

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Three

Throughout Leap of Faith, we will walk together through the entire story of the ministry of Jesus, at least as it is told by Mark. Mark is one of the early followers of Jesus. He may or may not have known Jesus himself, but he was probably a traveling companion of the apostle Simon Peter. Simon Peter never wrote a history of Jesus himself, but John Mark collected and wrote down Simon Peter's story. I'm sure that as you read you'll see that Peter's perspective comes out strongly, and that it's a really valuable perspective to have. Mark's gospel (which means 'good news') was the first one written, about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Incidentally, it's also the shortest. That means that, when we read it over 40 days, each day's passage should be of a quite manageable size. The size does vary a bit, as I've sectioned it in such a way as to make good sense of the stories, rather than just dividing it into equal-sized bits.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The story for the day.** For your convenience, we've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). As I've worked on this guide, I've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped me to do what I most want to do: enter into the story myself. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the disciples and the other people who interact with Jesus. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with Jesus?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, I offer some suggestions for how the day's reading might apply to you, to your six, and to our church.

March 3

Mark 6: 45-56—Jesus walks on the water

⁴⁵ Immediately after this, Jesus made his disciples get back into the boat and head out across the lake to Bethsaida, while he sent the people home. ⁴⁶ Afterward he went up into the hills by himself to pray. ⁴⁷ During the night, the disciples were in their boat out in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves. About three o'clock in the morning he came to them, walking on the water. He started to go past them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the water, they screamed in terror, thinking he was a ghost. ⁵⁰ They were all terrified when they saw him. But Jesus spoke to them at once. "It's all right," he said. "I am here! Don't be afraid." ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat, and the wind stopped. They were astonished at what they saw. ⁵² They still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the multiplied loaves, for their hearts were hard and they did not believe. ⁵³ When they arrived at Gennesaret on the other side of the lake, they anchored the boat ⁵⁴ and climbed out. The people standing there recognized him at once, ⁵⁵ and they ran throughout the whole area and began carrying sick people to him on mats. ⁵⁶ Wherever he went—in villages and cities and out on the farms—they laid the sick in the market plazas and streets. The sick begged him to let them at least touch the fringe of his robe, and all who touched it were healed.

Points of Interest:

- 'Jesus made his disciples get back into the boat'—This passage tells us that the disciples 'did not understand the significance of the miracle of the multiplied loaves.' The miracle of the multiplied loaves should have demonstrated to the disciples that Jesus can give them enough to serve the crowds and to provide abundantly for themselves as well. But the disciples

must still be operating from a poverty mentality: to serve the crowds is a loss for us. They're still wondering, "If we stay with the crowds, when and how are we going to get our rest?" I can imagine the disciples glumly watching Jesus teach, giving him the 'isn't it time that we be leaving' glare, drumming their fingers, or ostentatiously getting the boat ready for departure. Eventually, Jesus tires of their sullenness and just sends them off without him, while he finishes with the crowd. Unless Jesus sends them out to do his work, it's never a good sign when the disciples are separated from Jesus—they were called to be his regular companions. Last time the disciples were separated from Jesus, they missed out on a resurrection. This time, they miss out on the rest they wanted so badly. They cut out on the crowds a little early to get some extra rest, but they end up spending the whole night rowing. Jesus, on the other hand, spends the night alone praying. Jesus understands the miracle of the loaves: God provided him with time to give the crowds, and enough left over for rest for himself. The disciples spend the whole day cranky instead, and they end it by rowing in a storm.

