

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I'm sure that it has escaped the attention of no one in this room or joining us online in one way or another that the campaign for the upcoming elections has kicked into high gear. This past Tuesday was the first and maybe only debate between the current pair of contenders for the highest office in the land. This was a chance for them to put themselves out there, to make a case for why they deserve our vote. And it was a chance for American voters to have the candidates side by side, to see how they compare. Because in six weeks we will determine, we voters, who these two will be. We will determine that one of them will be the next president, and one of them will be either ex-president or ex-vice-president.

Today's Gospel reading finds Jesus in what might be seen as an analogous situation, at least superficially. Up until this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been travelling around, at home and abroad, making a name for himself; healing, casting out demons, feeding crowds of people in the wilderness, and proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near. Now, right smack in the middle of the Gospel, Jesus does some polling. What are they saying about me? Who do they think that I am? The thing is, we've already heard the answers to this question two chapters earlier, in the story about the death of John the Baptist. People were saying many of the same things then, that Jesus was Elijah returned from being taken up into heaven, or that he was another prophet. But Herod came to a different conclusion. It seems he was haunted by being tricked into killing John the Baptist, and he was sure that Jesus was John back from the dead, perhaps to avenge himself. So Jesus has heard some of these options before, but he's taking another poll, maybe to see if anything had changed.

Last week we had two different episodes from Jesus' travels in Gentile territory, and in my sermon I only talked about one of them, that remarkable encounter with the Syrophonecian woman and the healing of her daughter. The other story there was the healing of a deaf man. And it's interesting that unlike in other healing stories, Mark goes into some detail with this one. He doesn't just tell us that Jesus heals him, but that there was a process involved. Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears. He spat and touched the man's tongue. And he sighed, as if there was some effort involved, before saying to the man, "be opened" and the man being healed.

Between that story and today's reading a few other things happen. Jesus feeds another crowd of people, four thousand the second time; he has another difficult encounter with the Pharisees, which also elicits a deep sigh from him; and then there is a story, right before our reading today, about healing a blind man. And again, there is a process involved, some effort expended. Jesus' first attempt is not entirely successful. The man sees, only partially. He is no longer completely in the dark, but says that the people he sees look like trees walking. So Jesus gives it another try, and after that the man sees clearly.

It is important to have these healing stories in mind when considering today's Gospel text so that we can recognize today's episode as a similar kind of encounter. All of this fits into a theme that is present throughout the first part of Mark's Gospel, a theme of opening eyes and ears. It comes from the prophet Isaiah, and is part of God's promised future for God's people. The deaf will hear, God says, and the blind will see. It is a promise that is both literal and figurative, so that Jesus' question to his disciples about who people say that he is, and especially who *the disciples* say that he is, is a kind of diagnostic exam. What are you hearing and seeing after spending all this time with me?

Peter speaks up and declares that Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed, the one God had promised to send to rescue and restore God's people. This is the right answer. But it's also kind of a lucky guess – or an inspired one, as Jesus says in Matthew's account. Because what comes next shows that like the blind man in the story just before this one, Peter does not yet see clearly. Jesus already seems to know this. He knows that it's going to take some more effort to fully open Peter's eyes, and the eyes of the other disciples. And that's why he has to order them not to tell anyone about him. Not yet. Because like Jesus, they are still "on the way." They have not yet arrived at the destination.

In fact, they don't even know yet where the road ahead is leading. Because when they find out, they are shocked. Jesus pulls out the map, as it were, and shows them. He is heading for suffering, for rejection, and for death. And that sounds to Peter, and we may assume to the other disciples also, like a really bad idea, like seeing a big sign that says "bridge out ahead" and continuing down the same road anyway.

And so Peter gets up in Jesus' face, literally gets in Jesus' way, and says "no way!" "You cannot go down that road." And so Jesus has to get up in Peter's face and tell him off. "Get behind me, Satan!" he says. "You are looking down the wrong road, the human way, not God's way, because you are not yet seeing or hearing clearly. You cannot be allowed to drive in your condition, it will end in disaster. So get back in the car. I am driving." That's another way of saying, "follow me," which is what Jesus meant by saying, "get behind me."

What the disciples do not yet see, and what we often fail to appreciate or we forget in our lives as disciples of Jesus, is that the way of the cross that Jesus leads us down does not *end* at the cross. Peter did not seem to register the last thing Jesus said, that he would rise again. He did not yet catch that the cross was not Jesus' final destination, but that it too was "on the way" to the ultimate destination of genuine, abundant, and everlasting life. And so Jesus would have to try again with Peter, and again and again. Opening his ears and his eyes and his heart was going to be an ongoing process, no doubt with more sighs on Jesus' part.

And that, sisters and brothers in Christ, is where we too find ourselves, on the way with Jesus, hearing and not hearing, seeing and not seeing, sometimes getting it right, sometimes getting it disastrously wrong, alternately following and getting in Jesus' way. That is the life of faith. And it's why we call one of our faith-formation offerings here at Grace "On The Way." That's starting up again next week, by the way; Consult your GraceNotes." The good news, of course, is that we are not alone on this journey, that we are traveling together, and that Jesus is with us on the way. And just like with the blind man, and just like with Peter, Jesus does not give up on us when we fail to see or hear clearly. Jesus keeps at it. He keeps showing up when we gather in his name around his word and sacraments, keeps feeding us at his table, keeps working to open our ears and eyes and hearts, and to steer us away from the ways of this world that draw us from God, so that we might continue to follow him towards to the life that is ours through his cross.

May we draw strength and comfort from that good news. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds, and ears and eyes, in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.