

“Seeing, Not Seeing, and the Path to Fuller Healing”
Mark 8:22-9:1
February 2, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to our series in the Gospel of Mark.

Our text this morning is a bit larger. But as I studied this passage, I became convinced that there’s a theme that stretches across this longer passage. And it’s that theme that I want to focus on this morning.

Now, one thing I need to say up front ... is that if you saw the title of the sermon in the bulletin ... and you’re really curious and really excited to learn about Peter’s High, and Low, and Buffalo ... if you’re younger and maybe because of Pastor Gutierrez you know what that’s referring to, and you’re excited to hear what the connection is to the sermon, or if you’re older and super curious about what a buffalo has to do with the Apostle Peter ... I am so sorry. Because I’m not going to answer any of your questions about that.

That title came from the original version of this sermon, organized around those three points. It was a fun way to organize the sermon ... but then the problem was that it turned out that the sermon it organized was bad. Like ... really bad. And so there were a couple major revisions. And now there’s no more buffalo. I’m sorry. As Archibald Asparagus would remind us, not everyone gets a water buffalo.

So, instead of that, in what I hope is a better sermon, we’re going to focus exclusively on the theme of sight: what we see, what we don’t see, and how our sight can be improved.

With that in mind, let’s turn to our text now: Mark 8:22-9:1.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{8:22} And they [that is, Jesus and the disciples] came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. ²³ And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” ²⁴ And he looked up and said, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.” ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ And he sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.”

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “But who do you say

that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.”³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

^{9:1} And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we ask you to work now through this, your word to your servants,
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.

For our comfort in the afflictions we face in this world
is that your promises in your Word give us life.

Though the world may deride us,
we do not turn from this your revelation to us.

Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

Introduction

Our text this morning opens with a healing. Jesus heals a blind man. But he does it in an unusual way. Among other things, he does it in two stages.

And that itself should cause us to pause and dig a little deeper.

As we've said before, Jesus's healings were not just healings. They were signs. They were parables – pictures – of even deeper spiritual realities [Horne, 129]. And that seems to be especially true here, of this particular healing.

As Sinclair Ferguson puts it: “There is little doubt that the disciples were meant to learn something about their relationship with Jesus from this miracle story.” In fact, Ferguson continues, this miracle “was a perfect illustration to the disciples of what [Jesus] wanted to do with them in their spiritual blindness.” [Ferguson, 124-125]

In other words, Jesus didn’t heal the blind man in two stages because he needed to ... or because the first time didn’t take. He healed the blind man in two stages because the process in general, and that middle state that the blind man found himself in in verse 24, in particular, were both supposed to teach the disciples something about their spiritual vision.

And those spiritual realities that the healing of verses 22-26 were meant to point to, then played out in reality in the rest of our text.

And the spiritual reality that Jesus was showing them, and that he urges us to see as well, is that: As Christians, by God’s grace we can see ... but not yet as clearly as we should ... and so we need to let Jesus lead us, so that he can further heal us.

Let me say that again: As Christians, by God’s grace we can see ... but we don’t yet see as clearly as we should ... and so we need to let Jesus lead us, so that he can further heal us.

And we see that spiritual reality not just in the two-stage healing of the blind man ... but also in the interactions between Jesus and Peter in the verses that follow.

And so with both of those interactions in our text ... let’s consider this spiritual lesson before us.

As Christians, By God’s Grace We Can See

First, as Christians, by God’s grace, we can see.

The Bible tells us that human beings, made good and upright by God, have sinned and rebelled against him. And our sin has had all kinds of repercussions in our world, in our hearts, and in our lives.

And one of those repercussions is that by our sin, we have blinded ourselves to spiritual truth. By our sin, we have intentionally, and willfully, made ourselves blind to the truest spiritual truths. We have rendered ourselves unable to see God and see his truth, rightly.

But, the Bible tells us God, by his grace, has come to heal us.

In the story of Jesus and the blind man of Bethsaida – in the picture we’re given in verses 22 through 26, we see what Jesus came to do. He came to give sight to the blind. But not just the physically blind. He came to give sight to the spiritually blind. All who come to him, seeking the restoration of their spiritual sight, he will heal!

We get a picture of that in verses 22 through 26. But we see something of the spiritual reality it points to in verses 27 through 29.

Hear those verses again.

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.”

The first thing we learn here is that most people around the disciples at that time were wrong about who Jesus was. They saw him as some kind of prophet, similar to John the Baptist or Elijah.

But then the second thing we learn here is that where others may be blind to who Jesus is ... Peter can see. Peter knows that Jesus is the “Christ” – the Messiah – the true King, sent by God into the world to save God’s people.

That Peter can see what others have not seen is astounding. But it’s not just astounding – it’s miraculous. And Matthew’s account makes that even more clear. There Jesus says to Peter: “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” [Matthew 16:17]

Like the blind man, Peter has been given miraculous sight. And for that reason, he is able to see who Jesus is.

And if you’re a Christian, then the Bible tells us that the same is true for you.

