

Work With Me, Jesus
Mark 8:22-9:1
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
February 7, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver

Do you know what an “aha moment” is? Maybe you know that Oprah Winfrey describes that as “those sudden moments of understanding” – in many of her media platforms (her TV show, her magazine, her website...) she invites people to talk about a time in their lives when they saw things suddenly more clearly or in a better light. Interestingly, Oprah recently settled a lawsuit with the Insurance company Mutual of Omaha, which had been using (and had in fact trademarked) the phrase “the official sponsor of the Aha! moment”.

At any rate – you know what I mean, right? For instance, maybe you remember that scene in the 1968 film *The Planet of the Apes*, where Charlton Heston plays a space traveler marooned on a mysterious planet in the year AD 3978. At the very end of the film, Heston’s character is riding along a beach and sees something that changes his entire experience – he recognizes the Statue of Liberty, and realizes that humans have, in fact, destroyed the planet.

There are many more, of course. Do you remember the scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* when Darth Vader, in the midst of a battle with Luke Skywalker, reveals a family secret? “I am your father...” What about when Dr. Malcolm Crowe is talking to young Cole Sear, who has said, “I see dead people”...and Dr. Crowe realizes exactly who it is who has died? You know what I mean – an “aha” moment is that part of the story that causes you to view the entire narrative in a new light.

Welcome to Mark 8, with all apologies to Mutual of Omaha and Oprah Winfrey, the gospel sponsor of the “aha moment.” We are at the midpoint of the Gospel, which up until now has taken place either in the region of Galilee or some of the surrounding Gentile territories. In his ministry thus far, Jesus has emphasized his power and authority, as he has healed, exorcised, revived the dead, and taught to great effect.

There’s a lead-in to the “aha moment”, which comes officially in the second half of chapter 8 – and it’s a strange story. We’ve seen Jesus do all sorts of miracles and healings, but here in verses 22-26, he apparently has trouble in curing a man’s blindness. This is the only incident where Jesus has to “try again” when it comes to healing someone. It’s curious, isn’t it? The man is blind, and Jesus comes to him and touches him. Good news: the man can see. Bad news: he isn’t sure what he’s seeing. He sees people, but they look like trees.

Does anyone else have any questions about this passage? For starters, a real stickler for detail might want to know how a blind man knows what trees or people are supposed to look like, but trust me, that’s not the point here. The bigger question is, why didn’t Jesus just heal the man straight off? Why make this

a two-step process?

Do you remember how, in our previous discussion of the Gospel of Mark, we've talked about "the sandwich"? How Mark sometimes takes a couple of different stories and layers them on each other in such a way so that we can understand Jesus better by taking in the whole? I'm afraid that last week I gave you part of a sandwich – but not the entire serving.

Look at chapter 8:14-21. We talked about this last week – here's Jesus, spending time with his disciples, and they simply do not get it. In fact, he accuses them of being blind in v. 18. Do you remember how last week we said that up to this point, the disciples really don't have any idea who Jesus is or what he is about? That's pretty plain in the verses that we read last week.

Next, we get this strange story about a man who literally *is* blind – and who is not given sight all at once. Then, take a look at the material that comes in the second half of Mark 8 – beginning with verse 27. Who is Jesus talking with as we begin this section? His disciples. And what are his disciples, according to Jesus, the last time they spoke? They are blind.

And now Jesus looks at his disciples and he says, "What do I look like?" And they mumble a bit, probably thinking that this is another one of his little trick questions. They say, "Well, some people think that you look like John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets..." So far, so good. "But what do YOU think I look like?" And that's where Peter says, "Well, I think you look like a Savior."

Ding ding ding ding! That's the right answer, Peter! Congratulations. And, by the way, *don't say a word to anyone about that*. Peter and the disciples have made a personal testimony to the most important thing in human history, and Jesus says, "don't mention it." Strange? You bet. But keep reading.

Immediately after Jesus goes all hush hush about this messiah business, he starts to say some things quite openly, according to verse 32: he talks about his own suffering and death. And Peter, perhaps still basking in the glow of having gotten the last answer correct, takes Jesus off to the side and begins to suggest a more appropriate – a more messianic – strategy. Immediately, Jesus rebukes Peter and says that he's wrong. And then he teaches further about what it means to follow him.

So, here's the "sandwich", as I see it. It begins and ends with disciples who don't get who Jesus is or what he is about, at least fully. Right in the middle, you have a story of a man who is totally blind, and then has partial sight, and then, when he is touched again by the Master, is able to see clearly.

Remember how we got the Gospel of Mark? Peter, as an old man, sitting in the prison, awaiting his death, starts to pour out his memories to young Mark, who writes them down and preserves them for the church. And Peter and Mark tell us about these things in this order. Why?

Because I think it's Peter and Mark's way of saying, "You know, for the first few years, we didn't get it at all...we were with him and we saw and we heard, and then, finally, something clicked and we could see Who he was and What he was about. It was amazing! But do you know what? Even then, we didn't see clearly. We saw something – and it was True – but we didn't see the whole picture. There was a lot more that he had to teach us and to show us before we understood."

