

The Beginning of the Good News

A Study of the Gospel of Mark

The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
Fall 2015

Seeing Clearly 8:22-26; 10:46-52

Some things to think about...

The role of blindness in the Gospel of Mark

Most scholars agree that 8:22-10:56 represents the narrative turning point in Mark's Gospel. This crucial central section begins (8:22-26) and ends (10:46-52) with two stories about Jesus healing a blind man. These episodes are the only two occurrences of this type of healing in the entire Gospel. This makes their placement here all the more important for understanding some of Mark's important themes.

Spiritual blindness has already played an important role in Mark's gospel. "Do you have eyes and fail to see?" Jesus asks the disciples (8:18) when they don't understand the implications of the fishes and loaves. Similarly, in 4:12, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah (6:9-10) to explain why he speaks in parables to people with spiritual blindness: so that in their confounded state they might decide to turn back to the Lord to be forgiven and redirected according to the ways of the Lord.

First-century Jewish expectations for a Messiah from God

The first-century world of Judaism was so diverse that many scholars suggest it would be more appropriate to speak of the Judaisms (plural) of that era. This observation also informs our discussion of messianic expectations during that time.

On the one hand, as we have discussed from time to time in this study, certain leaders and groups within Judaism profited from collaboration with the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. For instance, those who served in the Temple (the priests and Levites as well as Torah experts like the scribes) were honored in Jewish society. Jesus criticized them, however, for cooperating with the Roman social structure that opposed God's desire to see justice and well-being among all God's people. These leaders benefitting from Roman occupation would *never* hope or expect God to send a Messiah to overturn the status quo that gave them power.

Other Jews, however, recalling the glorious days of King David from a millennium earlier, hoped God would send a Messiah to become king and reunite all Israel. Still others, remembering the more recent Maccabean Revolt against brutal Syrian rule from two centuries earlier, expected a messianic military leader to drive out the occupying Roman military forces. Other Jews, dedicated to Israel's prophetic tradition and remembering Moses' ancient promise that God would send another prophet like him, were looking for God to send a great prophet to call the people back to God's ways of justice and peace. Based on this prophetic messianic expectation, there were a number of Jews in the first and second century who proclaimed John the Baptist as God's Messiah and strictly followed his teachings.

As we have also noted before, *none* of the first-century Jewish expectations for a Messiah included the possibility that the Messiah would suffer and die. From this we might conclude that the various Jewish messianic expectations “blinded” the people. They were unable to see that God’s Messiah actually suffered and was executed because of his staunch convictions about the dawning reign of God, and was resurrected to new life by God to confirm his anointing and status as Messiah.

Attending to the Word...

As you read the first healing story in 8:22-26, notice the critical placement of this short passage. It immediately precedes 8:27-38, one of the passages we studied last week, where Peter rebukes Jesus for suggesting that the Messiah must suffer and die. Peter seemed to exhibit the common Jewish expectation that the Messiah would be powerful and victorious, rather than suffering and dying.

Notice also the role of “the village” in today’s first healing story. Jesus takes the man out of the village before trying to heal his blindness. Then, after he fully restores the man’s sight, he instructs the man to go home and warns him not to return to the village. Quite possibly, for Jesus the “village” represents first-century Judaism, with its expectations that God will send a powerful and glorious Messiah to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and reform the Temple structure. Jesus might be saying that life in the “village” that was Judaism was continuing to blind the disciples so that they were unable to see even the possibility that God’s Messiah might suffer and die.

In the first healing story, notice that Jesus has to swab the man’s eyes twice to restore his sight completely. Jesus may be suggesting that at times our spiritual blindness can only be healed in stages.

In the second healing story at 10:46-52, what is the crowd’s reaction to the shouts from blind Bartimaeus? How does this response reflect on their view of who they see as the intended beneficiaries of the ministry of Jesus?

What does Bartimaeus do when he learns that Jesus is calling him? What does he signify by immediately casting away the very cloak he uses to collect coins from passersby?

What does Jesus ask Bartimaeus? Is this surprising? If so, why? If not, why not?

What does Bartimaeus do once his sight is restored? What does this suggest about God’s will for us when the Lord heals our spiritual blindness?

Making the Word your own...

People like to talk about “eye-opening” experiences. Briefly describe an experience in your life when God opened your eyes to something new and important.

Can you tell a story about a spiritual revelation or insight that only became clear to you over a period of time or as the result of several different but related experiences?

Identify some of the modern “villages” that sometimes shape or even distort your views and expectations in the world. Can you tell a story about a recent time when the Lord healed an aspect of your spiritual blindness and, as a result, you realized you could not go back to a particular “village” because it had contributed to your spiritual blindness?

We often think we know what another person needs or what would be best for them, only to experience their displeasure when we act on that knowledge. In this second healing story it would have been very easy for Jesus to assume that the blind man wanted to be healed of his blindness. Instead, he asks Bartimaeus what he wants Jesus to do for him. Can you tell a story about a recent time when you, like Jesus, asked someone else “What do you want me to do for you?” What was the result of the encounter?