

12 July 2015

Transformations
Mark 8-9

We continue our journey through the story of Jesus as told by Mark. Last week, we saw him do marvelous works. He fed five thousand men in Galilee, starting with just a few loaves of bread. Then, leaving the Jewish region of Galilee, he went up to the Gentile region near Tyre, where he healed a Gentile woman's daughter. That was last week.

Well, when Jesus heals the daughter of that Gentile woman near Tyre, his good Jewish friends don't know what to make of it. The Jews are the "Chosen People" of God, after all, and what does that mean if God heals the Gentiles just like Jews? And now Jesus is taking them into the region of the Ten Cities – which are all Gentile settlements. It's all so confusing.

"Jesus! Jesus of Nazareth!" someone shouts as they near one of the Greek cities. "You're Jesus, aren't you?"

"I am."

"I saw you in Galilee once, when I was passing through. Sir, can you heal my friend?" The speaker disappears, then reappears a moment later, leading a young man. "He's deaf, sir. Ever since he was a child." The deaf man makes some strange, indistinct sounds, and his friend translates. "He said, 'Are you the one who can help me?'"

Jesus smiles. "I am." Pulling the young man aside, Jesus spits on his fingers then places them in the man's ears. Then, gently, he opens the man's mouth and touches his tongue. Jesus looks toward the heavens, then says, "Ephphatha!" which is Aramaic for "Open!"

The man's head jerks, and his eyes widen. He stares at a bird that sings nearby, watches a bee buzz past, then looks at Jesus. "You have a good friend," Jesus says.

The man nods. "I do," he replies, and his speech is clear.

Jesus and his friends move off, followed by Gentile crowds, and Jesus teaches them – just as he had taught the Jews on the other side of the sea. For three days, the crowd follows him, and at the end of the third day, Jesus turns to his friends and says, "We should feed these people before we send them home, don't you think?"

"But we don't have that much food, Master! There must be four thousand men here!"

Jesus just looks at them thoughtfully. He waited a minute, but nobody speaks. At last he sighs. "How much food *do* we have?"

"Seven loaves of bread."

“Huh. Any ideas?” The friends are silent. At last Jesus says, “Bring me the bread” and begins breaking the pieces. As had happened *just a few days before*, the bread multiplies in his hands. The crowd eats until all are full, and seven baskets of bread are collected at the end. Jesus calls his friends over and says, “Let’s go back across the sea now.” Relieved to be going home, the twelve procure a boat and they all get in. As they cross the sea, Jesus holds up one unbroken loaf of bread. “When I fed the five thousand Jews, how many baskets were left?” he asks. They reply, “Twelve, sir.” “And when I fed the four thousand Gentiles?” “Seven baskets, sir.”

Jesus holds up the bread. “Don’t you understand? There is just one loaf.”

Back in Galilee, Jesus leads his friends north, toward the villages around Caesarea Philippi. As they walk, Jesus looks speculatively at his friends. At last he says, “So you guys hear talk, right?” The friends nod, unsure where this is going. “So what do people say about me? Who do they say I am?”

After a moment, Thomas says, “Some think you’re John the River-dunker, come back to life. Herod says that, anyway.” They walk on a bit. Then another says, “That’s sort of crazy, though, since you were both alive at the same time. I hear people say you’re Elijah, returned from the dead.”

“Or one of the old prophets,” adds one of the Jameses. “Maybe even a new one, but one who’s as just as good as the old ones. A prophet, anyway.”

Jesus nods. Finally he says, “So what about you? Who do *you* think I am?”

There’s another pause, then Simon the fisherman says, “You’re the Christ.”

Jesus takes a deep breath, then smiles and lets it out slowly. “Then let me tell you about the Christ. I know you’ve heard all your lives about what the Christ will do when he comes. You’ve heard he’ll raise an army, drive out the Romans, establish the kingdom of David and Solomon all over again, right? Well, forget all that. God’s kingdom is a different kind of kingdom, and the Christ is a different kind of conqueror. The Son of Man doesn’t come to punish but to take punishment. He doesn’t come to kill but to die. You are going to see the Son of Man hated, scorned, rejected, tried, condemned by his own people, and executed. But he will rise on the third day.”

