

Wearable tech appears to be all the rage these days. Smart watches can track your workouts, monitor your health, answer your phone ... and even tell the time! Virtual reality headsets like the Meta Quest 3, or Apple Vision Pro, make you feel like you're inside the video game you're playing. Chances are just about everyone we're talking to these days is wearing some kind of device that makes life a little more interesting, informative, or convenient.

Now, most of the tech we wear isn't really essential to life — somehow many of us made it to adulthood with watches that only told the time, or maybe they also had a built-in calculator. But for some folks, wearable technology can mean the difference between life and death. Think of those who wear a pacemaker or internal defibrillator, which monitor and regulate the heartbeat. And while those technical advances enable longevity of life, others are improving the quality of life for people with other kinds of disabilities.

New wearable technology for the blind and visually impaired has the potential to make a huge difference in the quality of life of those who must navigate the world differently each day. Called “assistive technology” or “smart glasses,” these devices act as a visual or audio assistant for those with low or impaired vision. Take the NuEyes Pro glasses, for example! They are lightweight glasses that run on the Android platform and use cameras to magnify images up to 12 times, as well as provide the ability to change the color and contrast of the image the person is trying to observe. These glasses provide those with low vision the opportunity to see objects more clearly and even come with a bar code scanner and optical character recognition to recognize and read printed documents aloud.

Of course, this type of new technology and other gadgets like it are expensive, but like most tech advances, the devices will likely become less expensive and more mainstream over time and be game changers for those who need them. And while smart glasses can help a person with sight, they — like most

technology — can't help that much with giving their wearers real insight. And yet, when exploring today's Gospel from Mark, one could argue that the blind beggar Bartimaeus could have used some type of wearable tech before he encountered Jesus, even though Mark reveals that the blind man could actually see more clearly than the Lord's own disciples where it counted: in what we might call the real vision of discipleship.

Jesus and his disciples were passing through Jericho, getting ready to make the 15-mile trek from there up to Jerusalem, where the cross awaited. The itinerant Rabbi had warned his disciples three times that he was going to Jerusalem to die, but each time they failed to understand what he was talking about. Earlier on the road to Jerusalem, James and John had come to Jesus with a request to sit at his right and left when he came into his "glory," which they clearly perceived to be the glory of an earthly king sitting on the throne of Israel. Jesus warned them again that his throne would not be the kind they were hoping for, and that he had come to "give his life as a ransom for many." And even though the disciples had been with Jesus a long time, they still didn't really see the truth about who he was and where he was leading them.

But in this morning's story apparently a blind man could see the truth, even without possessing wearable 21st-century tech. When Jesus passed by, Bartimaeus began to shout out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" It's significant that only here in Mark's gospel, just before going up to Jerusalem, is Jesus identified as "Son of David," and by a blind man no less.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus continually tries to keep a lid on his "messianic secret," but it's now clear that it won't remain a secret much longer, and Bartimaeus is, ironically, the one who sees the truth. Although one could say that at that particular time in history using the title "Son of David" calls to mind the kind of messiah that will be a military ruler, like the original King David,

Bartimaeus appears to see Christ as a different kind of messiah, one who comes with mercy and not wrath. This is made apparent when he shouts, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me,” which is the cry of one who sees more of who Jesus really is than those whose eyes were supposed to be functioning normally.

In declaring Jesus as the merciful savior, however, Bartimaeus also seems to reveal that he sees more clearly the truth about himself than the Lord’s own students. In contrast to James and John, who seek to sit beside Jesus in his “glory” as a way of enhancing the way that others see them — not as former fishermen, but powerful associates of the King — Bartimaeus sees his own situation clearly. Unlike the “Sons of Thunder,” Bartimaeus recognizes his blindness and his need for mercy.

He isn’t using Jesus as a way to gain glory for himself, rather he sees himself as a beggar in need of the grace and mercy brought by the Son of David, who is also the Son of God. In a world where people believed that physical infirmity was a sign of spiritual brokenness, Bartimaeus doesn’t argue for his own righteousness or about the unfairness of it all. He simply wants mercy! So, in today’s narrative we encounter the original sinner’s prayer: “Have mercy on me, a sinner!” And even though his persistent cry may have annoyed the crowd, it caught Jesus’ attention!

It's important to note that Mark points out that the Lord “stood still” before telling the crowd to call Bartimaeus to him. This is because his standing still would enable the blind man to find him and come to him, and Bartimaeus does just that. He threw off his cloak — the outer garment he likely used for a blanket and as a catch-all for donations he might receive at the city gate — and “sprang up” to come to Jesus. And notice Jesus’ question to the blind man. It’s the same question he asked of James and John in last’s week’s story, “what do you want me to do for you?”

As you may recall, the disciples wanted Jesus to make them great, but Bartimaeus only wanted to see again. He uses the same word “teacher” to address Jesus that the two ambitious disciples had used. But in this case, it’s the plea of one who has actually understood the lesson, even though he had probably never read any of the scrolls of the Scriptures. Bartimaeus may not have been able to see, but he had an expansive vision of a merciful Messiah who could open a new world for him. One could say that his spiritual smart glasses were working perfectly.

Now, Jesus’ response to the blind man is an invitation: “Go, your faith has made you well.” Bartimaeus responds to the command of Jesus not by going or leaving, but by coming along and following Jesus “on the way.” Mark says that he had immediately regained his sight at Jesus’ word, but we could argue that he could see all along. The implication is that he became a disciple himself and, if so, he now saw the way clearly. He was given sight because of his faithful insight, and now he would see the glory of God in the face of the Son of David.

When the original King David entered Jerusalem against the Jebusites as a conquering hero, the inhabitants taunted him saying that “the blind and the lame will turn you back.” David would take the city and thus have “the blind and the lame” removed before his entry. The Son of David, in today’s Gospel is most certainly a contrast to his ancestor, for he removed blindness instead of the blind as he goes up into the city.

The story of Bartimaeus is a reminder that the Messiah came to restore the sight of those who have been blinded by power, expectation, despair, or sin. Only those who are willing to put on the spiritual smart glasses of a humble and repentant disciple will be able to see and understand how he conquers the city and the world — not through the power of might but through the “glory” of the cross. And, as we celebrate Reformation Sunday, I believe that Martin Luther would wholeheartedly agree!

His study of God's Word, and his experience of God's grace given to us on account of Christ, helped Luther take a stand against the corruption and the abuse of power taking place in the Roman Catholic Church of his day. He famously fought to give the common people, back then, access to the Bible in a language they could read and understand. In case you weren't aware, at that time the Holy Scriptures were only written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. But Luther wanted all people to have the ability to come to Jesus through God's Word. And during my time teaching our Confirmation Students, who will soon be Confirmed through the Affirmation of Baptism, like Luther I stressed the importance of reading, studying, and digesting the words of the Bible to help them experience Christ and his grace filled love for us.

Wearable smart glasses can offer a great deal of help and assistance for those who need them, but spiritual blindness requires a different sort of correction. In other words, do you see Jesus as a means to an end, to enhancing your reputation, your status, your own glory? Do you see him merely as a means, as a way, of getting to heaven? If that is the case, more than likely you need a different vision! It's the kind of vision that even a blind man can have: a vision of humility, faith and a desire to follow the One whose throne is a cross. True, the latest gadget or piece of technology will not save us from spiritual blindness. Only faith and our Triune God can make us well! And thanks be to God for that! Amen.