

October 28, 2018

Mark 8: 22-26; 10: 46-52

Prayer: O Lord, please go with us into the study of your gospel. Help us to understand your writers' concern with blindness and how that same blindness may afflict us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

None So Blind

Vince and I went to Fall for Greenville two weekends ago. We got out the map and studied the six or so stages, deciding what band we wanted to hear.

The only one we were pretty sure we *didn't* want to hear was the one playing at the Peace Center amphitheater – The 246 Army Band. We figured they'd be playing John Phillips Sousa and *As the Caisons Go Rolling Along*.

But we ended up at a ticket booth near the river and overheard the Doobie Brothers. That can't be the Army band, we said. Maybe they changed the schedule.

So we went down the stairs to the stage by the Reedy. And there were nine musicians, all with short hair and camouflage fatigues – playing Prince and Tom Petty and the Beatles. And they were unbelievably good. Vince said part of it was that their sound equipment and mixing was top notch – your tax dollars at work.

Then they brought out a large brass section to join the drummer and lead guitar and played a rocking version of *When the Saints Go Marching In*. And then they all came back for some Chicago and then *Proud Mary*.

We almost missed a great band and a great time because their name blinded us.

Blindness – both physical and metaphorical – is one of the biggest topics in the gospel of Mark. Sixteenth century Englishman John Heywood expressed it this way: *There is none so blind as he who will not see*. That is actually a great summation of the gospel of Mark.

But how Mark treats blindness is hard to see with our traditional approach to Bible study and sermons. We approach Scripture with a microscope. Because of time limits, we focus on only a few verses at a time, and we don't get the full context of what the writer is doing.

But today, we're going to back up and look at our passage in Mark through a telescope. We're going to look at two stories of healing blindness. And we're going to look at where they are and why they're there and how they become much more than healing stories because of those things.

Mark, as we've talked about many times, likes to make story sandwiches. That is, he begins one story, interrupts it with another, then finishes the first story. He does this to make one story comment upon the other, to make comparisons and contrasts.

He does this, for instance, when Jesus and the disciples pass a non-producing fig tree, and Jesus curses it. Then Jesus immediately goes and throws the money-changers out of the temple. The next day, he passes the fig tree again and it is withered.

Mark is allowing the non-producing fig tree to comment upon the non-producing temple. Both will be destroyed because a new day is coming.

Mark does this lots of other times as well, bracketing and arranging stories in certain combinations to make certain points. We know this, because the other gospel writers tell some of the same stories but arrange them differently. They tell their story of Jesus with other goals in mind.

Now Mark is going to make a thicker sandwich, a virtual Dagwood. He's going to sandwich not just one story inside another, but an entire segment, an entire idea, inside another.

The "bread" will be two stories about physically blind people. The filling will be the actions of the disciples, who, I would argue, are blind in other ways. Blind in the way Vince and I were to the Army Band.

If you'd like to read with me, we'll start with the opener, **Mark 8: 22-26**. Let's see how Mark begins this section.

22 They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to (Jesus) and begged him to touch him. ²³He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?'

²⁴And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.'²⁵Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'

Whenever you see in the bulletin that I am preaching somewhere else on a Sunday morning, this is probably the passage I'm preaching on. It's not even in the lectionary, but I've preached on it from Florida to New York.

Because to me, it is so evocative of the way we learn, the way we discern, a little bit at a time, and then more and more. It is evocative of the way we don't see homeless people, of the way we don't see so much of what goes on around us.

"I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." *I believe in Jesus, but I don't understand this or this or this.*

Many years ago, the men at the Salvation Army created a band that played here from time to time. And they called themselves Men Like Trees, Walking.

One of their signature songs was Johnny Nash's "I Can See Clearly Now."

I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,

I can see all obstacles in my way

Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind

It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright)

Sun-Shiny day.

These men were in recovery, many of them from years and years of drug abuse and alcoholism. They could see some truth, but at times, things were still fuzzy, like trees walking around. But they knew a day would come when their blindness would be completely healed, when they could see clearly.

In the literary structure of Mark, this little story is the first piece of sandwich bread. Jesus heals a blind man. Then he and the disciples turn their faces toward Jerusalem.

Lots of things happen along the way.

1) Jesus predicts his death three times. And three times, the disciples rebuke him or argue or ask for personal glory.

