

## Opening the Eyes of the Blind Mark 8:22-33

“Who do people say that I am?” It’s a good question because everyone was talking about Jesus and all the amazing things He was doing. Back in chapter 6, we find that even King Herod was wondering the same thing. And the same three ideas that the disciples mentioned in today’s passage, the same three possible explanations for Jesus’ tremendous power were also swirling around Herod’s palace.

Now, Herod’s guilty conscience led him to believe that Jesus was actually John the Baptist who had been raised from the dead, and the disciples point out in verse 27 that Herod wasn’t the only one who had this idea. And to someone who didn’t know very much about Jesus or John, this idea might seem plausible – after all, they were cousins, they were about the same age, and Jesus’ public ministry really got going after Herod put John in prison. So, we can understand how a casual observer might have come to the conclusion that Jesus was just John, perhaps escaped from prison, doing ministry under another name.

But this theory would have gotten no traction with anyone who knew very much about either Jesus or John. After all, John was certainly a straight-shooting prophet, someone who had no fear of confronting even the most powerful people with the sin in their lives – that’s eventually what got him thrown in jail and killed. But John was never said to have performed any miracles – all he did was teach people and baptize those who came to repentance.

And of course anyone who really listened to John’s teaching should have realized that he didn’t consider himself to be anywhere close to Jesus in power and authority. Instead, Mark chapter 1 says that John preached about Jesus: “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.” And anyone who was present when John baptized Jesus should have realized not only that the two men were separate individuals, but that Jesus was exactly this great One John had predicted He would be. For on that occasion, Mark tells us that Jesus “saw the heavens opening and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: ‘Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well-pleased.’”

No, anyone who actually gave any thought to the matter should have dismissed the possibility that Jesus was just John the Baptist made over – for Jesus was quite obviously someone much greater.

Okay, so what if Jesus was one of the prophets like those in Old Testament days? Unlike John, some of them did perform mighty miracles. Think about Elisha for example. He brought a child back from the dead, just like Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter – you can read all about it in II Kings chapter 4. And in fact, that same chapter tells the story of how Elisha fed 100 people with twenty barley loaves, which sounds a lot like Jesus’ feeding of the 4000 earlier in this chapter of Mark, doesn’t it? So, could the Muslims be right? Could Jesus be nothing more than another prophet of God?

Perhaps. But if so, Jesus’ power was obviously greater than that of any other prophet, and that should become obvious when we compare His miracles with those of Elisha. Of course, Jesus was able to feed a lot more people with a lot less. Moreover, when He raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead, all he did was to take the little girl by the hand and tell her to get up – and she did. In contrast, Elisha had

to pray to the Lord and he had to bring his whole body into contact with the dead child at least twice. When compared to Elisha, Jesus obviously has much greater power, indeed much more personal power.

And that seems to be the point of the very physical details of the way Jesus healed this blind man. Unlike Elijah, Jesus didn't have to pray that this man would be healed. All Jesus has to do is to touch him – and even more shockingly to spit on his eyes, for the man to be restored. No Old Testament prophet ever did anything like this. Jesus has to be someone much greater than just a prophet.

Okay, so what if He was Elijah? After all, II Kings chapter 2 tells us that Elijah never did die. Instead, he went up by a whirlwind into Heaven. Moreover, the very last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi, said that God would send Elijah back before the great day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5). Could Jesus have been Elijah returned from Heaven?

Well, in the next chapter we'll see this couldn't possibly be the case. We'll see Elijah appearing on the Mount of Transfiguration to talk with Jesus, and we'll also hear Jesus explaining that John the Baptist was in fact the one Malachi was talking about, the one who would prepare the way of the Lord by preaching a gospel of repentance.

But even if we don't look ahead to the next chapter for the answers, what Jesus' disciples knew about Him should have been sufficient to discount this possibility, to make clear that Jesus' power was much greater than even Elijah's. Yes, I Kings chapter 18 tells the dramatic story of how Elijah asked God to send fire from Heaven to embarrass the prophets of Baal. But in that same chapter, we also read that Elijah had to pray seven times before God would end a drought and send rain. In contrast, Mark's gospel makes clear that Jesus is in total control over all the forces of nature. Jesus is the One Who can walk on the water. And He doesn't have to pray about it – Jesus can calm a storm with a word.

No, none of the popular explanations of Jesus' power could possibly be right. He was much greater than John, much greater than an Old Testament prophet, even much greater than Elijah. So who is He? That's the question the whole of the previous two chapters was trying to answer, as we have been studying throughout this month. By acting out all the wondrous works listed in Isaiah chapter 29, Jesus was making it clear that He is, in fact, nothing less than the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. And this is what Peter finally realized in verse 29, and this is what we all need to realize as well.