- 'Their hearts were hard and they did not believe'—The last time we heard about hard hearts, it was concerning the religious teachers who went out to destroy Jesus. The disciples are heading in the wrong direction. They've forgotten the secret of the kingdom: draw near to Jesus and ask. They might have thought that, having gotten the secret once, they were permanently 'in.' But they need to stay near and keep asking if they want to keep getting more from Jesus. They could have asked Jesus, "With these crowds, how are we going to get our rest?" but instead they try to send the crowds away, and they respond sarcastically and faithlessly to Jesus' suggestion that they feed the crowds. They're soil is becoming bad, so bad that they don't even recognize Jesus. There's a snowball effect to our choices. A few bad decisions in a row can lead to a little part of us being hardened off from Jesus. If we want to keep getting more from him, it's important to turn quickly from poor choices and to draw near to him.
- 'he climbed into the boat'—Even though they've done nothing to deserve it, Jesus shows them mercy. When they are overwhelmed by the predicament they've gotten themselves in, he steps back into their boat, restoring companionship with them. Praise Jesus for his mercy! He doesn't quickly give up on his followers.
- 'The people standing there recognized him at once'—Mark gives us a little sign here that, despite Jesus' mercy, the disciples are not living up to their potential. Before the feeding of the 5000, the crowds recognize them. After their failure as shepherds to the 5000, the crowds recognize him.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The disciples heard Jesus' words 'Let's get some rest,' and they had a specific idea of how it would look. When circumstances went the other way, they tried to grab hold of the promise with their own power, and they ended up miserable. Is there a promise you have from Jesus, but it doesn't seem to be working out the way you thought? If you've been trying to grab it yourself, consider letting it go. Draw near to Jesus and ask him about it.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six in the midst of storms? Perhaps their even, to some extent, self-inflicted storms. Pray for Jesus' mercy for them in the midst of that storm. Ask Jesus not to pass them by.
- *For our church:* Pray that God would give our entire church understanding of the significance of the miracle of the multiplied bread. Understanding God's ability to multiply resources for the good of all is the key to joyful ministry. It's what gives us the faith to give, to serve others, and to reach out to new people with the message of the good news. Without understanding the multiplied loaves, we cannot do what we've been called to.

March 4

Mark 7: 1-23—The outside and the inside

One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to confront Jesus.² They noticed that some of Jesus' disciples failed to follow the usual Jewish ritual of hand washing

before eating.³ (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions.⁴ Similarly, they eat nothing bought from the market unless they have immersed their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to—such as their ceremony of washing cups, pitchers, and kettles.)⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, “Why don’t your disciples follow our age-old customs? For they eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony.”⁶ Jesus replied, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was prophesying about you when he said,

7 “These people honor me with their lips,
 but their hearts are far away.
 Their worship is a farce,
 for they replace God’s commands with their own man-made teachings.’

⁸ For you ignore God’s specific laws and substitute your own traditions.”⁹ Then he said, “You reject God’s laws in order to hold on to your own traditions.¹⁰ For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘Anyone who speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.’¹¹ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I could have given to you.’¹² You let them disregard their needy parents.¹³ As such, you break the law of God in order to protect your own tradition. And this is only one example. There are many, many others.”¹⁴ Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. “All of you listen,” he said, “and try to understand.¹⁵ You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do!”¹⁷ Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowds, and his disciples asked him what he meant by the statement he had made.¹⁸ “Don’t you understand either?” he asked. “Can’t you see that what you eat won’t defile you?¹⁹ Food doesn’t come in contact with your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then comes out again.” (By saying this, he showed that every kind of food is acceptable.)²⁰ And then he added, “It is the thought-life that defiles you.²¹ For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.²³ All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you and make you unacceptable to God.”

Points of Interest:

- ‘You reject God’s laws in order to hold on to your own traditions’—Traditions have a habit of taking on a life of their own. While there might have been a good reason for their ceremony when the ceremony was established, it seems like now the only reason the Pharisees and teachers have is, “because we’ve always done it that way.” Traditions are like ruts in the road, unless you actively work your way out of them, you end up following them. The Pharisees have gotten themselves so far into a rut that their tradition overrides the word of God. Most likely, the traditions were established as a way of following God, but now they trump following God. But, because that’s the way they’ve always done it, they probably don’t even notice.
- ‘You are not defiled by what you eat’—It’s a peculiar trait of traditions that they tend to focus on the superficial, rather than the heart of the matter. Maybe that is not the case in the beginning, but when traditions are followed so long that the purpose gets forgotten while the behavior is still obvious. The Pharisees care very much about how things appear, but neglect what is going on below the surface. It’s especially easy for religious people to judge by appearances. It’s easy to fall in the trap of believing you are speaking for God, when all you are doing is enforcing traditional behavior.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* All of us have a temptation to keep the outside looking good while we neglect the heart. Spend a moment confessing to the ways you maintain appearances.
- *For your six:* Jesus finds the message about the difference between the appearance and the heart so important that he gathers the entire crowd to tell them. For their whole lives, they’ve been hearing the opposite from the Pharisees and teachers. Pray for your six that Jesus would be able to break through any barriers tradition puts up in front of your six.
- *For our church:* It’s so easy to fall into the rut of tradition. Jesus says earlier in Mark that you can’t get any more wine if you don’t also get new skins, and traditions are like the old, brittle

wineskins. Pray that our church would have the willingness to get new skins when necessary. Particularly pray that we would not pursue our usual practices after having forgotten their purpose.

