

New Mission – Mark 8:27-30

Don't you love to be in on the secret? The surprise birthday party. The surprise baby shower. The retirement party. What fun to be in on the planning and to successfully pull it off.

The Gospel of Mark is known for something the scholars call "the messianic secret." Mark opens his Gospel by saying he is writing about "Jesus the Messiah (Christ), the son of God." Then we launch into the ministry of Jesus. He calls 12 apostles to walk with him. These twelve men saw Jesus perform miracles no one had ever seen before – the lame are healed, the dead are raised, the demon possessed are set free, the deaf and blind are healed. Twice Jesus feeds a multitude of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Add to this the amazing teachings of Jesus, how he spoke with such authority and challenged the old religious traditions, and one was left asking, "Who is this man?"

We, the readers of this Gospel know, because we read the introduction. He is Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. But the disciples, and the people of Galilee who followed Jesus' ministry, had not read that. They are baffled.

So in our text today we find what scholars call the watershed moment of Jesus' ministry. Everything Jesus had been doing in his ministry was preparing the disciples for this moment. And from this moment on, nothing will be the same.

It is such a brief passage; one might miss it as they read through the wonderful narratives of Mark's Gospel. Mark loves action, and moves from event to event to event with little explanation or even teaching moments. But the action stops for a moment as Jesus poses a most important question to his disciples.

Follow with me as I read from Mark 8:27-30

Mark is very intentional about which stories he relates. Look at what comes before this question. First Jesus feeds the four thousand, the second time he performs such a miracle. After the miracle Jesus gets into a boat (for the last time in this Gospel), and as they head out Jesus warns the disciples to stay away from the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod. It was a warning not to get dragged into worldly political and religious systems.

How do the disciples respond? They wonder if Jesus is upset because they only brought one loaf of bread! You can almost see Jesus shake his head as he says,

8:18 "Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears and fail to hear? And don't you remember?"

Think about the times I produced bread for the multitudes and how much was left over. I can produce more than enough bread. That is not the issue. Open your eyes and see!

In verse 21 Jesus says, "Do you still not understand?"

And then Mark tells us a story that is found in no other Gospel. It is about the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida, and it is unique for two reasons: one, the methods Jesus used in the healing, and two, the two-fold nature of the healing.

When Jesus gets close to the city of Bethsaida, people bring a blind man to him for healing. Jesus takes him out of the village and puts spit on the man's eyes and lays his hands on him and he is healed – sort of. The man says he can see, but people look like trees walking. Jesus lays his hands on him again and now the man can see perfectly.

As Mark's Gospel is shaped by the book of Isaiah, we see here what is described in **Isaiah 29:18-19: "On that day the deaf will hear ... and ... the eyes of the blind shall see ... and the neediest people shall exalt in the Holy One of Israel."**

This healing raises some interesting questions:

1. Why did Jesus tell him to go home and not enter the village (Bethsaida)? My best answer is because he would go into Bethsaida to beg as a blind man. He does not need to anymore – he can see. Go home, which was not in Bethsaida, and look after your family there.
2. Why did Jesus heal him in stages? This is the only place that ever happens in Jesus' ministry. All the other Gospels don't even record this event – maybe they did not know what to do with this story of apparent failure to cure.

However, Mark has a purpose in this story. He has just recorded how Jesus said the disciples are blind – they have eyes but do not see. They have been with Jesus for several months now and still they do not understand who he is or what he is about.

But something is about to happen that will change that. In the direct question Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" we will find that the disciples have their eyes opened to the reality of who Jesus is. Yet they do not see clearly. From this point on Jesus will bring clarity to their sight by explaining more about who he is and why he came.

In our text today Jesus first asks the disciples, "Who do men say that I am?"

The answers were varied: "Some say John the Baptist" (probably because Jesus spoke with such authority)

"Some say Elijah" (Because of all the miracles Jesus did, he is liked to the Old Testament prophet who also performed many miracles. Also, because Malachi ends with a promise that Elijah would come before the Messiah arrived, maybe they hoped this is what was happening)

"Some say one of the prophets" (they see the hand of God at work through Jesus)

Then Jesus turns to those who have walked with him, ate with him, listened to every word he spoke and watched every miracle he performed and asked:

"And what about you? Who do you say that I am?"

This is still the most important question anyone can ask: “Who do YOU say Jesus is?” What your mother and father say is important. What your friends say is important. What your pastor says, or your Sunday School teacher, or what the books say is important. But the answer that makes the difference between spiritual life and spiritual death, the answer that will determine whether your name is in the Lamb’s book of life or not is the answer to Jesus’s question: Who do YOU say that I am?”

It is no coincidence that Mark tells us this took place in Caesarea Philippi, the farthest Jesus would travel from Jerusalem. That city was named in honor of the Emperor of Rome who insisted people declare, “Caesar is Lord.” But if Caesar is lord, who is Jesus?

