

Mark 8:1-9:1

Introductory Comments

1. Mark 8 contains two miracles of Jesus, Peter's confession, and Jesus' first prediction of his own death and resurrection. It is the middle chapter of the Gospel, and it is a turning point where Mark's description of Jesus as teacher and miracle worker gives way to his focus on the role of Jesus' death and the difficult nature of his teachings.
2. Once again, Mark uses geographical movement as a means to delineate the story. In this case, pay attention to where and with whom Jesus experiences opposition, and where and with whom he experiences faith.
3. We have noted since chapter four that Mark increasingly employs the disciples as negative examples for the audience/reader. As you read today's material, pay attention to how you feel toward the disciples based on how Mark is presenting the situations involving them. Are they sympathetic figures? Are they comedic? Ironic? Something else?

Questions and read 8:1-9:1

Discussion Questions

1. What are similarities and differences between the two feeding stories? (6:34-44 – 5000 ppl, 5 loaves, 2 fish, 12 baskets left over; 8:1-9 – 4000 ppl, 7 loaves, few fish, 7 baskets left over). **What is the purpose of these two stories in close proximity to each other?** *We, the audience, have just seen, in Mark 6, how Jesus is able to feed a multitude when the disciples didn't think it was possible. Now, in Mark 8, we have a reprise of this act. But when Jesus touches the issue of feeding the multitude, the disciples, rather than remembering what Jesus has done before and responding willingly, ask, "How can one feed these people in a desert?" For the audience, the answer is shockingly plain – "Well, the same way he did in the past!" The scene plays out similarly to the first, but the irony is manifest: Jesus had more food and a smaller crowd, but still the disciples, who **distributed** the food in the earlier episode, professed ignorance about how the crowd could be fed. The purpose of these two episodes so near to one another is to further distance the faithless, forgetful, hard-of-heart disciples from the audience who sees, hears, and remembers what Jesus has done. It is also to show that, when faithless soil proliferates, Jesus' power is diminished.*

2. While in the boat crossing over the Sea of Galilee (8:14-21), the interaction between Jesus and the disciples is borderline satirical. What is Mark doing here? *They're in a boat with one loaf of bread. Jesus is trying to teach the disciples metaphorically to avoid "the leaven" of the Pharisees. Missing the metaphor altogether, the disciples get worried about not having bread. Sitting in the boat with one who has just fed 4000 people with seven loaves of bread and earlier fed 5000 people with five loaves, the disciples' worry over 13 people with one loaf strikes the*

audience as absurd and also draws Jesus' exasperated rebuke (8:17-18). Jesus' comments define the nature of the audience's response to the disciples at this point. The irony of the situation is so broad that the reader could find it funny or view the disciples as hopeless dimwits. Jesus' anger and stern words to the disciples, however, indicate to the reader the seriousness and disappointment inherent in their present lack of comprehension. Because we see so clearly what they do not, this scene makes the disciples all the more removed from the audience's sympathy, and creates a stronger bond between the audience, narrator, and Jesus.

3. Why do you think Mark has them meet a blind man as soon as they land in Bethsaida? *It accentuates the lack of faith in the disciples which renders them "blind," and the fact that it's easier to bring sight to a blind man who has faith. Why all the elaborate machinations in the healing of the blind man?* *It illustrates that it's getting harder for Jesus to perform miracles; again, not because of any lack of power within Jesus, but because of the proliferation of unfruitful ground. At this point, the Gospel is only halfway through, and there will only be two more healing miracles and one nature miracle.*

4. When Jesus tells the cured blind man in v. 26, "Do not even go into the village," (i.e. don't tell anyone about this) what does he mean? *It's a literary device, akin to "reverse psychology." Look back to 4:21-25. It says that there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Jesus knows and expects that fruitful ground will be fruitful, because as it says in 4:26-28, the nature of good soil is to grow and spread seed. Likewise, those healed go and tell others!*

5. When Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?," what do you make of the disciples' response? Does it remind you of anything? *The disciples' words here are almost an exact repetition of Herod's response in 6:14-16. By repeating the same materials here, the author invokes the earlier story and thus reminds the audience of the pervasiveness and capriciousness of evil. Moreover, it imports a sinister overtone in what initially starts as a positive encounter: Peter's confession.*

6. What does Peter's confession represent? *Peter's confession is the first time in the story that a human character rather than a demon or spirit confirms the narrator's initial introduction of Jesus as the Christ (1:1). So, Peter finally understands something the audience has known from the first line – that Jesus is the Christ. He demonstrates the characteristics of rocky soil, however, as his initial positive response is followed by...*

7. The two rebukes. Peter's, followed by Jesus' (8:32-33). What is the significance of this exchange? *Peter evidently believes he knows better than the Messiah! His confession doesn't lead to more faith (or good ground), but to pride and hardness of heart (and head). At this point we in the audience can only shake our heads, aligned as we are with the narrator and with Jesus in this story. This exchange simply illustrates how the audience and Peter stand on opposite sides. What does, "Get behind me, Satan?" mean? It is deliberately vague, but plays on the initial call language of "follow behind me," and also means "get behind me, man!"*

8. Given how Mark has presented the story so far, when you read Jesus' first prediction of his passion and necessary suffering, what is Mark's reasoning for why the Messiah must suffer and die? *Traditionally, scholars and believers have assumed that Jesus must suffer and die as a result of some divine necessity. In this understanding, God ordains the suffering of Jesus and those who follow him. While, for Mark, God is certainly sovereign over all of creation, the direct cause of suffering for Jesus is the current dominance of "this adulterous and sinful generation." It is not God's will but the evil will of the present authorities and powers that makes suffering inevitable. As the Parable of the Tenants (12:1-12) and the Apocalyptic discourse (Mk 13) will clarify and confirm, the creation of God is now in the hands of a murderous generation who will destroy anyone daring to challenge their privileges. However, it will not always be so, for God will come to put out the present group and set things right. But of that timing, no one knows.*

9. What does 9:1 mean, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power"? *The audience has already heard of so many who were healed because of faith. So, they are in tune with the efficacy of miracles that happen when one has faith. However, the disciples in the person of Peter reject Jesus' description of the way to be followed, just as they have earlier failed to understand the feedings and many of the healings; perhaps a more glorious vision of who Jesus is and what he is about will soften those hardened hearts that stymie Jesus' plain words. Just such a vision will next be presented to the disciples in the episode commonly referred to as the "Transfiguration."*

****For next session, read Mark 9:2-50*