March 5

Mark 7: 24-37—Two healings

²⁴ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. He tried to keep it secret that he was there, but he couldn't. As usual, the news of his arrival spread fast. ²⁵ Right away a woman came to him whose little girl was possessed by an evil spirit. She had heard about Jesus, and now she came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ She begged him to release her child from the demon's control. Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia, ²⁷ Jesus told her, "First I should help my own family, the Jews. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are given some crumbs from the children's plates." ²⁹ "Good answer!" he said. "And because you have answered so well, I have healed your daughter." ³⁰ And when she arrived home, her little girl was lying quietly in bed, and the demon was gone. ³¹ Jesus left Tyre and went to Sidon, then back to the Sea of Galilee and the region of the Ten Towns. ³² A deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to him, and the people begged Jesus to lay his hands on the man to heal him. ³³ Jesus led him to a private place away from the crowd. He put his fingers into the man's ears. Then, spitting onto his own fingers, he touched the man's tongue with the spittle. ³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and commanded, "Be opened!" ³⁵ Instantly the man could hear perfectly and speak plainly! ³⁶ Jesus told the crowd not to tell anyone, but the more he told them not to, the more they spread the news, ³⁷ for they were completely amazed. Again and again they said, "Everything he does is wonderful. He even heals those who are deaf and mute."

Points of Interest:

- 'It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs'—This seems to be an extraordinarily offensive thing for Jesus to say. Moreover, it is inconsistent with Jesus' previous actions. We've already seen him cast a demon out of a gentile before, when he freed the demoniac. Why would he so insultingly refuse now? Although it doesn't take away the shock of Jesus' words completely, the story of the farmer and the seeds offers some insight into the situation. Jesus says, 'To those on the outside, everything is in stories.' He speaks in riddles to test the soil. He finds very good soil here, and he rewards it with affirmation and with healing.
- 'even the dogs under the table are given some crumbs'—This woman understands the significance of the multiplication of the loaves! The disciples, who were there and who are regular companions of Jesus, don't get it. But this woman understands that Jesus has enough for everyone—even his crumbs would be enough to solve here problem. Her faith gives her the ability not only to understand Jesus' story, but to add to it herself.
- 'He put his fingers into the man's ears . . . he touched the man's tongue'—Jesus is using sign language. Again and again in this story, Jesus has responded to the faith of the people being healed. He gives the deaf man the chance to demonstrate faith here by signing to him what he intends.
- "he sighed and commanded, 'Be opened!'"—Jesus is able to miraculously open the ears of a man who is physically deaf. The disciples ears work fine, but their hearts are having a hard time hearing. How does soil that's gone hard get good again? How do ears that have closed open up again? It can only happen like the actual healing of the deaf man happened, by the touch of Jesus.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Sometimes Jesus' words are hard to understand or difficult to accept. Pray that God would give you the faith to engage with him about difficult things, and that he would give you the insight to see through to his purposes. Lift up to Jesus the things about your

relationship with him that are difficult to understand. Ask him to make those very places the source of great miracles in your life.

- *For your six:* Speak to the ears of your six, 'Be opened.' Pray that their hearts will be able to hear Jesus' words more and more clearly all the time.
- *For our church:* Jesus does a great job of interpreting to the deaf man what is happening to him. As a church, we want to be able to explain to people in understandable ways the ways that God is working. Ask God that he would always be giving us new and better ways of communicating naturally about the supernatural.

March 6

Mark 8: 1-10—the feeding of the 4000

About this time another great crowd had gathered, and the people ran out of food again. Jesus called his disciples and told them, ² "I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat. ³ And if I send them home without feeding them, they will faint along the road. For some of them have come a long distance." ⁴ "How are we supposed to find enough food for them here in the wilderness?" his disciples asked. ⁵ "How many loaves of bread do you have?" he asked. "Seven," they replied. ⁶ So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves, thanked God for them, broke them into pieces, and gave them to his disciples, who distributed the bread to the crowd. ⁷ A few small fish were found, too, so Jesus also blessed these and told the disciples to pass them out. ⁸ They ate until they were full, and when the scraps were picked up, there were seven large baskets of food left over! ⁹ There were about four thousand people in the crowd that day, and he sent them home after they had eaten. ¹⁰ Immediately after this, he got into a boat with his disciples and crossed over to the region of Dalmanutha.

