

WESTMINSTER
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THE GOOD NEWS:
We Saw Someone

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Since the earliest of times people of faith have gone on pilgrimages. Today, pilgrimages entice even people who claim to be indifferent to faith to embark on an ancient path.

A pilgrimage roughly means a journey, usually on foot.

I've companioned – not led – pilgrimages over the years in various countries, in all sorts of weather, through myriad terrains. I say “companioned” since everyone needs to put their feet, one in front of the other on the road, carry their own backpack and burdens, endure their own blisters and heavy breathing up the hills.

Along the way, you cannot help but compare your pace against another's. Someone skips along, like a Billy goat while an athlete falls to the back of the pack in a *Winnie the Pooh* style to stop every few steps, claiming the desire to smell the roses.

Since a pilgrimage is not a race, any competitive streak becomes absurd. And yet, you notice your differences in ability, interests, and what others will notice about you. When you see someone, you choose to welcome them or keep your

distance. A measure of caution helps you discern what the other person wants from the pilgrimage – or from you.

Prior to the Reformation, priests prescribed a pilgrimage as penance for sins. Today a person's motive to walk is rarely consistent.

People begin with great plans to journal, photograph, or maybe engage in some spiritual practice. By the third day, fatigue disperses any euphoria and by mid-afternoon, when still miles from the evening bed, you wonder “why am I doing this?”

That's the point, the pilgrimage will challenge you. It demands self-reflection and will test your endurance. Maybe that is the mystery: It's not so much what we see in others but what we find in ourselves.

Let's learn from Jesus and his disciples as they head towards Jerusalem. They are long past the novelty phase of being away from home and witnessing Jesus' miracles. They question if any possible good comes *to them* by following Jesus.

Peter still stings from Jesus' rebuke back in Caesarea Philippi. He imagines Jesus as Messiah to topple the Roman empire. What's wrong with wanting to stop the madness of that tyrant? And does Jesus really think he's "satan"? And, yet Peter follows him.

James and John are scratching their heads from Jesus' reprimand about desiring greatness. Isn't that what builds secure society, great leaders? They did not leave home and family to grovel as servants.

Tired. Confused. The disciples are far deeper than a day-three breakdown. Now, heading to Jerusalem seems like a bad plan if it means Jesus will die.

Our gospel story picks up with Jesus still holding a child in the center of his lap.

Dear God

We'll walk for miles to see you.

We've cleared our calendars to hear you.

In our life's journey, we seek your will and to follow in Christ's way.

Silence the noise around. Send your spirit to chase away

our false notions so we hear you

as clearly today as centuries ago. Amen.

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.”

³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴²“If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into

hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

“We saw someone.” This disciple, John, provokes a piercing lecture by saying, “we saw someone.”

Does he intend for Jesus to fight that outsider? Maybe then Jesus would stop poking at his disciples. Or, is this John’s subversive desire to accrue credit for guarding Jesus and by extension their exclusive mission?

In a time of divisiveness, it behooves someone to differentiate allies from foes. Knowing clear boundaries ensures one is not left outside of the group’s security. John warns, “those not with us must be against us” and this man is an enemy.

At this stage of their journey to Jerusalem, the disciples are exhausted. To compound their physical state Jesus confounds them by teaching of his impending death. At this breaking

point, they begin to expose their deepest motives. And Jesus lashes out.

They cannot understand that his messiahship – fully revealed on the other side of the cross – will extinguish the worldly values of greatness, division, and domination.

Curiously, it is the most graceful thing that exposes their lack of understanding. Someone else casts out a demon giving credit to Jesus. Something good happens and they feel rage.

Even though they had not done a good job of casting out demons themselves, like petulant children, they claim that's still their mission and Jesus is their messiah.

Now Jesus describes in graphic details the hellacious consequences of their desires to achieve greatness. His hyperbole shakes them from within. Beware of how their feet can take them places they should not go. Their hand can reach where they shouldn't. Their eyes can gaze with malicious intent. Within them exists the potential to corrupt the entirety of their lives. Jesus teaches about seeing yourself....not judging or punishing anyone else.

Notice, please, that Jesus does NOT say, “If you see someone’s hand causing them to sin, chase them down and cut it off.” Jesus says If YOUR hand causes you to sin. . . If YOUR eye causes you to sin. . . He is speaking about each of us taking a personal inventory of OURSELVES, not of anyone else.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ ministry explicitly reaches out to outsiders to heal and love them – out of pure desire to heal them, not for personal gain. When any disciple inserts themselves between another person and Jesus, they are doing the opposite of what it means to be a follower. They cause stumbling – for the other person and for themselves.

Seeing with Jesus’ eyes may mean seeing the sinful ways we serve self-interests. He wants us to see that small child still sitting in his lap.

This is a text (and a test) for our time and probably most times in human history. We follow a messiah who made all the wrong people feel right and erased every boundary and border he ever came upon. Society and the human heart tend toward division and judgement along lines of difference and seeking approval.

Jesus wants to end this then and now. When we remain fixated on exploiting differences and condemning others we simply cannot see what Jesus. When we say, “we saw someone” in the same derision as John did, we simultaneously judge the other and expose ourselves.

If we are getting weary of being called out these past weeks, well, that’s the bite of Mark’s gospel. It forces us to see that we live in a competitive world and voices roar with fear to induce suspicion and division – in politics, commerce, education, one-ups-manship.

When we discover ourselves slipping into this penchant for “we saw someone,” let it become a mirror in which we ask ourselves – what does this reveal about me?

- The fear I might lose something and another person might win?
- The fear that despite all the evidence to the contrary, in a community of abundance, there might not be enough?
- The fear that someone may look at me and judge me as not good enough?

The good news of this harsh story is that when we realize the way this “we saw someone” attitude corrupts our lives, we can trust in Christ’s grace to heal and forgive us.

In Mark’s gospel, the risen Christ tells his disciples that he has gone ahead of them. They will see him in Galilee.

History tells us that after his resurrection, when they gathered together and resumed his work, they understood what it means to see with his eyes, to spread the good news by serving the vulnerable, to upset power with love. History tells us that their willingness to let go of greatness and division is precisely what fueled the spread of the good news.

When we replace “we saw someone” with faith’s “we see as Jesus” we draw ourselves and everyone else closer to God.

Let me close with a story. In ancient Israel, several times each year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would ascend to Jerusalem. As part of a pilgrimage ritual, they would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, turning to the right *en masse*, circling counterclockwise.

Meanwhile, the brokenhearted, the mourners, would make this same ritual walk but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction: every step against the current. And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into that person's eyes and inquire: "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?" "My father died," a person might say. "There are so many things I never got to say to him." Or perhaps: "My partner left. I was completely blindsided." Or: "My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results."

Those who walked from the right offer a blessing: "May the Holy One comfort you," they would say. "You are not alone." And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached. This timeless wisdom speaks to what it means to be human in a world.

This year, you may walk the path of the anguished. Perhaps next year, it may be me.

I will hold your broken heart knowing that one day you will hold mine. This is what it means to see someone. To see someone with the eyes of faith.



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