've been told they can see better than anybody else. And this season in Plato's world has been especially rough. We've seen fractures and breaks and a blindness, sometimes a willing blindness, to truth and love and faith. We've seen individuals singled out, their lives put in danger in search of the truth. We've seen mass shootings, some even aimed at people in prayer. We've seen Christians acting un-Christianly, and the Lord's name taken in vain more times than this preacher can count. This is not the future we wanted to come back to. But I think this is why most of us are here this morning. Because we see this future, this Plato's world, and we don't like it. We wanna know the future that is the Kingdom of God, and we're desperately trying to get there. But even our sight is a little off sometimes. 'Cause we get a little too puffed up in our own way of seeing things, just like everybody does. But that's not Jesus. Jesus doesn't see things that way. Jesus isn't stopped in his tracks by clever philosophy and successful doers. Jesus' world is ordered differently. It's ordered differently from Plato's, and it's ordered differently from ours. 'Cause what does stop Jesus, what captures Jesus' attention, and stirs Jesus' love is not the smart or the rich or the privileged. It's the whatever's on the underside of that. It's whoever's left out of what the rest of the

world says gets to be in. It's the blind son of Timaeus callin' for mercy. The Kingdom of God is made for people like that. Not the all-seeing philosopher, but the blind son Bartimaeus. Not his savvy, not his strength, not his anything it takes cutthroat business knowhow, but his faith. It's his faith that makes him well.