Points of Interest:

- 'the people ran out of food again'—often Jesus gives us second chances at our moments of failure. That is what Jesus did for the disciples here. The feeding of the 5000 was probably the worst day in their lives of following Jesus: it was miserable for them, and they failed in their relationship with Jesus and with others. Jesus doesn't allow that mark of failure to stain their soul. He gives them a second chance at success. The great news is that Jesus doesn't leave the disciples to do it on their own; he gives them what they need to succeed. This time, Jesus leads them step-by-step through the experience to help them get it right: he tells them explicitly that he has compassion on the crowd; and he preemptively tells them that sending the crowds away would not work. Although they don't necessarily get a straight A (It's a little surprising that they have to ask where they will find bread in the wilderness; although, to their credit, the tone of their response seems more open), it's a much better experience for the disciples. They feed the crowds, stay with Jesus until the crowds depart, and they get in the boat with Jesus at the end of the day. Is there a moment of failure in your following of Jesus that you often get stuck on? It especially seems that when we fail at assignments Jesus gives us to love and serve others, it inhibits our relationships with him and others until we overcome it. Ask Jesus for a chance to overcome this block, and for the help you need to succeed and move beyond your failure.
- 'four thousand people'—The last time there was a mass feeding, the count was five thousand men. This time it's four thousand people. This most likely indicates that this crowd is non-Jews. The standard practice of the Jewish people at the time was to count only men (which means that there were probably many more than 5000 at the first feeding, once you include women and children). But, when counting Gentiles, they just lumped them all together, not separating men and women in the count. The Syrian woman told Jesus in the last passage that she knew that he had enough bread for non-Jews as well as Jews. In this passage, Jesus responds to that faith: he demonstrates literally that he has enough bread to give to the Gentiles as well. The Syrian women's responsiveness to Jesus gives not only her, but a whole crowd, a miracle.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Do you feel like you've missed out on a miracle? People who weren't at the feeding of the 5000 might have felt like they had been left out of a once-in-a-lifetime event, but Jesus demonstrates that he is willing and able to do it again. If you feel like people around you have experienced something supernatural from God but you missed it, ask God to do it again.
- *For your six:* Jesus says of the crowd, 'And if I send them home without feeding them, they will faint along the road.' Are any of your six close to fainting—they just don't have the energy to go forward? Ask Jesus to give you something to feed and restore them.
- *For our church:* It's wonderful to be a part of a church in which so many new people are coming to experience Jesus' goodness with us all the time. Pray that the trend would continue and, in fact, increase. Pray that we would have a new wave of people not only visiting, but joining us. Ask God to send us a whole new crowd of people to feed with his Spirit, his words, and his presence.

March 7

Mark 8: 11-26—the yeast of the Pharisees, and the healing of a blind man

¹¹ When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had arrived, they came to argue with him. Testing him to see if he was from God, they demanded, "Give us a miraculous sign from heaven to prove yourself." ¹² When he heard this, he sighed deeply and said, "Why do you people keep demanding a miraculous sign? I assure you, I will not give this generation any such sign." ¹³ So he got back into the boat and left them, and he crossed to the other side of the lake. ¹⁴ But the disciples discovered they had forgotten to bring any food, so there was only one loaf of bread with them in the boat. ¹⁵ As they were crossing the lake, Jesus warned them, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod." ¹⁶ They decided he was saying this because they hadn't brought any bread. ¹⁷ Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he said, "Why are you so worried about having no food? Won't you ever learn or understand? Are your hearts too hard to take it in?" ¹⁸ "You have eyes—can't you see? You have ears—can't you hear? Don't you remember anything at all?" ¹⁹ What about the five thousand men I fed with five loaves of bread? How many baskets of leftovers did you pick up afterward?" "Twelve," they said. ²⁰ "And when I fed the four thousand with seven loaves, how many large baskets of leftovers did you pick up?" "Seven," they said. ²¹ "Don't you understand even yet?" he asked them. ²² When they arrived at Bethsaida, some people brought a blind man to Jesus, and they begged him to touch and heal the man. ²³ Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Then, spitting on the man's eyes, he laid his hands on him and asked, "Can you see anything now?" ²⁴ The man looked around. "Yes," he said, "I see people, but I can't see them very clearly. They look like trees walking around." ²⁵ Then Jesus placed his hands over the man's eyes again. As the man stared intently, his sight was completely restored, and he could see everything clearly. ²⁶ Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go back into the village on your way home."

