

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

October 21, 2018

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 10: 35-45)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to [Jesus] and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; and whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever driven somewhere on a foggy morning? You know, when the ground is still warm and the air is pretty chill. And you find yourself in the middle of a cloud, and you can only see a couple feet in front of you. Should I keep going? Should I stop? Is anything out there? Am I in danger? I know the road is there. I just can't see it.

I remember a time Brian and I were hiking in the mountains in Kauai, and we slogged through mud, and we climbed up rocks. And we finally made it to the overlook. And we looked out and we saw – absolutely nothing. White mist, shifting. I know something is out there. I just can't see it. Walking in the fog.

The eighth, ninth, and tenth chapters of the Gospel of Mark are like walking in the fog. We heard a piece of that this morning from near the end in the tenth chapter. But today I want to look at that whole section, just kind of the big picture, because it has an important message for us.

So we'll start back in the eighth chapter of Mark, at the beginning of this section. And it begins with a miracle. Sort of. A sort-of miracle. Jesus heals a blind man. The blind man comes to Jesus and says, "Please heal me." And Jesus touches his eyes, and says, "What do you see?" And the man replies, "I can see people but they look like trees walking." A sort-of miracle. Seeing, but not seeing. And Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes again, and he can see clearly. So we start this section, in the eighth chapter of Mark, with this blind man who can't see, then he can sort of see, then he can see.

This whole big section ends at the end of chapter ten with another healing of another blind man. And so we end up, the beginning and the end, with these healings of blind men. And in between that is the fog. It's the fog. Jesus says three times between those two healings that he is going to die and rise again.

The first time that it happens, Jesus says:

*"Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."*

Notice Jesus is beginning to teach them. He is not just casually mentioning this. He is teaching them that he will die and rise again. And Peter takes Jesus aside and rebuked him. "Now, no, don't be talking that way. That is never going to happen. Don't worry about that." Peter is lost in this fog. He can't see what Jesus is trying to teach them. Okay. So we have the blind man, the blind man. Jesus says he is going to die and rise again. Peter says, "Well, what?"

A little bit later in the middle there we read:

[Jesus said,] *"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."*

And in the very next breath, the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. They're in the fog. They can't see what it means that he will die and rise again.

The third time Jesus says,

*"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."*

The next thing out of James and John's mouth is, "*Grant us to sit at your right left, in your glory.*" James and John are in the fog. They can't see what God's reign is about.

So we start with the healing of the blind man. We end with the healing of the blind man. And between that we have three instances where the disciples cannot see to save their souls. It's like the fog has rolled in and they can't see what is right in front of them. There is something out there. It's real. But they just can't see it.

Are the disciples really that obtuse? They don't learn it the first time. They don't learn it the second time. You would think that they would learn it the third time.

But this place that Jesus describes – this reign of God, where the first are last and greatness lies in weakness. This place that Jesus describes where love is more important than power, where children and widows and outcasts are all welcomed. This place is the opposite of life as we know it. It's hard to imagine that this reign of God is out there, out there in the fog, when we can't really see it either. The disciples don't see because it is hard to see. These disciples aren't foolish. The fog is thick. It is for all of us.

Aren't you guys at least a little tired of all the stuff that is swirling around us these days? The news and the ads, with all the worst-case scenarios, the constant push to do more, and be more, and have more. That is the ocean we swim in. That is the fog that surrounds us.

Then we come to church, and we hear from Jesus: Just rest in God's love. There is enough and more. There is room for everyone. Really. Everyone. We can all care for each other. We can care for the earth. Life has eternal meaning. But that's not the world we're living in. And it's hard to trust this new reality. It's hard to trust this reign of God.

But every once in awhile the fog lightens and we can see it, a glimpse of God's reign through the fog. Like the blind man sort of being able to see.

A couple weeks ago a group of men from this church went on a fishing trip together. Now, the men that went on this trip – I didn't go on the trip, but I saw who went. And they are pretty different ideologically, politically, different. But they were willing to spend a rainy-ish weekend together in a cabin, to enjoy each other's company, maybe even catch a fish or two. Willing to welcome each other in a time when most people are labeled and judged and excluded. A glimpse that God's reign is real.

This week I heard at least four times about caring visits people had made to memory-care centers, or nursing homes, or driving somebody to the doctor, so those who are alone know that they are loved. And that glimpse that God's reign is real.

On Tuesday evening, the Church Council approved a grant to help buy clothing for homeless teens at a shelter. Not because they are good teens or worthy teens, but because they are teens who have nothing. And we can show them that there is enough for them. A glimpse that God's reign is real.

I hear these things, and I think – whoa – it is really out there. I may not always see it, but God's reign is real, and we are a part of it. I pray for the fog to lift and my blindness to be healed.

In this big section of Mark's Gospel, the disciples are wanting to see, they are trying to see, but they keep getting it wrong. They can't even imagine a world where the last are first, where everyone is loved, and there is enough. They keep coming back to a world where they want to win. They want to be greatest. They want to sit at the right hand of God. I want power and honor and glory. They can't see what this reign of God looks like. And I think it's because this is the eighth through tenth chapters of the Gospel of Mark. And there is more to come. They don't know the rest of the story.

They didn't know that Jesus really would be handed over and condemned, and mocked, and crucified. They couldn't imagine that Jesus really would die in service to this reign of God. That Jesus would live into this reign, even if it meant being crushed by the Roman Empire. Jesus was so certain that this way of love and abundance was the reality beyond the fog. So certain that this was true and real, and everything else was just fog. Jesus was so certain he was willing to give his whole life and his death into its service.

The disciples couldn't see that. And they didn't know the rest of the story. They didn't know that after three days Jesus would rise again. They didn't know the power of God to give life. They didn't know that there is more to this world than we can see. More life, more love, more abundance, more possibility in this reign of love than we can ever hope to see.

God's reign is out there. And Saint Paul said, "We see now through a mirror dimly." But it is out there. And Jesus has shown us the power and the hope in God's reign of welcome, and abundance, and care. And we get to be a part of it, right here, right now, as the baptized and beloved children of God. Not as the greatest, not as the ones on the right and left in glory, but as our best selves right here and now.

We may not see it through the fog. But God's reign is real, and we are part of it.

Amen.