Lent started the past Wednesday and will finish on April 3rd, the Holy Saturday. As we prepare our hearts to remember Jesus' suffering on the cross and anticipate His resurrection on Easter Sunday many Christians practice fasting and spend intentional time to reflect on Jesus' sacrifice.

Lent is a season of spiritual discipline and renewal when we:

- Give up something specific that tends to hinder our relationship with Jesus.
- Take up a spiritual practice that will help us make more space for Jesus.

Many of us had made Lenten commitments [Response Moment: *Have you made a Lenten commitment?*] and, if you haven't yet, you can still do so and check out our website where you will find some good practical guidelines and suggestions for your prayerful consideration [https://cornerstonechurch.ca/lent-commitment/].

Great questions are thought provoking and can shape our lives; they force us to process information and to develop new ways of seeing reality; they reframe perspectives about the purpose of life and give ownership to the listeners' life choices.

Ken Coleman, a #1 bestselling author of *The Proximity Principle* says, "Good questions inform, great questions transform."

Jesus asks great, penetrating questions that cut to the heart of those who are following him. It's been observed that Jesus gives less than 10 direct answers but asks 183 different questions of the disciples, the crowd, the Pharisees, and political leaders.[1]

The purpose of this new sermon series, "Jesus Has Questions For you," is to help us grow in our intimacy with Jesus and experience spiritual renewal as we observe Lent and fulfill our Lenten commitment.

This series is based on Mk. 8:22-10:52 - the midpoint and the turning point of the gospel with its accent on discipleship – where Jesus focuses on the disciples, predicts his impending suffering, death, and resurrection.

At this juncture in Mark's story we read about Jesus' beginning journey toward Jerusalem, to the place of His execution and exaltation - Jesus is "on the way" to His death and, while traveling with His disciples, He asks them a series of questions and confront their failure to grasp about His mission as a crucified Messiah (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; see 2:20; 3:6, 19 for Mark's earlier hints about Jesus' death). [2]

[1] Scott Perkins, *Essential Questions: Following the Way of Jesus By Examining What He Asked in Mark 8-10,* p. 10.

[2] This sermon series is based on Jesus' questions to the disciples identified by Scott Perkins in his book.

As we walk through Mk. 8-10 in this and following Sundays until Easter, we become Jesus' traveling companions - like the disciples - as followers of the Way (Mk. 1:2; cf. Jn. 14:6; Acts 9:1-2; 19:9;22:4; 24:14, 22) at the same time being challenged by the same series of soul-searching questions He asked "on the way."

So type yes in the Chat if you are ready to travel with Jesus so you can grow in your discipleship journey. Let's begin to look at the first question Jesus asks in Mk. 8:22-26 (NIV), the healing of a blind man.

Mk. 8:22 They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. **23** He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "***Do you see anything?***"

24 He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

25 Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. **26** Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

Why is Jesus' question "***Do you see anything?***" such an important question to the blind man and the disciples then as well as to us today? The answer is found in the way Mark weaves the different materials of this Jesus story together.

Mark's Gospel hasn't been put together as a collection of random stories about Jesus. Mark is a skilful story teller who has provided a plotline and narrative features to help his listeners/readers interpret the Jesus story along the way.

It is worth noting that Jesus' teaching about His suffering and death on the way to Jerusalem is sandwiched by two episodes involving healing of two blind men as bookends (8:22-26; 10:46-52).

Earlier in Mk. 8:11-12, Jesus refuses the Pharisees' request for a sign from heaven because they refuse to ***see*** the many signs Jesus has already shown (Mark 8:11-12).

And when Jesus warns the disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod, i.e., their poisonous attitudes and harmful behaviours, his disciples misunderstand Him completely and that prompted Jesus' response, "**17**Do you still ***not see or understand***? Are your hearts hardened? **18**Do you have ***eyes but fail to see***, and ears but fail to hear?"

Keeping this previous dialogues in mind, we can now see the twofold significance of this first miracle of healing of the blind man where Mark places right at the beginning portion of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, i.e., at the starting point when Jesus points out their spiritual blindness or misunderstanding about following Him "on the way."

On the one hand, it's a straight forward miracle of giving sight that underscores the saving power and authority of Jesus the Messiah – everyone needs His miracle-working power and healing touch to be made whole.

On the other hand, this is an "acted parable"[3] or "a parable-in-action"[4] about seeing and understanding that compares the loss of physical sight of the blind man to the spiritual blindness of the disciples. Just as Jesus enables this blind man to see, he will open the eyes of His disciples so they can understand His suffering and life mission.

"***Do you see anything?***"

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You don't fully grasp what it means to follow Me.

You see, just because the disciples hang out with Jesus, it doesn't mean they understand fully His identity and His mission as well as what He's asking of them.

Doing things – even religious, altruistic or philanthropic service, or performing miracles - together with other disciples/followers doesn't guarantee spiritual maturity or having the same mind and being on the same page with Jesus.

