

"You are the Christ"

In the Old Testament, the prophets rebuked God's people for their spiritual dullness. And when they did this, they often described the people's problems in terms of the senses. The people had eye and ears, but they weren't truly seeing and hearing. God told the people through the prophet Jeremiah (5:21) that they were, "foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not." God said through the prophet Ezekiel (12:2), "You dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house. God said through the prophet Isaiah, "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'"

Do you see a constant theme in these prophecies? God kept referring to Israel as blind and deaf. Obviously God was not speaking in a physical sense. He was speaking in a spiritual one. The people were spiritually blind and deaf. They were dull to understanding the spiritual truths of God. In our passage for today we see that the disciples fall into this same category. In verse 18, Jesus rebukes the disciples concerning the same thing - having eyes but not seeing, having ears but not hearing. The disciples show that they are typical Israelites, and typical humans - spiritually blind and deaf; hard hearts; unable to understand the things of God. That is the state of all of us without Christ. And yet the good news is that this passage shows how Jesus is the solution for our spiritual blindness and deafness. As truly as he brought sight to the blind man in our passage and hearing to the deaf man, he can bring true vision, true hearing, and true understanding to our spirits. So let's dig into this passage and see God's message for us today.

You'll notice that I read a rather long passage for today. I did this intentionally because I want us to look at a bigger story that Mark has been developing. You see Mark has been taking us on the spiritual journey of the disciples. He's been showing how they are being changed from being spiritually dull to finally be able to make this grand confession that Jesus is the Christ. Mark develops this over several chapters. And Mark does this by presenting two parallel sets of events. One set is found in chapters 6 and 7. The other set is here in chapter 8. Both sets of events start and end in the same way. Both start with a miraculous feeding. The first miraculous feeding is in chapter 6 where Jesus feeds the five thousand. The second miraculous feeding is in chapter 8 where Jesus feeds the four thousand. And both sets of events end in the same way, with a healing of someone's senses followed by a confession of Jesus. At the end of chapter 7 we see a deaf man healed and then the people proclaim, "He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." And at the end of the second set of events, we see a blind man healed and then hear the disciples confess, "You are the Christ". Not only do both parallel sets of events start and end the same way, but they also have similar events along the way. For example, both parallel set of events include the disciples traveling on a boat with Jesus, and on both boat trips we find the disciples misunderstanding Jesus. Another example: both sets of events include a confrontation with the Pharisees. The similarities go on and on. But the point is: the events in chapters 6 and 7 parallel the events in chapter 8.

And though we learn a number of lessons about Jesus in these two parallel events, there is an underlying story behind all these events. That story is about the disciples. The disciples go through the first set of events, and guess what? They

still don't get it. They still are spiritually dull. They still don't recognize Jesus as they ought. And so Jesus takes them on a sort of "take two." The first try didn't work for them, so let's do it again.

That's where we find ourselves in verse 1 of chapter 8 at the beginning of this parallel set of events. Jesus and the disciples are back out with a multitude of people. Jesus is teaching the people and he notices that they are hungry. He plans to miraculously feed them again, and so he turns to the disciples and presents the issue to them. How should they have responded? They should have responded in faith. Maybe they could have said, "Lord, please miraculously feed them like you did last time." But, that's not what they say. Instead they respond in verse 4 with doubt: "How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?" Surely Jesus must have been disappointed by that response - they had all been there before and seen him feed the five thousand! But Jesus then proceeds to teach them the same lesson again. He has them take another inventory of what they have: just seven loaves and a few small fish. Jesus then blesses the food and divides it up, and again the people are miraculously fed. This time the disciples gather up 7 larger baskets full of leftovers. Clearly the similarities in this miracle would beg the disciples to wake up and learn an important lesson about who Jesus is and what he is able to do! But not yet. That lesson was soon to be learned, but not yet.