The reason you are a believer when so many or not ... the reason you see who Jesus is when so many do not ... is not because you’re smarter, or better, or more intrinsically good than others ... it’s because God, in his mercy, has given you a measure of sight. It’s not because your “flesh and blood” have revealed such things to you, but because your “Father who is in heaven” has opened your eyes to these truths. It’s because you once were lost, but now you’re found – once blind, but now you see. Jesus has given you a measure of sight. And so you can see who he is.

That’s the first thing – the first spiritual truth we need to see in Jesus’s interaction with the blind man, his interaction with Peter, and his interactions with us: As Christians, by God’s miraculous grace, we can see.

That’s the first thing.

But We Don’t Yet See as Clearly as We Should

But the second thing ... is that we don’t yet see as clearly as we should.

And that comes out in verses 27-33. Hear those verses again:

³¹ And [Jesus] began to teach them [the disciples,] that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But

turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Just a few verse earlier, we marveled at Peter’s spiritual sight. But here we are shocked by his ongoing limitations.

Peter sees ... but not yet as clearly as he should.

And here, the connection between the blind man and Peter – here the reality that the healing of verses 22-26 is meant by Mark (and maybe also by Peter) to be an interpretive lens for the rest of the passage becomes, I think, even more obvious.

Peter is just like the blind man in verse 24 – between the first healing and the second healing. He sees ... but not yet as clearly as he should. His vision remains obstructed. Some things he makes out – he knows what they are – just as the blind man knew enough to know that the objects in front of him were really people. But still ... they look wrong to him ... they look like trees. And in the same way, Peter sees that Jesus is the Christ ... but he doesn’t yet clearly see what that means – what the Christ is really like.

And the form this unclear vision takes for Peter, is the same form it often takes for us: in various places and in various ways, he still views spiritual reality according to the beliefs of his culture, instead of the truth of the Bible.

For Peter that meant that he expected the Messiah to be what the Jewish culture around him expected the Messiah to be. The assumption was that the Christ would come, and from the start he would come in glory ... not in humility. He would crush his enemies ... not allow himself to be crushed. Peter expected a Christ who would receive a crown without a cross. He would conquer not by taking on the form of a servant ... but he would conquer in the same way that Caesar conquered.

Peter was partially blinded still by the assumptions and expectations of his culture.

And we often are as well.

We do the same thing. Like the Jewish culture of Peter, our culture is divided into different camps – different tribes. They had Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes, just as we might have progressives, conservatives, and populists. They had Herodians and Zealots, just as we might have elites and the rising masses. They had a menu of subcultures to choose from, just as we do. And as with us, each of those subcultures think that they see things clearly, while everyone else is blind. But each of those subcultures in Peter’s day was wrong about key spiritual realities. And so first-century Christians, coming from each of those cultural backgrounds ... had a tendency to let that cultural background partially blind them. That’s what was happening to Peter in verse 32. And the same thing often happens to us.

Whatever subculture you call your own ... we each let worldly perspectives cloud, distort, and obscure our spiritual vision – by adopting those cultural views with the same level of conviction as we adopt Biblical truths. And when we do that ... we may find ourselves ... like Peter ... arguing

with ... and trying to correct Jesus himself, which is really not a position any Christian should want to put themselves in.

And yet we do ... maybe more subtly than Peter did ... but we do all the same. Because, though Jesus has given us a measure of spiritual sight ... we don't yet see as clearly as we should.

Now ... we tend to believe that that's true about other kinds of people ... but it's really important that we also believe that that's true about us as well.

The blind man acknowledged that reality. He told Jesus – he acknowledged to him openly – that he could see ... but he could not yet fully see. He couldn't yet see clearly.

Peter, on the other hand, denied his partial blindness. And the result was dreadful for him. He found himself rebuking Jesus, in verse 32. And then he heard Jesus call him Satan, in verse 33.

That's a pretty sharp turn from where Peter seemed to be in verse 29. And it came about because Peter failed to believe that while he could see ... he didn't yet see as clearly as he should.

And we can fail to believe that too. And when we do, we are often far too confident in our spiritual vision – far too confident that while others may be confused, and while others may have their vision obscured ... we see all things clearly.

But God has given us a very simple means to remind us that we don't yet see as clearly as we should.

He's given us his Word. And he's called us to hear it, and to read it.

Whenever we hear God's Word preached, or whenever we read God's Word on our own ... and something we read bothers us ... whenever we feel that impulse to correct it ... or to edit it ... or to redact it ... or to ignore one part of it or another – whenever God's Word bothers us – whenever we feel the impulse Peter did, to correct God ... that is a reminder to us that while by God's grace we can see ... we don't yet see as clearly as we should.

Where do you come across those kinds of reminders? Around what themes do they tend to strike you?

It can come to us in countless ways, and over countless topics ... but Peter's experience reminds us that one way it often comes to us is over the nature of God himself. We often want, in one way or another, to remove the cross from Christ. We don't like the guilt the cross implies about us. Or we don't like the justice it implies about God. Or we don't like the humility it implies of our Lord. Or we don't like the meekness it implies of our King. Or we don't like the path it implies for our lives. Like Peter ... one way our spiritual vision is often obscured ... is that we too want a Christ without a cross ... an exaltation without first a humiliation. But Jesus reminds us here that when we expect that ... we are not seeing him rightly.

