

Healing as salvation
Mark 8.22-26; 10.46-52

Mark uses 5 verses to tell this healing story. As is the case in other healings, people bring this blind man to Jesus. We can imagine that it was his family and friends who had heard about Jesus and decided to bring their son and brother for Jesus to heal him.

Unlike other healing stories, Jesus doesn't quite get the healing right on the first try. But the second time, the man sees perfectly. A miraculous healing that leaves him free to participate in the life of his community in a way that he hadn't been able to before. This is Good News for the man, and for those who loved him!

And that's the end of the story, right?

Not quite. What we know of Mark's Gospel is that its stories are layered and patterned. So at a first layer, it's the end of the story. But there are other layers when we look at this healing in its larger context.

One of the first pieces that points to another layer is the detail about Jesus spitting on the man's eyes. That detail links this healing to the healing of the deaf man in chapter 7. These are the only times that Jesus' healing included spitting. (It's the only time he spits!)

Jesus is healing the deaf and the blind. Mark has been alerting us all along that Jesus is the awaited Messiah and the Kingdom of God is now. With these healings, Jesus is fulfilling Isaiah's messianic prophecies:

“On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.” *29:18 (NRSV)*

“ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;” *35:5*

With these stories of the healing of the deaf and blind, Mark, the storyteller, is boldly proclaiming that “This is the day of the Lord!”

And this is Good News not only to the men who have been healed and to their families, but this is also Good News to an entire people who have been waiting for the Holy One of

Israel to come and claim God's beloved children. In this layer of the story, these healings offer healing and hope for the communal body that has been waiting for God's long-promised salvation and restoration.

There's another layer. (Likely there are many other layers.) This one is more complex and nuanced.

This third layer starts to be revealed when we get to chapter 10 and the healing of Bartimaeus. Since we know that Mark's Gospel message is told in patterns and layers, we know to pay attention to this second story of a blind man being healed. In other words, the first story isn't finished until we get to the end of the Bartimaeus story. (And then it still isn't finished!)

There are some interesting contrasts to notice in the stories. The man in chapter 8 has no name. And people *brought* him to Jesus. But in the second story, the man does have a name, son of Timaeus. *Timaeus*, in Hebrew means *unclean*. And the crowds, rather than bringing this "son of the unclean" to Jesus, try to keep Jesus from him. But this "son of the unclean" would not be silenced. Because even though he was blind, he *saw* Jesus. Even with blinded eyes, he recognized Jesus. And he wouldn't be thwarted!

Amazing, isn't it! Especially amazing when you consider the interactions between Jesus and his disciples in chapters 8-10. Time and again, (and Gretchen insightfully took us through these encounters several weeks ago) the disciples failed to see Jesus. Failed to hear him. They had eyes to see and ears to hear, but they couldn't see or hear. But this unclean man recognized and understood.

From these two stories and the teachings they hold in between them, we begin to get a sense that these stories are just as much about the disciples as they are about two men being healed. If we go back to the first story, it wasn't that Jesus didn't get the healing right; it was

instead revealing and naming the disciples' dim vision. They had poor eyesight and Jesus knew it.

In this layer of the story, the healing isn't so much about the miracle of blind men being given sight, it's a story about *seeing*, about our human inability...or perhaps unwillingness... to *see*. Mark's storytelling doesn't spare the disciples as he exposes their blindness and deafness. And if the disciples are blind and deaf, we can be sure that we are, as well. This layer of the story moves us from the Good News of healing to the hard news of our blindness. It was hard news for the disciples and it's hard news for us.

Jesus delivered hard news to his disciples not because he was being mean or punitive but because he loved them and wanted them to see and hear and know the same things that he himself was seeing, hearing, and knowing. The hard news was *for* them, was to move them through a process that would lead them to the Good News of resurrection and healing. Because the God of Jesus is a living God, is a God of Life!

To explore this layer of hard news, let's look at what had happened just before the first healing. Earlier in chapter 8, Jesus fed 4,000 people. Then he and the disciples got into their boat. (*Mark 8:14–21*)

¹⁴Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵Then Jesus commanded them, saying, “*See* that you see the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”

¹⁶And they argued among themselves, saying, “It is because we have no bread.”

¹⁷But Jesus, knowing, said to them, “Why do you argue because you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Is your heart still hardened? ¹⁸Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?”

They said to Him, “Twelve.”

²⁰“Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?”

And they said, “Seven.”

²¹So He said to them, “How *is it* you do not comprehend?”

When Jesus tells the disciples to “*see* the leaven of the Pharisees” he isn’t telling them to go look at their yeast! As we examine this deeper layer of the story, we hear Jesus moving us from the literal to the metaphorical and spiritual.

