



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Like Trees, Walking

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He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking" (Mark 8:23-24).

Here is this blind man in the little village of Bethsaida. His friends bring him to Jesus and beg Jesus to touch him, and their begging shows the depth of their caring. They're not even sure what Jesus can do for him, but they plead: "Please, Jesus. Please just touch him." We pray for people, and for ourselves, with all degrees of intensity, don't we? But when we beg or plead, we really, desperately want God to come through.

Jesus is moved, as he's always moved by suffering, and he's moved by people's compassion for others. Compassion contrasts with indifference the way light shines in darkness, so of course Jesus notices compassion. He will care for this blind man, partly out of his own compassion and partly because of his friends' caring. That's the way prayer works.

Jesus will answer the friends' prayers, but notice how he does it. First, he takes the man by his hand. We pray that way too sometimes: "Precious Lord, take my hand." And Jesus does. He takes this man by the hand, and then he leads him step by step, still blind, out of the village.

Why does he do that? Why take the man out of the village? Why not just heal him right then and there? Maybe it's because the people of Bethsaida are rather hard-hearted and unlikely to be moved, even by a miracle. Jesus says on

another occasion, “Woe to you, Bethsaida, for if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago.” Maybe even answers to prayer are lost on some people. But there’s another possibility as well. Maybe those of us who are watching are meant to see something, not only in what Jesus does but in how he does it. Maybe we’re to notice how Jesus can lead us for a while before we’re able to see where we’re going—before we can see even Jesus himself.

In any case, here outside the village, after this man has walked a way with the Christ he can’t see, Jesus stops. He turns and puts saliva on the man’s eyes and lays his hands on him. Why saliva? Is there some sort of healing property in that, some medicinal value? People often get lost in those kinds of details, but whatever it is about the salves used in healing, the salvation itself, the actual healing, always comes as a gift from God. So Jesus takes something of himself, and applies it to the man’s eyes, and then he asks, “Can you see anything?”

“I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Apparently, this man used to be able to see. He knows what people look like, and he knows what trees look like, but now that he’s starting to see again, his vision is still not good. How do you suppose he feels right now, in this moment of partial healing? Is he grateful that he can see anything at all, when half an hour ago he was completely blind? Is he excited, hoping his vision is on its way back to 20/20 and he can get on with his life? Or is he disappointed that he’s only been healed part-way?

And what kind of healer is this Jesus, who only heals half-way? Does he really have to work at it? Are there limits

to what Jesus can do? We wonder why healing does not come all at once, or why it seems to come only in part.

But Jesus is not finished yet. He lays his hands on the man again, and he looks intently, as if to transfer vision itself from his own eyes to this man's eyes; and then the man's sight is restored. He sees everything clearly now, and the slight momentary affliction of doubt and uncertainty and partial healing is just a fast-fading memory, swallowed up in the joy of wholeness and healing.

Why did it seem to take two tries for Jesus to heal this man? Why didn't he get it right the first time? I don't know, but maybe that's part of the point. None of us sees very clearly now, even if we've walked with Jesus for a while. We still see through a glass darkly, as St. Paul says, writing a letter that will turn out to be part of the Bible itself. Maybe that's what Mark means. We see only a little now. Jesus walked with us and led us by the hand before we saw him at all, and even while he heals us, we see only in part. We're still learning to see.

And speaking of seeing things, notice where this little story falls in the course of Mark's gospel. Jesus recently fed a crowd of 4,000 people with seven loaves and a few small fish. That's after he already fed 5,000 in another place with similarly slim pickings. Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker is getting around, and he's healed lots of people, but still the Pharisees want to see some sign from heaven. It's exasperating, even to Jesus, and Mark says he sighs from someplace deep within his spirit. "Why does this generation still ask for a sign? Why can't they see?"