It is Peter who becomes the spokesman for the disciples, and he says, “You are the Messiah!”

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus makes clear that this insight came not from Peter himself, but as a revelation from God to Peter. But Peter is correct. Jesus is the Messiah. He is the Christ. Since chapter 1:1 we have waited for the disciples to finally catch on to the “secret” of who Jesus is. Finally, they get it right!

Jesus is the Messiah, the One sent from God to deliver his people from their greatest enemy: sin. This is the One promised from old, and this is why Mark wants us to see Jesus fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah throughout his ministry.

The eyes of the disciples are finally opened, and they can see who Jesus is. **But only partially.** Messiah to the disciples took on a very different meaning than to Jesus. We will see that in the very next verses. Jesus goes on to describe what “Messiah” (anointed deliverer) means for him:

8: 31 – “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this...”

Verse 32 goes on to say that Peter rebuked Jesus. The word “Rebuked” is the same word used when Jesus rebuked the demons! This was a very strong argument! For Peter, Messiah and suffering do not go together. Messiah is powerful and invincible, like King David, but better. The Messiah would remove the Romans from the land of Israel and set up a throne in Jerusalem. Then it would be happy ever after...

Jesus in turn rebukes Peter. In fact, he sees in Peter’s refusal to accept a suffering Messiah as an attack by Satan himself. So Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan.”

The turning point has come in Mark’s Gospel. Up until 8:29 Jesus was revealing himself as the Messiah to the disciples. Now they finally got it – their eyes were opened. But from this point on Jesus will make the long journey back to Jerusalem where he would be betrayed, arrested, beaten and killed. Then on the third day he would rise to life again. From this point on Jesus is reshaping the meaning of Messiah for the disciples. Jesus chooses a new title: the Son of Man.

This title comes from the book of Daniel, and refers to the one who was human but would come with Divine power to establish a kingdom that would never end (cf. Daniel 7:13). This would be Jesus' preferred title as he made his way to the cross.

Now Jesus does something few leaders have ever done – he tells the crowd and the disciples that there is a cost to following him. Here, for the first time, Jesus introduces the theme of the cross. Those who follow Jesus must take up their cross, deny themselves, and follow Him. He was heading to death and then resurrected life. True disciples must follow him.

I am sure Jesus disciples must have felt as if someone just hit them over the head with a 2X4. Messiah was to be about victory and power. The cross was about humility, shame, extreme suffering and death. Jesus said if you lose your life for the Gospel you will save it.

³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? Jesus asked.

In chapter 9:30-32 Jesus warns the disciples of his impending death once more. Then in chapter 10:32-34 Jesus once again foretells his death, adding the Gentiles will flog him and kill him.

Jesus knows the disciples are seeing, but not clearly yet. In fact, it will not be until Resurrection Sunday before the disciples start to see clearly. What happened to the blind man at Bethsaida is what was happening spiritually to the disciples. They see, but not clearly – yet.

They are now on the way to Jerusalem. The rest of Mark's Gospel is about that journey and what will happen there. We are moving towards Good Friday and Easter Sunday!

As I read about Jesus describing the way of the cross for his disciples, I wondered what that meant for us in these days of COVID. Denying ourselves may look like watching church on the computer instead of gathering in the building as we wish to. Taking up our cross may mean giving up something so we can be a greater witness to our community. In all the material that crosses my desk about defying the orders and reopening anyway, no one has cited these verses.

Who is the Jesus we follow? The militant warrior or the suffering servant? Maybe our vision is not as clear as Jesus wishes it would be, and we too need a two-fold healing of our hearts and minds.

This section of teaching in Mark's Gospel actually ends in chapter 10 with the story of another healing of a blind man. I love this story, and I told it again and again to my children when they were small.

The blind man heard Jesus was passing by so he cried out for help. The people told him to be quiet so he called out all the louder! (I love his persistence)

Jesus invites him to come, so the blind man throws off his beggars cloak and goes to Jesus. Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The blind man says, "I want to see." Seems obvious, right? But do people really want to see Jesus, who he really is, and what he asks us to do if we choose to walk with him? Jesus says the faith of the blind man has healed him, and the man immediately receives his sight.

And then what does he do? He follows Jesus. He says "Yes" to the invitation to "Come walk with me."

The secret is out – Jesus is the Messiah. But Jesus says the Messiah is also the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. He will die for the people – he will take our sins on himself.

And the new mission we have? To let others know who Jesus is, and what it means to walk with him. It is our mission to reveal the secret – Jesus is our Saviour, God come to earth to rescue his fallen creation. That mission will lead Jesus to a cross, but he knowingly and willingly went so that all who confess their sin, believe in him and trust in Him alone for salvation will be forgiven and gain eternal life.

That is our mission. We know the secret of who Jesus is. Now we are sent to tell others:

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

That is your mission – if you choose to accept it.