At this, Simon the fisherman takes him aside. “Now, Jesus, I know you’re tired, but that kind of discouraging talk doesn’t help anyone. Let’s try to be positive around the others, all right?”

Jesus leans into Simon’s face. “Do not tell me to be quiet. Do not tell me to speak happy untruths. Get behind me, Satan.” Then he looks at all the Twelve. “What I said about the Christ is true for you, too. If you want to follow my path, then you have to deny yourself, pick up the cross of your own sacrifice, and start walking. Anyone who puts his own life first will lose it. But anyone who lays down his life willingly will find it.”

Six days later, Jesus takes Simon and the brothers James and John aside. “Come with me,” he says, and he leads them up a mountain. When they reach the top, Simon and James and John sit down to catch their breath, then look up.

“What’s going on?” breathes John. “What’s happening?”

Jesus is different. A moment earlier, he had been as hot and sweaty as they were, and wearing the same ragged brown work clothes, but not any more. Jesus’ face shines, and his robes are a brilliant, gleaming white.

“Who’s that with him?” asks James. There are two other men, both in the same dazzling garments. One of them holds a rod that almost seems to writhe in his hand like a snake. “That’s Moses,” James says suddenly. “That’s the rod of God in his hand.”

“And the other one’s Elijah the prophet,” says John. “With that wild beard and eyes? Who else could it be?”

“I’m scared,” says Simon. But despite his fear Simon stands up and said, “Master, it’s good to be up here with Moses and Elijah. If you want to just stay up here forever, I’ll build some shelters for you.”

Jesus covers his hand with his face but he seems to be laughing. Moses and Elijah disappear, and there’s just Jesus again, in the old, stained workman’s clothes. “Simon,” he says, “I think I’m going to start calling you *Petros*.”

“*Petros*?” repeats Simon. “Peter? The Rock? Is it because I’m firm and steadfast?”

“Sure,” says Jesus. “That too.” They start down the mountain, but as they go Jesus says, “James? John? Peter? I don’t want you to tell anyone what you saw up there. Not yet.”

“All right, Master,” they agree. “Um, when *can* we tell?”

“When the Son of Man has risen from the dead, then tell everyone. All right?”

They nod. Since they had no idea what that meant, there was nothing else to do. They get to the foot of the hill, and they can see that there’s a disturbance. One man rushes toward them. “There you are!” the man cries in an anguished voice. “Please heal my son! I brought him to your followers, but they couldn’t help him.”

Jesus frowns and looks at his friends. “You couldn’t?” They look down. Jesus sighs. “How long do you think I’m going to be around? You got to do this stuff yourself.” He looks at the father. “Bring your son.”

As the father and son approach, the young man suddenly stops. His eyes roll back in his head and he begins writhing and twitching. Foam appears at his mouth, and then he falls back to the ground rigid. Jesus says, “How long has he been like this?”

“Since he was a child,” the father gasps. “Please, sir. If you can help him –”

“*If?*” repeats Jesus. “Anything’s possible, if you trust.”

The father hesitates, but his eyes grow angry. “You think it’s that simple?” he asks harshly. “Do you have any idea how many healers I’ve taken him to? How many promises have been broken? How many lies I’ve given money for? And it’s only getting worse. The demon inside throws him into the fire, into the water. If I’m not there to pull him out, he dies. I’ve saved his life a dozen times. Do you know what it’s like to live afraid that you’ll kill your son by taking a nap? Trust? Help me to trust you more. I want to! I do! But it’s not that damn easy!” He holds his arms out wide, then his thumb and forefinger a hair apart. “I have *this* much fear, and *this* much trust. I hope that’s enough for you, but either way it’s all I’ve got.”

Jesus lifts his thumb and forefinger, mimicking the man’s gesture. “*This* much trust is enough to change the world,” he says. “You trusted enough to ask, and it is enough.” With that, he reaches down and takes the boy’s stiff hand. Slowly, the rigid boy relaxes, first at the fingers then the wrist and arm and body. Color returns to the boy’s face, and his eyes focus.

“Father?”

“Sir?” the father says to Jesus.

“It won’t happen again,” Jesus says. “He is well. Take him home.”

“Sir?”

“And now you can trust a little more, perhaps. Either way, it is enough.”