Instead we soon find the disciples on a boat again with Jesus in verse 14. Jesus begins to teach the disciples on the boat an important lesson. In verse 15 he tells the disciples during their boat ride, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Of course, the background for Jesus' warning comes from the previous verses, verses 11-13. Before they left on the boat Jesus had encountered the Pharisees who had demanded a sign from heaven. The Pharisees were asking for heavenly proof and confirmation of Jesus' ministry. Of course Jesus responds with a loud sigh to the Pharisees. Jesus was frustrated by the hard hearts of the Pharisees. How could they ask for a sign? Clearly Jesus' miracles pointed to who he was. Clearly there were signs all around them. Yet they wanted a sign *from heaven*. Maybe they thought that multiplying bread was not enough, that they wanted the bread to actually fall from heaven as it did in Moses' day. Or maybe they were trying to trick Jesus. Deuteronomy 13 warns against false prophets who show a sign and then lead people astray. Maybe they were going to point to that passage if Jesus did give a sign. Who knows what their intention was, but by asking for a sign, they in a sense broke Deuteronomy 13 themselves. The Pharisees were looking for signs instead of evaluating Jesus' message. Jesus' message was not one that led people astray but called people to faith and repentance. In a sense, the Pharisees were doing what they always are doing - looking for externals, instead of looking at deeper spiritual issues, at issues of the heart and faith.

And besides, what good would it have been for Jesus to give them a sign? The Pharisees had already accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan. Jesus of course rebuked them and warned them to not blaspheme the Holy Spirit. But the point is, Jesus already was doing signs that should have told Pharisees who Jesus is. But the Pharisees either ignored or perverted these signs. The problem with the Pharisees was not a lack of signs. The problem was their hard hearts. That's what Jesus told them in the parallel event in chapter 7. The Pharisees were concerned with eternal purity but had missed their real need - to have a clean and pure heart.

And so that is why Jesus then warns the disciples on the boat about the leaven of the Pharisees. Jesus is warning the disciples about the teaching and influence of the Pharisees. You see leaven can be very influential. We talked about leaven last week when we looked at 1 Corinthians 5 and saw how Paul described sin as

leaven which is able to infect the whole church. That was the danger with the Pharisees and even with Herod. The Pharisees could infect the disciples with their bad teaching: teaching that emphasized traditionalism and externalism. And Herod, as we saw back in chapter 6, could infect the disciples with an unrepentant heart and wicked living. Both of these influences are like leaven which a small amount can affect a large lump of dough. The disciples were to be on guard against these influences.

But that is not how the disciples understood Jesus words, was it? No, we see on the boat here their spiritual dullness coming through. When they hear Jesus words, they talk amongst themselves what he meant. And since we had learned in verse 14 that they had forgotten to bring any bread, the disciples assume Jesus must be concerned about that. They concluded: Jesus must realize we didn't bring bread, and so he doesn't want us to take any bread from the Pharisees or from the Herodians when we get to the other side of the sea. And so the disciples were thinking physically. They heard the word leaven, and just thought about normal earthly bread. This response is wrong in so many ways!

But look at how Jesus responds. He doesn't clarify what he is saying. He doesn't say, "No, wait, I'm not talking about needing bread, I'm talking about the influence of the Pharisees and Herod." No, Jesus actually drops his point on that, and attends to an even more fundamental issue - their concern about not having bread. What? How can you guys be concerned about not having bread! This is the real problem! Remember, in the parallel passage, when Jesus walked on water to them in the boat, they were dumbfounded. But Mark told us that they were confused because they didn't understand about Jesus feeding the five thousand. Now they are on a boat again, and still hadn't learned that lesson, even after seeing the miracle again with the four thousand. They had seen Jesus twice miraculously feed a multitude with almost nothing, and they are worried that the 13 of them might go hungry? How dull can they be! And what this says goes beyond just bread. The disciples' dullness shows a fundamental lack of understanding who Jesus really is. They hadn't quite got it yet!

That's what Jesus then says. In verse 18, he first asks them two important questions. He basically says, "Look, you have eyes, but do you not see? You have ears, but do you not hear?" This obviously brings us back to the prophets of old and reminds us of Israel's history of spiritual ignorance. But then look at the next question Jesus asks them: "Do you not remember?" What were they supposed to remember? They were supposed to remember the two miraculous feedings Jesus had done. Jesus then gives them a test. He sees if they remember these two miracles. He reminds them the details of these miracles and for each asks how many leftovers were picked up. And guess what? The disciples get the answers right. They *remembered* just fine. They *remember* that the leftovers were 12 baskets full the first time and 7 larger baskets full the second time. In other words, the disciples' *memory* was just fine. They did remember. But then notice Jesus last question: "How is it you do not *understand*?" The Pharisees had asked for a sign - the disciples had two glaring signs right in front of them that should have told them who Jesus was - 12 baskets and 7 larger baskets full of leftovers!