Points of Interest:

- 'he got back into the boat and left them'—Jesus has shaken the dust off of his feet (ch. 6:11) as far as the Pharisees are concerned. If he has done so many signs for the Pharisees without them acknowledging them, he knows that one more will not make the difference. He goes in search of people who will be receptive to him and his teaching.
- 'They decided he was saying this because they hadn't brought any bread'—The disciples have become completely deaf to Jesus' words. They take the story literally instead of knowing it is a pointer to some other meaning—and rather than asking Jesus, they ask one another what it means. And they come up with the ridiculous interpretation that Jesus doesn't want them to shop at the same grocery store as the Pharisees. They have had plenty of opportunity to know what Jesus is talking about. If they had eyes to see, they would have seen Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees and known what was going on. If they had ears to hear, they would have understood what Jesus was talking about. If only they would remember the miracle that just happened, they would know that Jesus isn't talking about bread. The disciples have been with Jesus, but it's as if they've been unable to really notice what has been going on.
- 'Why are you so worried about having no food?'—It seems that the main reason that the disciples are having such a hard time understanding what Jesus is saying is that they are still

stuck on the question, 'Are we going to have enough to eat?' No matter how many times Jesus miraculously provides, the next time things are looking a little short they begin to be anxious again. Each time, they fall into doubt, 'Will Jesus really be able to take care of us?' This question of the disciples is indeed a big one. We are constantly tempted to doubt that Jesus is willing and able to care of us. If we don't believe he will provide for us, it makes it very hard for us to get something new from God. Every day, we need to ask God to give us our daily bread, trusting in him to do it. And the next day, we need to remember that he provided yesterday. Otherwise, we will be doomed to spending much of our lives worrying about whether we have enough.

- 'They look like trees walking'—sometimes healing doesn't come all at once. It's a process over time. Even Jesus has this occasion where the healing happens in two stages. Two things help the healing to completion: Jesus touches the man again; and the man stares intently. More prayer from Jesus and more faith and effort on the part of the man turn a partial healing into a complete one.
- 'he could see everything clearly'—last time the disciples had a hard time understanding Jesus' words, he immediately gave a deaf man the ability to hear perfectly. This time, Jesus immediately gives a blind man the ability to see clearly. Right now the disciples are deaf and blind, but their situation is still not hopeless. Jesus can return clear sight and perfect hearing to them. It will take his touch, and it will take them 'staring intently,' making an extra effort.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus gives us here a great model for how to pray for healing.
 1. He lays hands on the person and prays.
 2. He stops to ask the person how it is going.
 3. When he finds out that something is happening but it is incomplete, he prays for the healing to be complete.
 4. And he invites the man to be active in his own healing—striving for what Jesus can give him.
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would be able to see, hear, and remember. Ask that Jesus would give them eyes to notice what he is doing, ears to hear his words, and a memory to recall when Jesus does something good for them. Particularly pray that your six would not forget when God answers their prayers.
- *For our church:* Ask Jesus to make our church that never forgets the baskets of leftovers. May God preserve us from ever falling back on mere survival as our goal.

March 8

Mark 8: 27-9:1—Who do you say I am?

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ²⁸ "Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets." ²⁹ Then Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ But Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹ Then Jesus began to tell them that he, the Son of Man, would suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the leaders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, and three days later he would rise again. ³² As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and told him he shouldn't say things like that. ³³ Jesus turned and looked at his disciples and then said to Peter very sternly, "Get away from me, Satan! You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's." ³⁴ Then he called his disciples and the crowds to come over and listen. "If any of you wants to be my follower," he told them, "you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. ³⁵ If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life. ³⁶ And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process? ³⁷ Is anything worth more than your soul? ³⁸ If a person is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, I, the Son of Man, will be ashamed of that person when I return in the

glory of my Father with the holy angels.” 9 Jesus went on to say, “I assure you that some of you standing here right now will not die before you see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power!”

