

One of the outstanding features in Mark's gospel is what has sometimes been called the "Messianic Secret." The idea of the "Messianic Secret" comes from the fact that Jesus often commands silence regarding His miracles and His identity. So far we have heard Jesus command silence from demons in Mark 1:34 and 3:12, from the Leper He heals in Mark 1:44, to the Deaf man whose hearing is restored in Mark 7:36, and to the blind man made to see in Mark 8:26.

We can understand Jesus' call for silence from two perspectives. On the one hand, we can understand it as an attempt at crowd control. Jesus was trying to keep His identity secret and His miracles private to keep from being mobbed by the crowds. On the other hand, and without denying the truth of this first thing, I also think the Messianic Secret serves to build suspense as Mark tells his story. As the Gospel unfolds, the disciples don't know the answer to these questions and are in the process of answering them for themselves. Those who read the gospel or hear the gospel story, are invited to journey along with the disciples, share in their suspense and in their enlightenment. Mark doesn't just want to tell us who Jesus is--He wants us to discover it for ourselves. This is always a better way of learning. What we experience or discover for ourselves will always make a much bigger impact on us than something we've just been told.

Of course, those of us who have been in the church for a long time may be at a bit of a disadvantage. If we've already decided or discovered who Jesus is, we may tend to miss the drama and excitement of discovering Him. But I would encourage you to use your imaginations. Put yourselves in the place of Jesus' disciples and pretend you are finding out about Him for the first time: In taking this journey over again, you may discover something you missed the first time around.

Let's think about what we've seen of Jesus in the first half of Mark's gospel. We've seen Jesus heal the sick and cast out demons. We've seen Him cleanse a Leper, make a paralyzed man walk again, and restore a withered hand. We've seen Jesus calm a storm at sea, raise a child from the dead, and walk on water. Twice we've seen Him multiply several loaves of bread and a few small fish to feed multitudes of hungry people. Most recently we've seen Him restore hearing and clear speech to a man who had gone deaf and restore sight to a blind man. In addition to what we've seen, we've heard Jesus teach; He has taught religious freedom from man-made rules. He has taught about overcoming evil and about forgiveness. He has taught us about the Family of God, about the importance of having open hearts to God's

message, and about how the Kingdom of God grows. He has taught us about justice and the nature of evil. He has shown us by example that all people matter to God, regardless of race, gender, social standing or wealth.

But, the question is have we been seeing? Have we been hearing anything? Have we understood? Have we believed? The evidence has been piling up but what do we make of the evidence? Who is Jesus?

The first part of our Scripture passage this morning is the story of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. We mentioned this healing last Sunday, but I want us to take a closer look this morning. Mark 8:22-26 say:

"They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, 'Do you see anything?'" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village."

The first thing I would have you notice here is the Messianic Secret. Verse 26 says, "Jesus sent him home, saying, 'Don't go into the village.'" This instruction was meant to keep a lid on the miracle. Jesus took the man outside the village to heal him and tells him not to go back into the village afterwards. We notice in this the humility of Jesus; our natural tendency here I think would have been to take him back into the village as a trophy of how God used us to perform this miracle. Jesus wants to keep it quiet, at least for the moment. Jesus doesn't want to be mobbed by the crowd. Mark wants us to wonder what such secrecy is hiding.

Another thing I would have us notice in this story is the progressive nature of the healing. This is quite unique among all of the miracles of Jesus. It is the only one that is not instantaneously complete. Knowing that, we have to ask "why?" Why does this miracle occur gradually? There are a number of possibilities we could explore, but there are only two I want to surface this morning. First of all, I think this gradual or two-stage healing reminds us that healings and other forms of answered prayer may be given gradually; miracles don't have to happen all at once to be miracles. Answered prayers all glorify God and are miraculous occurrences whether given instantaneously or by stages. This story helps us not to be discouraged if we see no or limited

immediate results for our prayers. The answers we seek may unfold gradually.

The second explanation I would offer you this morning for the gradual healing of the blind man of Bethsaida is that it serves as a symbol for what is going on in the hearts and minds of the disciples at this point in Mark's gospel, and as a symbol of what may be going on in the hearts and minds of those who read this gospel later. The disciples were gradually coming to understand. Their eyes were gradually opening to the truth of who Jesus was and is.

