

Blind Spots

Last week we overheard yet another dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees about the things that divide us from God and one another, the words and actions that undermine community and drive us farther away from the God who longs to hold us close. On the heels of that encounter, Jesus continues to wind his way from the outer reaches of the region toward Jerusalem, the heart of the story. He heals a little girl who happens not to be Jewish and unstops the ears of a deaf man. He finds a way to feed 4000 on a hillside with the disciples' meager snack of a few loaves and a couple of fish. Jesus goes on to warn the disciples about trusting all that the Pharisees and the empire try to feed them, and then he heals a blind man, on his second attempt. [Mark 8:27-9:9]

One of the toughest parts of learning to drive for me was understanding blind spots. Until you've almost been side-swiped by a car you didn't see coming, blind spots may not make sense. After all there are windows and mirrors that allow 360 degrees of visibility, right? No. Not really. Last summer we rented a car to haul us and our stuff and two teenagers and their stuff to the beach. Our cars are well-loved. Mine is a 2006. I felt fancy when we bought it because it has a CD player in it, and an outlet where I can plug in a regular cord instead of using the lighter—very hi-tech. The rental was of course a much newer model, complete with a screen with a rearview camera and any number of bells and whistles, including a blind spot alert. Thankfully this alert does not beep or chime. It simply flashes on the side mirror when another car is in a spot the driver might not see. I honestly loved most of the bells and whistles, including these alerts, but the curmudgeon in me begins to wonder if it's really driving without having to glance over my shoulder before changing lanes. Do I risk forgetting that blind spots are a danger if the car does all the work for me? I'm not sure it's a good idea for me to expect something else to do my blind spot work for me.

Throughout the season of Epiphany, Mark has been introducing us to Jesus, helping the community come to an understanding of who Jesus is and what his ministry among us is about. We have now reached the narrative and the mathematical midpoint of Mark's gospel, so it makes sense to pause and asked what we have

learned so far. We have learned that Jesus includes others in the work of this kingdom-come-near. He invites fishermen to join him as disciples and students. He calls tax collectors and sinners to follow him as well. He heals and teaches and feeds thousands. He walks on water and gets exasperated. He is concerned for our relationship with God and one another, and he has no time to waste in ushering in the kingdom God has in mind. So now in the middle of the story, he stops and asks Peter what the word is on the street. He wants to know how people perceive him. I don't think it's an ego thing for Jesus. Rather, I believe he wants to know if the disciples are paying attention, and then he wants to know what they are thinking as well. And so he asks, who do you—all of you—say that I am? And Peter is quick to respond: "You are the Christ." Or in other translations, "You are the Messiah."

This is the first time Mark has used this title for Jesus since the chapter one, verse one, and it is a title Jesus does not use to refer to himself in Mark. His response to Peter is confusing. I for one want Peter to get a gold star or at least a thumbs up for getting the title correct. It feels like a win. But Jesus knows more than I do. He tells Peter and the others not to tell anyone about him. It seems that Peter has a blind spot, that he cannot or does not fully grasp just what being Messiah means. So Jesus goes on to fill out the picture:

[The Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.¹

And Peter refuses to hear it. Our translation says that he begins to correct Jesus, but the Greek is stronger than saying, "I beg to differ." Instead Mark uses the language of rebuke, the very same verb Mark uses when Jesus calls out demons. Peter has a blind spot. A big one. He cannot see, he cannot imagine what Jesus is telling him. Messiah—*Christos* in Greek, means anointed one. Anointed ones in Ancient Israel's story are kings, and kings do not suffer, nor are they rejected by the very religious leaders who have longed for their arrival. Nor are they killed. Peter cannot comprehend such a thing. It does not compute.