Points of Interest:

- ‘Who do people say I am?’—This passage marks the mid-point of Mark’s story, and in this passage we see a significant turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Among other things, the first half of the story is about Jesus’ identity. Jesus has said and done amazing things—heal the sick, cast out demons, calm the waves, raise the dead—that provoke the question, ‘Who is this guy?’ And there have been many answers to the question. John the Baptist, Elijah, and one of the prophets seem to be the dominant answers: the people are tossing around these answers in the story about King Herod, and Peter repeats them here. Other answers to the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ include the carpenter’s son, the servant of the prince of demons, and a crazy man. Everyone is interested in the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ and everyone has an opinion.
- ‘Who do you say I am?’—Jesus indicates with this question that Peter’s answer should be different from all the rest. Just like Jesus’ question of the blind man led the blind man to stare intently, Jesus’ question of Peter makes him think carefully. And Peter, who has been a bit blind recently, sees clearly: ‘You are the Messiah,’ who is the king and savior of the Jews.
- ‘Peter took him aside and told him he shouldn’t say things like that’—The first half of the gospel of Mark provokes and addresses the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ In this passage, we hear the definitive answer: Jesus is the Messiah. The second half of Mark’s story addresses the question, ‘What is the Messiah and what does it mean for me?’ Even though Peter has just declared that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah, Peter thinks he has a better idea of what the Messiah ought to be than Jesus does. In Peter’s view, the Messiah should be a glorious conqueror who rallies all of Israel behind him and conquers their enemies. To Peter, Jesus’ prediction of his death is an unseemly loss of nerve. He thinks Jesus is being defeatist: ‘I’m the Messiah, but I don’t think it’s ever going to work because the Pharisees don’t like me.’
- ‘Get away from me, Satan!’—Jesus reaction to Peter is strong. Satan’s role so far in the book of Mark has been to tempt Jesus and to fight him. Peter thinks he is being helpful and encouraging to Jesus, but he’s really taking Satan’s role: he’s tempting Jesus away from God’s will, and he is working against the kingdom of God. Jesus has to sternly warn Peter.
- ‘If any of you wants to be my follower’—Peter rebukes Jesus because Jesus says that he is going to be killed. In response, Jesus ups the ante by saying anyone who is his follower will also be killed. All of the disciples have made previous decisions to follow Jesus: they left behind their old identities and picked up the identity of his disciples. Now, Jesus significantly changes the game. He is no longer simply inviting them to follow him around Galilee performing miracles; he is asking them to follow him to execution. In light of this new calling, he renews the offer to follow: he gives the disciples a chance to go back, and he invited anyone from the crowd who would like to join.
- ‘If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it’—Now comes the good news. Jesus isn’t defeatist, and he isn’t a masochist. He is offering everyone a solution to the problem, how do I save my life? All of us want to save our lives, but we can’t. No matter how successful we are at living, we spend a day of our lives every day, and we can’t get that day back. We are constantly moving one step closer to death. No level of safety can protect us from death, and no amount of money can buy us out of death. Jesus is asking everything of his followers: he is asking their lives. But, he is only asking of them something that they are slowly losing anyway. And, in exchange, he offers what we all want: true, heavenly, eternal life. This is why he rebukes Peter so strongly. By telling Jesus to save himself, he is directing him toward losing his life—and toward ruining everyone else’s opportunity to gain life.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* ‘And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process?’—What are your big plans for giving yourself a good life? The bad news is that Jesus says the plans will fail. The good news is that he offers a better one. What would you have to put aside in order to take up Jesus’ offer? Are you ready for it? Start by laying aside

- your plan for giving yourself a good day today. Ask Jesus what his plan for your day is. That plan will probably involve some death, and even more life.
- *For your six:* Jesus asks Peter a question that helps Peter to see clearly. Ask Jesus to give you clarifying questions to ask your friends.
 - *For our church:* Peter gets carried away by his unbelievably fortunate circumstances. He finds himself the most prominent follower of the man who turns out to be the one and only Messiah. In his enthusiasm, he slips into a human perspective on it: he wants it to be easy and flashy. We are incredibly fortunate to be a part of what Jesus is doing. Pray that we would look at our success from a divine point of view, and embrace both the suffering and the blessing that comes with it.