This is the usual path for most people who come to faith. Though there are those who like the Apostle Paul come to faith in Christ in a "Damascus road" experience, most of us come to it in stages. We experience a little of Christ here and a little there. We hear the gospel message. We get some teaching. We meet a Christian or a Christian family who seems genuine. Perhaps there is an answer to prayer. The evidence builds. The Holy Spirit woos us over time like a patient but persistent lover. Little by little, the light dawns. Our spiritual eyes are opened, but at first we "see men as trees walking." But then there is another word or another touch from the Lord and the veil is lifted. Suddenly we see clearly and we proclaim, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

The question asserts itself at this point: Where am I, where are you in terms of this spiritual journey? Are our spiritual eyes still closed, partially opened, blurry, or wide and clear to presence of the Lord within us and among us? **Are your eyes open to see Jesus?**

Moving on to verses 27-30, we read: *"Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?'" he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'" Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.' Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him."*

The secret of Jesus' identity is still in effect for the crowds, but this is an "aha!" moment for His disciples. Jesus is not John the Baptist raised from the dead. Jesus is not Elijah returned. Jesus is not one of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Christ, Savior. Jesus is the One God has promised.

Another question surfaces: Who is Jesus to you and me? This little passage of Scripture is so powerful in reference to the world in which we find ourselves. The opinions of who Jesus was or is are many. Some say He was just a prophet. Some say a moral teacher, while

others see Him as a troublemaker. Still others say He is a myth. Some late night comedians say He is fair game for crude jokes. Some make Him out to be a fraud. Some people see Him as a personal genie, a lucky rabbit's foot, or spiritual pepper spray to ward off evil Karma. We could go on. But what others say doesn't matter; the question is who is Jesus to you and me?

Do we know Him as the One--the One and Only--the One who saves us from our sins? Do we know Him as the Christ? **Are your eyes open to see Him as your Savior?**

Dr. David McKenna, says that Mark is divided into two main questions. The first question is "Who?" "Who is Jesus? And, the second question is "How?" "How does Jesus live out His identity?" Once Mark establishes the fact that Jesus is the Savior, he goes on in the second half of his gospel to tell us how Jesus saves us.

And, certainly, we note an abrupt change in mood beginning at verses 31: Mark 8:31-32 say, *"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."*

I think we are a lot like Peter. We like all the good stuff. We like Jesus' ministry of healing and deliverance. We like the miracles. We like it when His answers confound the criticisms of the Pharisees. But, we don't like this talk about suffering and death. Maybe Peter's eyes aren't all the open yet after all and maybe ours aren't either. The truth is that we cannot know Jesus fully as our Savior until we embrace Him as our sacrifice. Eternal life is purchased at the price of His sufferings and of His death. Anything short of this won't do.

Jesus makes this clear in his rebuke to Peter. Mark 8:33 says, *"But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."* Do you see what I see? Any attempt to detour around the cross is instigated by Satan; it bows to the reasoning of man and minimizes the ways of God. We need to remember: **He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, and only by His stripes are we healed** (see Isaiah 53:5).

Yes, the Christian life is wonderful. There are miracles and many answered prayers. There will be wonderful times of intimacy with our Savior and times of high adventure with Him and one another, followed

by times of rest and comfort. But, the journey also takes us through dark valleys. Beginning at verse 35 we see this side of what it means to follow Jesus:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Once we know Who Jesus is and what He has done to save us, the last question that presents itself to us is this "will we follow Him?" This is not a question to be taken lightly for it means to surrender our ways to His ways. It means giving up worldly riches in favor of heavenly treasure. It means taking our cues for living from the Lord instead of from the people and culture around us. It means giving up self-preservation in favor of self-sacrifice. It means taking a stand for Jesus and for the values of His kingdom when everyone else is ridiculing Him and denying His values.

It's not all majesty and miracles; a lot of this journey involves hard work, loneliness, ridicule, uncertainty, and pain. But these are sacrifices we are willing to make because we know something of what He has sacrificed for us. **Knowing Who He is and the price He paid to save us, we take up the cross and follow Jesus.**

Mark asks two questions for everyone: "Who is Jesus?" and "How does Jesus save?" Three questions present themselves to us here this morning: "Who do we say Jesus is?" "Have we received the sacrifice He made for our sins?" "Will we follow Him as our Lord and Savior?" How will you answer? What will you do with Jesus?

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Sermon for September 30, 2007

The Most Important Question

Mark 8:22-38

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