For if Jesus is only what much of the world continues to think He is, then none of us have any reason for hope. For how could a mere moralist do anything more for us than to set before us a good example? How could a mere teacher save anyone from their sins? How could a mere prophet make an atoning sacrifice for anyone else? And how could any of these sorts of people help anyone thousands of years after they themselves had died?

No, the good news is that which Peter proclaimed in verse 29, and that which we read in our responsive reading this morning: that Jesus was and is the Messiah, the promised Redeemer, the only begotten Son of God. The good news is that those who believe on Him, those who trust in Him as Savior and bow before Him as Lord will not in fact die in their sins, but will have eternal life. And the good news is that God loved sinners like us enough to give His Son to die for us, to pay the atoning price for our sins to make all this possible.

But Peter didn't understand all of this at the time he spoke the words of verse 29, did he? For what happened immediately after he made his great confession, after he came to the realization that Jesus is the Messiah? When Jesus began to explain what kind of Messiah He had come to be, when Jesus began to unfold some of the great truths in our responsive reading this morning, explaining to His disciples the amazing reality that He had come into the world to die and then to rise from the dead, Peter objected. And Jesus said that in opposing His plan to die for the world, Peter was acting like Satan.

So, why did Peter oppose Jesus, whom he had just proclaimed to be the Messiah? Mostly because of what Peter, and really all the people living at that time, expected the Messiah to be and do. Peter thought the Messiah would be a great military leader like David, someone who would bring justice and prosperity to His people at the point of a sword. In short, Peter was expecting Jesus to be a lot like Mohammed – and that perhaps explains why Mohammed continues to attract lots of followers today.

So, Peter got it partly right – he got that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But at the same time, he didn't see Jesus completely clearly, did he? Oh, he got what Isaiah 29 was saying, that Jesus was the Holy One of Israel, the long-awaited Messiah. But he didn't yet understand Isaiah 53, that Jesus would be the Suffering Servant, the One Who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. In a very real sense, Peter was still blinded by his own expectations and the expectations of his culture. And he, along with all the rest of the disciples continued to experience this sort of partial blindness to the true identity of Jesus until after Jesus' resurrection.

And this, I think, helps to explain why Mark includes the amazing story of Jesus healing the blind man where he does – right before Peter's confession. For if Mark were to continue to follow the outline of Isaiah 29, as all the rest of Jesus' miracles in chapters 7 and 8 do, the healing of the blind man would be placed right between chapters 7 and 8. Instead, this miracle is directly and intentionally placed right here, right before Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah.

So, why are these two stories placed back to back? And why is this miracle, of all the miracles of Jesus that are recorded for us, the only one that was partial, at least at first? Well, think again about what we have learned from this miracle – that Jesus has tremendous power, personal power, power that is in fact greater than that of any other prophet who has ever lived. So, why would Someone with this kind of amazing power, why would Someone Who could cast a demon out of a girl without even seeing her, Someone Who could open the ears of a deaf man and instantly give him the ability to speak, Someone Who could feed 4000 folks with seven dinner rolls – why would He accomplish only a partial healing at first? It couldn't be from lack of ability – no, Jesus obviously wanted to make a point, a deliberate comparison with Peter's spiritual blindness that was about to be lifted.

So, what is that point? What does Jesus want us to understand about these two men, both of whom couldn't see Jesus at first, and both of who were at first only partially healed of their blindness? Simply this – that is Jesus, only Jesus, Who has the power to make blind men see. No Old Testament prophet ever opened the ears of the deaf or the eyes of the blind. And no matter how many miracles the disciples had seen throughout the first eight chapters of Mark's gospel, they still didn't understand Who Jesus is – until He opened their eyes, even if only partially at first. Matthew makes this point explicitly, when he tells us that Jesus responded to Peter's great confession this way: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father which is in heaven."

In other words, it's not enough for us to read the words of Jesus, even such clear promises of salvation that we found in our responsive reading this morning. And it's not even enough for us to proclaim the Person and Work of Christ, however clearly, however compellingly, to those who don't yet know Him. For these two stories make this point plain: unless God opens the eyes of the blind, they will never see Him clearly, they will never respond to His call for repentance and faith. Instead, they will continue to ask for more signs like the Pharisees did, or they will actively oppose Him as Peter did, at least at first.

So, do you want to know more of Jesus, to draw closer to Him, to follow Him more consistently, to experience more of His healing presence? Do you have friends who need to experience the truth about Jesus, to accept Him as Savior and acknowledge Him as Lord? Then let's do what this blind man's friends did in verse 22: let's bring ourselves and our loved ones to Jesus in earnest, urgent prayer. And let's ask Him to open our eyes, that we might see Him for Who He is.