By telling about the exchange on the boat, Mark is again recalling Isaiah, this time chapter 6, the story of Isaiah’s calling. In response to Isaiah saying, “Send me” God answers: “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’” And God continues to describe to Isaiah the destruction and desolation, until finally, there is nothing left but a stump. But God isn’t finished. When everything is destroyed, when there is only a stump, “*The holy seed is its stump.*”

It is these disciples that God was describing to Isaiah. This is the hard news that Jesus is delivering. These stories reveal *our* inability to see and hear. But in this hard news we are promised a seed. And seeds always hold the possibility of new life!

The miracle that Jesus is bringing about is much bigger and far more significant than the healing of two men—Jesus is bringing about a *seeing* and a *hearing* that is given by the Holy Seed, the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Seed brings life into places where our eyes only see ruin, desolation, death.

And this is the very thing that Jesus is teaching the disciples in between the two healing stories, right? “Be like little children.” “If you want to be great you must serve others.” “Take up your cross.” “If you want to save your life you have to lose it.” “The Son of Humanity will be betrayed, killed, and after three days rise again.”

Loss. Ruin. Destruction. Jesus keeps up the hard teachings...and they all lead to death. And in the stump, there is the promise of new life rising up.

But the disciples can't see, or hear, or understand. At every turn, they're in their heads, trying to figure it out, trying to make sense. This isn't just the disciples, this is us. Through the disciples, Mark is revealing our very human blindness.

So what is it that they couldn't *see*? How is it that *we* have eyes but cannot see? It's as though Jesus is telling a riddle and the poor disciples simply can't figure it out. But what's fascinating is that Jesus, while clearly frustrated with them, he doesn't go get 12 new disciples. He keeps trusting his beloved God, trusting the process, trusting that the living God has a seed in this stump that are his disciples. That is us.

So the disciples are trying to figure out the answer to Jesus' riddle. They're arguing and trying to make sense of these teachings in between the two healings. The riddle is about what it means to lose your life in order to save it. How can the first be last? Or, what does it mean that the one who is greatest is servant? How is it possible to be like children? What could Jesus possibly mean when he says he'll be killed and in three days rise up? What does it mean? It doesn't make any sense!

And that seems to be the answer to the riddle: *it doesn't make sense*. It isn't intended to be figured out; rather, it's intended to be trusted...like little children trust the way the world works without trying to control or manipulate it. And it's something that Bartimaeus and other unclean people who live on the margins know from lived experience.

The disciples...and we...keep trying to figure out how the Kingdom of God works. What are the rules and instructions? What's the right thing and what's the wrong thing? But Jesus isn't interested in the binaries that we human beings get caught in. Jesus doesn't care about clean and unclean. And he's also not interested in moving people from the category of "least" into the category of "greatest", or the "greatest" becoming the "least." Because we'd

still be left with “greatest” and “least.” We’d still have two oppositional categories, it’s just that now there are different people in each.

In Mark’s telling of these two stories of blind men receiving sight, what we begin to see through the layers is that Jesus is confusing and refusing the boundaries, even the boundaries of sight and blindness—seeing people are blind and blind people see.

An answer to the riddle is the *holy seed in the stump*. Rather than competing binaries that keep people in endless rivalry, God is creating a new thing. Where we see two, God sees three and four. When we see five loaves of bread, God sees more than enough to feed 5,000 hungry people.

Jesus isn’t teaching us to move from being the greatest to being the least; rather he’s saying that when we let go of what we’re holding onto—let go of what we *think* we see, or what we *habitually* see and hear and know—once we’ve fallen, once we’re vulnerable—like a child, like the unclean ones on the margins—once we risk the vulnerability of failure and loss and death, then... only then... the Holy Seed of the living God begins to rise up in new life. And that is Good News...hard news...but Good News!

We know this news. In our bodies and in our lived experiences, we know this. We know what it is to lose...and to be lost. The hardest is when we’re in the middle of it, when it’s dark as night and filled with desolation. And we can’t see. We can’t see a way forward. When we can’t see anything but pain.

And we’ve had experiences of being found. We don’t always know that we’re being saved until time passes and we look back and see that God has been raising up new life, and we’re no longer quite the same persons we were. Being saved...being healed...changes us...transforms us....

Every layer of this story leads us to Good News. We need to keep telling and hearing these stories...as a practice...so that the next time we're in the dark, when *think* we can't see the way forward, we remember that we don't have to see or figure out the way forward. Our work is to trust the living God, to trust that the Spirit of God is always at work breaking open the Holy Seed and calling us to rise up into resurrected living.