That was the disciple's problem. They saw the crowds miraculously feed with their eyes. They heard Jesus' blessings of the bread and fish with their ears. They mentally remembered all the details. But they had not spiritually understood. They didn't understand the significance. They had eyes, but did not see. They had ears, but did not hear. They even had minds, but did not understand. And so the disciples were at a crossroad in their life. Who were the disciples going to be? Were they going to be like the Pharisees, rejecting Jesus' message, more concerned with the outward and external? Were they going to be like Herod, rejecting Jesus'

call to repentance, being content with sin? Were they going to be like the masses, the very masses that didn't know how to identify Jesus as we see in verse 28? Or were they going to be one of the insiders? Were they going to be those with eyes to see and ears to hear? Were they going to be people who understood the mystery of the kingdom of God, as Jesus described in Mark 4:11?

Well, they would be, but it would only be because of the work of Jesus in their lives. The miracle of the blind man actually illustrates the disciples' situation. As I mentioned, both parallel sets of events in chapters 6-8 end with a miracle followed by a confession. And it's certainly no coincidence that the first was a healing of a deaf man, and now this second one was of a blind man. The same senses that are spiritually dull for the disciples, are the ones that are healed physically by Jesus. That alone should tell us something about what Jesus is interested in doing. He's interested in giving us spiritual eyes and ears, and he illustrates that with giving people new physical eyes and ears.

But look specifically at this healing of the blind man which leads to the disciples finally confessing that Jesus is the Christ. Do you notice anything unusual with this miracle? There are actually a few things. Look at verse 23. Notice in verse 23 that he leads the blind man out of the town. He takes the blind man with him and has the blind man follow him. Usually Jesus just heals the people right there on the spot. He then spits on his eyes and puts his hand on him. The spitting on the eyes is a little abnormal for him, but it could be Jesus' way of making sure this blind man knows that it is Jesus healing him. But then what is especially out of the ordinary is that this man's healing essentially takes two tries. After the first laying on of Jesus' hands the man has a partial healing. His eye sight is partially restored, but he doesn't quite see clearly. The man reports that he sees people, but that they look like trees walking around. Then Jesus puts his hands on the man again, and verse 25 says that he was then fully restored, able to see clearly.

Commentators have discussed a lot about this miracle as you can imagine. Why would Jesus need a second take with this man to heal him? Certainly that is not the normal case with Jesus' healing. Jesus could but speak and the dead would be raised. So, why didn't this man receive a full healing here? Well, first off, I don't believe it's because of any lack of power by Jesus. Nothing in the text would suggest that. I think the difficulty comes if you try to study this miracle just in and of itself. However, if you look at the bigger story that Mark is telling here with the disciples, it actually makes perfect sense. It's actually a vivid illustration of what has been going on with the disciples. This blind man's healing needed a second take. The disciples had to have a second take. They had seen the first feeding of the five thousand, but didn't see clearly yet after it. They needed to witness the miracle again, and then be confronted with Jesus before recognition finally happened. Then the disciples began to see clearly. We know this to be the case because of what follows: the disciples confess that Jesus is the Christ!

And so don't think Mark tells us that Jesus healed a deaf man and a blind man just in passing. Do you see how Mark is tying all these events together? Behind all these two sets of parallel events in chapters 6-8 is Mark showing us how Jesus is giving the disciples new eyes and ears. Mark is showing how Jesus is working on the disciples' hearts and minds, softening their hearts and giving understanding to their minds. And so just as Jesus gives physical sight and physical hearing to these two impaired men, Jesus gives true sight and true hearing to the disciples. He takes their spiritual dullness and ignorance and gives them spiritual understanding. This culminates in their confession in verse 29 that Jesus is the Christ.

You see, this is the moral of the story! Jesus is the answer! The prophet Isaiah prophesied of that day saying, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy (35:5-6). All of these things are fulfilled by Jesus. We have seen all these miracles already performed by Jesus in the book of Mark. Jesus is the promised Messiah. The disciples had *finally* recognized it. They had finally made the connection and put it together. They had finally confessed what the rest of the crowds had not - that Jesus is the Christ.