It is hard to blame Peter really. The truth can be hard to grasp, difficult to face, especially when the truth turns the truth you've known on its head. Maybe it's because we have a student driver in our house, but I feel like I am running into my own blind spots everywhere I turn these days. As I think you know, I'm not from

¹ Mark 8: 31, CEB

around here originally, and I have been slowly coming to grips with just how blind I was to the systemic racism at work in every aspect of my life growing up below the Mason-Dixon Line. I attended private schools that were founded around the time when Brown vs. Board of Education declared segregated schools to be unconstitutional, the time when desegregation began. I attended a wonderful Presbyterian liberal arts college that was built in part by enslaved people, some of whom were enslaved by some of the college's original trustees. That is not a truth I wanted or was even able to see. But not seeing it, pretending that it did not happen that way, does not make it any less true. Nor does that blind spot move me or those institutions any closer to redemption.

I was told that it was different in the north, that racism was not an issue up here, but that is not true either, is it? Just this week, the model for a new monument that will be installed on the grounds of the capital was unveiled. The monument serves as a reminder of the old 8th ward which was demolished so that the park behind the capital could be built as part of the beautification of Harrisburg. It will also commemorate the passage of the 15th and 19th amendments which gave black men and women the right to vote. The capital complex is lovely, but that loveliness came at a cost to the black community, including the many who were told to vacate their properties and move elsewhere. That wound still runs deep. Ignoring it or saying it just can't be true does nothing to bring healing or hope.²

And so Jesus' words echo in my ears much as they must ring in Peter's. I wish that salvation did not mean pain or suffering or—heaven forbid—a cross. The cross was used throughout the Roman Empire as a weapon of torture, a harsh, cruel, and shameful warning to anyone who dared cross the status quo or threaten the powers that be. Scholars argue about what Mark means that Jesus must suffer, must be rejected, and must die. Some would say that God requires that kind of death, but I think it is more damning than that. I think the cross stands as a stark reminder of just what humanity will do to one who speaks out against injustice, one who

² <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/01/monument-planned-on-pa-capitol-grounds-to-be-nations-first-to-commemorate-the-15th-and-19th-amendments-to-us-constitution-that-expanded-voting-rights.html>
https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/02/support-pours-in-for-long-overdue-monument-to-harrisburg-neighborhood-razed-to-make-way-for-the-capitol.html?fbclid=IwAR3cT1JpWFR8v6N3X6JEiHGANpDhn6Ou1wIIOkFKO3J5k8ltvblNGrQr_dA
https://digitalharrisburg.com/2019/01/16/remembering-the-old-eighth-ward/?fbclid=IwAR0buT5VDMQkuj5FN_AHGC3IKIXkRCAKJYPm_iBLQnov5Sn1S9fPMnmh8Lk

calls people to love God more than anyone or anything else, one who confronts the powerful or those who oppress others while hiding behind their religious beliefs.

The shift to the shiny moment on the mountain seems odd and abrupt on the heels of this suffering and dying talk. No wonder Peter wants to set up camp and stay put. *This* is more like it after all. A bright light, the voice of God, sparkling white robes and hanging out with Moses and Elijah: *this* matches the Messiah picture Peter has in his head. But *this* is not where Jesus is headed. This mountain is not the destination he has in mind. Yes, this moment simply and profoundly confirms who he is. Yes, Jesus is God's beloved Son. Yes, he is destined for resurrection and glory. And, yes, he is headed back down the mountain to come face to face with the very worst the world can throw at him.

And down the mountain is exactly where he belongs. We need Jesus to walk headlong down into the trenches where people are still written off because of the language they speak, the color of their skin, the bills they cannot pay, the illness they cannot cure, the person they love, or the papers they do or do not carry. It matters that the Jesus of the mountaintop is also the Christ of the cross. It matters that we see him as both. It matters that we allow him to give us a new vision, to remove the blind spots that get in our way, to help us confront all that threatens to undo us, to undo our loved ones, to undo all God's beloved children. It matters that we his church do this hard blind spot work. It matters that we do not leave that messy work to others, that we do not offload that work or outsource it either. And so in the coming weeks we will walk down the mountain and alongside this Jesus, the shining one who must suffer, the beloved Son of God who will die on the cross. And as we go, we will be praying for our blind spots to be cleared away, too. Because then, and only then will we be able to see this Jesus for who he is. Then and only then, by the grace of God, will we be able to begin to imagine the kingdom and the resurrection life he comes to usher in, for us and for all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.