Just as the blind man needed to be touched by Jesus twice before he could see perfectly, so the disciples needed more lessons even after they came to understand the basics of Who he was and What he came to do. And Jesus refuses to allow them to say anything about him, his purpose, or his mission, until they get it right.

That's why his rebuke of Peter is so stunning. Peter is right! Jesus is the Messiah! Jesus of Nazareth, our friend, the one who has invited us to come along with him, the one who a few chapters back even sent us out to tell other people about God's kingdom – Jesus is the real deal! Everything we've hoped for, everything we've waited for, everything we've been expecting – Jesus is it!

Except when Jesus starts to talk about a Messiah who suffers, and is rejected and is killed...You know, Jesus, that's not how it's supposed to be. I mean, really, Lord, haven't you read the Old Testament? The Messiah? Heck, he's supposed to be the one who overpowers sin. The one who establishes God's purposes on the earth. The one who ushers in the true Kingdom. That kind of Messiah doesn't suffer or die...that kind of Messiah kicks the Romans out and shapes up the Temple and...

And Jesus interrupts him (or me) and says, "Look, I don't need a bodyguard. I am not looking for a coach, a handler, or an advisor. I am looking for people who are interested in, and willing to follow me. Disciples do not protect or advise Jesus. Disciples follow Jesus.

And Jesus lays it out in the end of chapter 8, doesn't he? If we want to follow him, it's going to cost us. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his amazing book on discipleship, "when Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹

Friends, the truth is this: when Jesus and I had a conversation about me becoming a disciple, it was not an offer that I made to him. "Look, Jesus, show me what you've got, talk a little bit about your plans, and maybe we can make something work."

When Jesus called me, and you, and the people out there, he called us to be willing to re-orient our selves around the world as he sees it. He called us to acknowledge the fact that sometimes things are not what we think they are. That what we think are trees walking around are really men and women.

We see a high school kid get beaten up by three undercover cops because

¹ *The Cost of Discipleship*, chapter 2

he's carrying a bottle of Pepsi and they think it looks like a gun. "Oh well," we say, "that stuff happens. It's too bad." We think it's normal. We see neighbors who don't have any heat – not because of the storm, but because they are impoverished – and we accept it as a given. "That's just going to happen." We see a war that drags on and on and on and pretty soon we get used to it and we think that it can't be any other way. Because we're used to it, it's "normal". And because it's "normal", we start to think that it's the way it will always be. And when we think that that's how it will always be, we think that's how it SHOULD be. Beloved, there is a difference between what we can see now and how things are supposed to be. There is a difference between what we perceive and what is TRUE. We do not see clearly, and should not confuse our perceptions with God's intentions.

Years ago, I got a call from a panicked young girl. She had missed the school bus and was supposed to have a big test that day and if she missed the test she would fail the course and if she failed the course she would flunk out of sixth grade and if she flunked out of sixth grade she would probably become homeless and if she became homeless then she would probably turn to drugs or prostitution or ... I mean to tell you, she was weeping and crying because the world had ended. So I said, "How would it be if I gave you a ride to school?" She said, "Oh, that would be great!" So I picked her up.

I said, "Where is your school?" And she got the deer in the headlights look in her eyes and started to cry again and said, "I don't know! I don't know! I've only ever been there on the bus." And we started to go down the trail about failing class and being kicked out of the sixth grade and so on.

I said, "Look, sweetheart, do I have to cross a river to get to your school?" And she said "Yes." And I said, "Do you see the fountain on your way to school, or are you closer to the stadium?" "Oh, the stadium. We drive right close to the stadium!" I asked her to think a little more, and she said, "When I'm in class, I can look out my window and I see a big smokestack with the number 57 on it."

Well, as you may have guessed, once I had that piece of information, I was able to get to Schiller Middle School, right near the Heinz factory on the Northside, and another life of teenaged dissolution was avoided. Thanks be to God!

Here's why I'm telling that story: because there are times in my life where I get so lost and so worked up and so turned around that I just can't find my way on my own. At those times, it is imperative that I find some way to ground myself – some anchor – some landmark that does not move. Once I find something that is true – something that is not changing – then I can get to where I need to be.

Like the man in the gospel, like Peter, like Mark – I am prone to see imperfectly. I need Christ to work with me a little more before I'm ready to say that I see things as they should be. And so I want to be one of those followers who is willing to say, "Jesus, I'll let you decide where I need to be and what I need to keep. Just work with me, Jesus. Work with me."

Beloved...This is an “aha” moment in the Gospel. The disciples see a truth clearly for the first time. They know – we know – who Jesus is. But knowing something, and being able to act on it wisely and well are two different things. How glad I am that we are here together, listening to scripture, learning to follow. How deeply I hope that you will allow Jesus to work with you in every aspect of your life – that you will follow him with your time, with your wallet, with your sexuality, with your ego...and that you will expect the same of me. Amen.