Whether it's that biblical truth, or another one ... the second thing we see here in our text is that even though, as Christians, by God's grace, we can see ... we don't yet see as clearly as we should.

That's the second thing put before us here.

So we see our starting point in the gospel: by God's grace, we can see.

We see our problem now in the Christian life: that we don't yet see as clearly as we should.

What then is the solution?

How can our sight be further healed?

We Need to Let Jesus Lead Us, So That He Can Further Heal Us

Well, that's the third thing we see in our text.

The third thing we see here is that we need to let Jesus lead us so that he can further heal us.

We need to let Jesus lead us so that he can further heal our sight.

And we see this first in the healing of the blind man, and then again in Jesus's words to his disciples.

First, we see it in how Jesus heals the blind man.

There's a lot of unexplained, counterintuitive leading that Jesus does in verses 22-26 ... and a lot of trusting and following that the blind man is expected to respond with.

Both before and after this healing, the blind man is challenged to follow Jesus where he leads him ... even when it doesn't quite make sense to him. The man meets Jesus in the village. But then, for reasons not explained, Jesus tells him to follow him (blindly) out of the village, in verse 23. Then he's expected to follow Jesus's direction, as Jesus does things that were probably confusing: spitting on his eyes, healing him at first partially, but not fully, and then, upon the completion of the healing, telling him not to enter the village, but to go straight home instead. Jesus leads this man – both literally and figuratively – in ways that might not have made sense to him ... but in each step of the way, this man follows Jesus faithfully. He goes where Jesus leads him. He receives what Jesus has for him. He obeys what Jesus commands him. And it's through that process that Jesus heals him.

And in verses 34 through 38 it becomes clear that the same is true for all of Jesus's disciples. It's by letting Jesus lead us – by following him humbly and trustingly – that we too will be more fully healed.

Speaking to his disciples, Jesus puts it like this. He says to them, starting in verse 34:

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

If we want to be saved – if we want to be more fully healed – then we too, like the blind man, must let Jesus lead us, and we must follow him faithfully.

But Jesus makes it clear from the start that where he leads us will not always make sense to us. In fact, letting him lead us will often mean self-denial. Worse, it may even feel like death – like taking up our cross, an instrument of execution. To save our lives, we will, in a sense, have to lose our lives. To be more fully healed, we may, in a sense, have to be more truly broken. But it's only in following Jesus – even when we don't understand, even when his way appears to be the way to death – it is only in following Jesus that we can be further healed.

It's only in following him that we can be given more sight ... as the very last verse of our passage promises, with Jesus telling his followers: “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”

How do we improve our spiritual sight? How can we have our spiritual eyes further healed? How can we better see the power of God's kingdom?

By following Jesus. By dying to ourselves, in order to live for him. By taking up our cross. By entrusting ourselves more fully to him.

That means many different things.

It means trusting his Word, even when it doesn't quite make sense to us.

It means obeying his commands, even when it hurts and might cost us something.

It means imitating him when we want to imitate the ways of the world.

It means loving other people, as he has loved us.

It means showing mercy to our enemies, just as he has shown us mercy.

It means living our lives for him, and not for ourselves.

It might not be clear to us how following Jesus in those ways will improve our spiritual sight. But it will. Just as following Jesus out of the village would eventually improve the blind man's physical sight. Not because our actions will further heal our vision. But because as we follow Jesus, he will lay his hands on our eyes again ... and we will see more clearly. And bit by bit ... step by step ... as we follow him ... by his grace, he will give us clearer and clearer spiritual vision.

That is, after all, what he did with Peter.

Peter struggled to follow Jesus. And his following certainly was not perfect. But as he stumbled along ... as he took up his cross in fits and starts ... Jesus healed the eyes of his heart more and more ... so that the Peter whom Jesus so sternly rebuked here in verse 33 really would one day be the Peter on whom Jesus would build his Church.

And as Jesus healed and transformed Peter ... so he can heal and transform us ... if we will just follow him where he leads us.

Conclusion

As Christians, by God's grace we can see ... but we don't yet see as clearly as we should ... and so we need to let Jesus lead us, so that he can further heal us.

This is what we see in our text this morning.

And so, brothers and sisters, as Jesus has given us vision, let us confess what we can truly see, just as Peter did when he confessed Jesus to be the Christ.

Let us acknowledge that we don't yet see as clearly as we should, allowing God's Word to regularly expose the shortcomings and obstructions in our spiritual vision.

And then, let us take up our cross and follow Jesus, wherever he leads us. For as we follow him, we too will be enabled to see the kingdom of God coming with power. Not only in this life, but in fullness in the life to come ... on that great day when the Lord will close our earthly mission and he'll end our pilgrim days – when hope shall change to glad fruition, faith to sight, and prayer to praise.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let's Study Mark*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999.
Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.