March 9

Mark 9: 2-13—the transfiguration

² Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain. No one else was there. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance changed, ³ and his clothing became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly process could ever make it. ⁴ Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus. ⁵ "Teacher, this is wonderful!" Peter exclaimed. "We will make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He didn't really know what to say, for they were all terribly afraid. ⁷ Then a cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." ⁸ Suddenly they looked around, and Moses and Elijah were gone, and only Jesus was with them. ⁹ As they descended the mountainside, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until he, the Son of Man, had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept it to themselves, but they often asked each other what he meant by "rising from the dead." ¹¹ Now they began asking him, "Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?" ¹² Jesus responded, "Elijah is indeed coming first to set everything in order. Why then is it written in the Scriptures that the Son of Man must suffer and be treated with utter contempt?" ¹³ But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and he was badly mistreated, just as the Scriptures predicted."

Points of Interest:

- 'I assure you that some of you standing here right now will not die before you see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power'—This sentence is actually the end of yesterday's passage. Jesus tells them that the life of one of his followers will not be all suffering; they will get amazing tastes of glory also. Six days later, three of them get just such a taste.
- 'Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus'—Moses and Elijah are two of the major figures of the Old Testament, the story of God's people before Jesus arrived. Why do they all of a sudden appear here? It would seem to make sense for a number of reasons. Moses and Elijah also had notoriously difficult times getting God's people to hear and understand God's words; so maybe they are commiserating. An even better reason, though, is that they serve as proof of Jesus' offer. Jesus has just asked his followers to lay down his life, trusting that he will give them a better one. These are big stakes to ask: what if it's not really possible to be raised from the dead? You certainly wouldn't want to find this out at the moment of death. So, Jesus introduces Peter, James, and John to two people who, by all rights, ought to be dead. They each lived hundreds of years ago: one of them died, and has apparently risen again; the other never tasted death and was immediately taken to heaven. They are—literally—living proof that Jesus can give life. A third reason is that Moses represents God's law and Elijah represents prophecy. Jesus seems to be demonstrating to the disciples that in what he says, he has the backing of both God's law and God's prophecy.
- 'We will make three shrines'—Peter, awed at being in the presence of such greatness, just blurts something out. It seems like he's fishing for a good reason for him to be there: hey, I can pitch tents for the three of you. By suggesting three shrines, Peter is putting them on equal footing. He might have thought that he was actually being pretty generous to Jesus, making him the peer of two of the most important men in Jewish history. But God the Father steps in and shows him just how great Jesus is. God says, 'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him,' and when they look around, Moses and Elijah have disappeared. God is saying, even more than Moses and more than Elijah, you should listen to what Jesus has to say.

- ‘This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him’—at the beginning of Mark’s story, God spoke to Jesus from heaven, saying, ‘You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you.’ Here, as the second half of the story begins, God speaks from heaven again. This time, he speaks to the disciple, telling them that Jesus is his trustworthy son. This too is meant as validation for the words Jesus spoke yesterday. God’s voice from heaven is backing Jesus’ statement that trying to save your life only leads to death, and he is backing Jesus’ promise that he has true life to give.
- ‘Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?’—Remember from the first day that the prophet Malachi prophesied that Elijah would come before the great and terrible day of the Lord—that is of the Messiah. The disciples have now heard that Jesus is the Messiah, and they have seen Elijah. They’re wondering whether they have just seen the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy. Jesus seems to be telling them that they did, in fact, see the fulfillment, but it was at Jesus’ baptism and John’s martyrdom.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* If yesterday’s passage was overwhelming to you, ask Jesus for confirmation of its truth. Ask him to point you to more passages of the Bible that back Jesus’ warning and promise. Ask for a word from God.
- *For your six:* What are the other voices that your six listen to? They might not even be evil alternatives: Moses and Elijah certainly are not. But, Jesus’ voice has to be unique if we are to find life. Pray that God would diminish the other voices in your six’s life so that Jesus can be heard more clearly.
- *For our church:* Ask that God would give our church moments of great glory. Ask for power in our times of worship, that they would be times that fuel us and encourage us for our life together of following Jesus.