Then Jesus and his disciples get in a boat and cast off across the big lake toward Bethsaida. On the way, in

another touch of that divine comedy we miss if we don't have eyes to see it, the disciples realize that they only have one loaf of bread. They forgot to pack any sandwiches, and they start fussing about that. This strikes Jesus as a teaching moment, so he begins to say, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees." But the hungry disciples respond cluelessly: "He's talking about how we forgot to bring the bread. Why is he talking about that?"

Jesus finds his little band of brothers remarkable—not because they forgot to bring lunch, but because they're so worried about it. They're no more insightful than the Pharisees, even after all this time. "Why are you talking about bread?" he asks. "Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and not hear?" Jesus reviews the events of recent weeks with them. "When I broke five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets were left over?" "Twelve," they say. "And the seven loaves for four thousand, how many baskets were left?" "Uh, seven." "Then when will you understand?"

That's when they come to Bethsaida, and the healing of the man who cannot see. And right after that, on the long walk to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?"

"Some say you're John the Baptist, back from the dead, or Elijah, or one of the prophets."

"But who do *you* say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples. Peter, being Peter, blurts out, "You are the Messiah!" Then Jesus starts to tell them about the suffering he has to undergo, and the rejection he's about to face, but Peter wants none of it. "No, no, you've got it all wrong, Master. The Messiah doesn't die. The Messiah wins. The

Messiah beats the bad guys, not the other way around!” But Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan,” which in this case basically means Tempter. “You set your mind not on heavenly things, but on human things.”

So that’s the setting for this little story about the blind man in Mark’s gospel: between Pharisees who can’t recognize the Messiah when they see him and disciples who, for all they’ve seen, still don’t understand, and cringe at the cost of discipleship. The story is not just about a blind man who happens to be healed along the way. It’s about all the rest of us who claim to be disciples of Jesus. Christ can feed multitudes, and we’re still afraid there won’t be enough for us. He brings sight to the blind, but we still don’t see very well. We cringe when he talks about a cross we might have to bear before we come into his kingdom.

Jesus walks with us, and leads us by the hand before we even see him. Then, when we need some sort of rescue, some intervention in our lives, we’re anxious because it seems to come so slowly and we wonder why it’s taking so long.

Several years ago, a group of miners not far from here were trapped underground in the cold, damp darkness. Family and friends and total strangers gathered on the surface, praying hard, while engineers drilled down to find the men. For a time there was no sound from the miners, and no one knew whether they were dead or alive. Then, in the middle of the rescue operation, the big drill bit broke and precious time was lost while they had to go and find another bit and start another hole.

Finally, seventy-odd hours after the accident, the miners were found alive and brought back to the surface.

Someone said later that if the original hole had been completed, it would have sent water flooding into the space where the miners were trapped, and they all would have drowned. What looked like a terrible setback when the drill bit broke turned out to be, in the eyes of those who prayed, the guiding hand of God. To those who did not believe in prayer, it was just a remarkable piece of good luck.

To our limited vision the works of God often look like trees walking. We see a little, but we don't see clearly, and we're full of questions. Even if God healed the blind man, why was he blind in the first place? God may have answered those people's prayers, but why were the miners trapped at all? And why don't everyone's prayers always seem to be answered?

We see some things only dimly in this life. We don't understand, much of the time. But Jesus' disciples didn't always understand either, and when they got around to writing the gospel, they told us how poor their vision had been. They tell us again and again that even those who walked with Jesus did not understand until much later, on the other side of the Resurrection. The implication for us seems to be that neither will we understand fully, until we see the risen Lord.

In the meantime, we don't see Jesus very clearly. We see him only through our preconceptions and preoccupations. But Jesus sees us, and that's what matters most. "Now we see through a glass darkly, but then we shall see face to face," St. Paul says. "Now we know in part, but then we shall know fully, even as we have been fully known." One day it will all be clear. For now, the one who heals and saves watches over us—and if we don't see quite clearly, maybe that's all right. Maybe we just need to pray for

more patience, and trust that Jesus is not finished with us yet.



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