You see the disciples were finally beginning to recognize that Jesus is all that they needed. When they were on the boat, they were all upset and concerned because they had no bread. They even said that in verse 16, "we have no bread." The other account of this miracle in Matthew 16 says the same thing, that they had no bread. And yet the inspired author Mark does tell us of one loaf that they had with them in the boat. Matthew's account doesn't mention this. But Mark says in verse 14 that they did have one loaf with them in the boat. It is extremely compelling to see this single loaf as actually Mark's clever way of pointing back to Jesus. You see the disciples weren't without any loaf of bread. They had the one loaf of bread right there with them in the boat. They had Jesus. And so I would propose to you that Jesus is the loaf. He is the spiritual bread come down from heaven, that whoever would eat of him would never hunger again. Now we can't be for certain that this was Mark's intention in noting that they only had one loaf with them in the boat. It certainly is suggestive. But the truth is surely correct. Jesus is the one. He is the only one we need. He is our life and breath. He is, as the disciples finally realized, the Christ; the Messiah. He is the one who had come to save the world. He is the one who came to save us from our sins and to bring us into eternal life. If we are with him, we need to fear nothing, not eternal damnation, and certainly not a little hunger from having to forgotten to bring bread.

And so as we see the disciples finally starting to "get it," finally starting to have spiritual understanding, we realize that their journey was a process. Like the blind man who was healed, there was progression in them being able to see more clearly. All of this was the work of Jesus. Jesus was leading them, and as they were with him, they were learning and growing. They were becoming more and more full of spiritual understanding. And yet it was a process. And it's a process that's not complete at this point in the story. Soon after Peter confesses on behalf of the disciples "You are the Christ", we find Jesus rebuking him. Jesus doesn't rebuke him for his confession. No, his confession was correct. But after his confession, Jesus then begins to teach them what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. He tells the disciples how he would have to suffer, die, and rise again, and Peter didn't like that, so Peter rebuked Jesus. Jesus in turn then rebukes Peter saying that Peter doesn't have in mind the things of God but the things of man. In other words, the disciples' journey continues. They finally had come to this climactic confession where they recognized Jesus as the Christ. Now they will have to learn what that means. Now they knew that Jesus was the Christ, but they didn't yet understand what the role of the Christ really ways. And so that is what we'll see in the remainder of the Gospel of Mark. This confession by the disciples is right in the center of the book of Mark. It's a climactic turning point in the book of Mark. But it's also a shift in direction. Mark has brought us to the conclusion now that Jesus is the Christ, now he's show us what that means. And so as we see the disciples continue in that journey, we will follow along with them!

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Jesus is the one, and he is the only one, who gives us spiritual understanding. And yet this story of the disciples figuring out who Jesus is should remind you that your relationship with Jesus is also going to be a

journey and a process. As you get to know Jesus, you are going to acquire a lot of knowledge about him. But you need to move beyond just head knowledge. In addition to knowledge, we also need understanding. You need those moments in your Christian life where you have a sort of spiritual "aha, I get it! I understand! I see now!" And as your heart grows softer and your spiritual eyesight and spiritual hearing is developed, it will yield those times where you too shout out, "Jesus is the Christ!" "He does all things well!"

But if spiritual understanding is a process, we should be meditating on what we are learning about Jesus. That is what Jesus rebuked the disciples for. They had seen his miracles, but hadn't really understood what they meant. They needed to reflect more on their significance. They needed to ponder them and consider them.

But as you do this, don't mistakenly think your growth is all about you - as if you give yourself spiritual understanding and enliven your spiritual senses. No, even as we ponder and meditate on God's Word, we should look to Christ himself for that. He is the one who opens our eyes and ears, who enlightens our minds and invigorates our hearts. In other words, we need Jesus' ear-opening, eye-enlightening, mind-awakening, heart-softening, spirit-reviving love in our lives. That's what we need. Pray for it. Ask him for that. He will surely give it to you. And praise him for it!

Lastly, I want you to understand that as we go down this spiritual journey, the result is something that will stand out as different than the world. The disciples came to confess that Jesus is the Christ, while the rest of the world wondered about Jesus and came up with all their own theories. The Pharisees thought he was from the devil. Herod was fascinated with him but refused to follow him. The orthodox confession that Jesus is Lord continues to be something that the world does not confess. And so as we each make that confession, we are standing up, and we are standing out, in this world. Sometimes the world will persecute us for that. Often they might just laugh at us and think we are crazy. But we must not be of the world. Let us hold fast to that confession, and grow in that confession. Praise be to Jesus who does grow us and preserve us in our confession of him. He does all things well! Amen.

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