2) Jesus takes Peter and James and John to a mountaintop, where they meet Moses and Elijah and talk about “rising from the dead.” But Mark tells us that Peter, James and John don’t know what that means.

3) The disciples try to exorcise a demon and cannot. But when they hear about a man who *has* exorcised a demon, they complain because he “**is not following us.**”

4) And finally, the brothers James and John come to Jesus with this statement: “**Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.**” (Mark 10: 35)

And Jesus replies, “**What is it you want me to do for you?**” (v. 36)

They ask for glory, for one to sit on Jesus’ right hand in the kingdom, the other on his left. Their request is for personal glory.

Immediately after their request, Mark ends this middle section with the second piece of bread, another story of the healing of blindness. Turn with me, please, to **Mark 10: 46- 52.**

46 They came to Jericho. As (Jesus) and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting

by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'

⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'

⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.'

⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?'

The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.'

⁵²Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.'

Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Mark opens these chapters with the healing of a blind man, and he closes them with the healing of a blind man. These two outsiders are made into insiders. These two men who couldn't physically see ... become seers, the only ones who see what following Jesus really means.

Did you notice how Jesus asked James and John the identical question he asked Bartimaeus? **“What is it you want me to do for you?”**

James and John wanted personal glory. Bartimaeus wanted **“to see again.”**

Did you notice how Mark ended chapter 10? **“Immediately, (Bartimaeus) regained his sight and followed him on the way.”**

This is Mark’s greatest compliment. Someone who follows Jesus “on the way” – on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross – is the true disciple.

Meanwhile, what are the 12 disciples, the ultimate insiders, doing? Showing all the signs of true blindness: Rebuking Jesus, arguing and asking for personal glory.

Mark uses these stories of physical blindness to comment on the disciples’ true blindness at this point in the story. And this true blindness is a commentary as well on us in the modern church.

For we are modern-day disciples. And we are in more danger of blindness than Peter and James and John ever were.

Two weeks ago, we talked about a very similar subject, which is no surprise because Mark hammers us with similar messages on discipleship. Like him, I fear that too many professing disciples are turning a blind eye to the teachings of Jesus.

It is one thing if we support building a wall or separating immigrant families or banning people from certain countries or even overlooking sexual immorality. But we cannot claim these are things Jesus taught. We cannot claim the cloak of Christian discipleship.

Following Jesus “on the way” is terribly difficult, and the issues are just going to get more complex, more complicated. But I think if we are going to call ourselves Christians, we have to start with Christ’s teachings as we make our decisions.

The first-century disciples' blindness was most evident in their refusal to hear when Jesus spoke of the cross. Instead, they rebuked him, they argued about who was greatest, they requested personal glory.

They were blind to what following Jesus meant.

And then two outsiders, two men who could not see, were made to see clearly, to follow Jesus "on the way."

But that's only half of the story. To follow Jesus "on the way" means more than professing faith. Remember: After Jesus restored Bartimaeus' sight, the former beggar left his position by the roadside.

His healing led to a new way of life. He did not acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, then sit back down and continue begging. He got up and **"followed him on the way."**

I imagine Triune is one of the few churches looking at this passage this morning where some people actually beg on occasion. This is not just an ancient story, but a modern reality. Not just a metaphor but an actual event. What Americans once saw only when they traveled abroad, they are now seeing in all our cities. Even Greenville.

And when there are the resources that Greenville has, begging, panhandling, is not following Jesus "on the way" either.

Several years ago, a grant maker gave us a pot of money to use specifically for people who were trying hard to make changes in their lives. We have used it sparingly, only with people we have watched for a long time and know how hard they are trying.

Last week, I learned that someone who has worshiped with us for years and years had his car break down. He was walking over seven miles to church.

I offered to help with the repair bill from this pot of money. He said no thank you. In this season of his life, he felt God had something to teach him. All he wanted were our prayers for his discernment.

To follow Jesus means leaving any lifestyle that blinds us to the kingdom.

For some, that may be a lifestyle of opulence and privilege that blinds us to the plight of others.

For some, that may be a lifestyle of addiction and entitlement that blinds us to our own responsibilities.

To follow Jesus is to accept his healing no matter what the disease.

Because part of the story of Bartimaeus is the outsider who was made to see.

And part of the story is the new disciple who embraced seeing.

Amen.