[Response Moment: *if you had spent every day with Jesus for three years, would you "get" Jesus?*]

One of the prominent features of this Gospel is the not-so-flattering picture of the disciples; they are pretty messed up, confused about Jesus' words and deeds, influenced by worldly values, driven by selfish ambitions, and lacking spiritual maturity. And regarding this healing story here NT scholar Ben Witherington III writes: "This miracle visually demonstrated the spiritual malady of the disciples."[5]

From this vantage point, Jesus' question "***Do you see anything?***" is more a soul-searching question for the benefit of His disciples and ours, to draw attention to what it means to follow Him "on the way," especially in light of His suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection.

So what practical lessons can we learn from this healing story that will help us to see and understand better the Jesus way? Let's get back to the story.

Mk. 8:22 They came to ***Bethsaida*** ... **23** [Jesus] ***took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village*** …**26** Jesus sent him home, saying, "***Don't even go into the village***."

Location, location, location! Bethsaida is the home town of Andrew, Peter, and Philip. There must be something

[3] Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark,* p. 198.

[4] Jerry Starling, **DIFFICULT PASSAGES: Mark 8:22-26 – Why Did He Do It Like That?** https://committedtotruth.wordpress.com/2010/04/26/difficult-passages-mark-822-26/

[5] *The Gospel of Mark,* p. 238.

different about Bethsaida, though it wouldn't be "Must Visit" place in Jesus' itinerary! In fact, Jesus is rather wary of this village. He leads the blind man out of the village before healing him and commands not to go back there after.

But it's no accident that Mark just picked this incident randomly; he must know what Jesus has said about Bethsaida. We read in Matthew 11:21,

"Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."

Jesus calls a curse on this place! Why such harsh words?

What have the people of Bethsaida and their vicinity seen or heard of Jesus' miracles? Reading the earlier chapters in Mark, we can find a pretty good samples:

-calming of the storm (Mk 4:35-41)
-healing of a demon-possessed man (Mk 5:1-20)
-resurrection of a dead girl (Mk 5:21-43)
-healing of a sick woman (Mk 5:24-34)
-feeding the five thousand (Mk 6:30-44)
-walking on water (Mk 6:45-56)
-healing of a deaf and mute man (Mk 7:31-35)
-feeding the four thousand (Mk 8:1-13)

But Jesus denounces Bethsaida; although He has performed miracles in the surrounding areas of the village, the people fail to see and understand His words and deeds. The culture of indifference produces a lack of repentance and the people of this town are not receptive to Jesus' message of the kingdom.

Does this not remind you of what we read earlier about Jesus' response to the disciples?

"[17]Do you still ***not see or understand***? Are your hearts hardened? [18]Do you have ***eyes but fail to see***, and ears but fail to hear?"

So Bethsaida represents spiritually blind, selfish and callous people with harden hearts that live in a culture of unbelief and rebellion.

The Apostle Paul uses similar language to describe people whose hearts are darkened and they have created God in their image and persist in doing whatever they desire – and God gives them up to their own wickedness (Rom. 1:18ff.).

Jesus' beginning step of healing is to lead this blind man out of that hostile-to-God environment; and his final word is a command not to get back to the village.

The blind man is now distant from what is familiar and allows Jesus to lead the way.

With respect to the disciples, Jesus is challenging them to put aside the popular but mistaken view of messiahship and their yearning for position, power, privilege, and prosperity.

So here is the first practical application that will help us to see Jesus better:

Soften our hearts and submit to Jesus' leading.

For us today, Jesus is challenging us to consider things, mindsets, attitudes, habits or people that have blocked our sight – whatever that has stopped our moving forward, stunted our growth, or sabotaged our mission. So often we resist leaving behind the familiar ways of doing life.

As Scott Perkins perceptively says,

"what we tend to want from Jesus is for him to create for us a better version of what we already know. We plead for Jesus to bring success and prosperity to our broken ways of seeing while he wants to create in our life something entirely new."[6]

Some indicators of a soften heart:

- Admit that we need help and pray that God will direct people who can lead you to Jesus.
- Be vulnerable, let go of personal fears, insecurity, personal assumptions, and selfish ambitions.
- Trust Christ's guidance and instructions, even going to unfamiliar territory.

Don't cherry pick Jesus' teaching; make space for Jesus and let Him shape your whole life in God's love!

[Response Moment: *Will you soften your heart and submit to Jesus' leading?*]

In this Lenten season, ask Jesus to open your eyes to see areas of your life you need to let go and trust in His leading. Maybe it's your relationships, finance, career, spiritual growth like taking a bold step of faith to be baptised in May [https://cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism/]?

As we begin traveling the Jesus way and develop our sight as His followers, we need Jesus' repeating touch of healing.

It's instructive to note that this is the only recorded miracle that happens in phases.

23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had ***spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him***, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

[6] *Essential Questions*, p. 25.

[24] He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

[25] ***Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly***."

The progressive nature of this miracle doesn't mean that Jesus' healing power is not up to snuff or lacking effectiveness; the progression shows the imperfect faith of the blind man that requires continuous correction. This, of course, points to the spiritual short-sightedness and the poor understanding of the disciples and the need for timely correction. In short, **Mark's emphasis is on the repeated touch of Jesus.**

Jesus wants His disciples [and us today] to see that the healing of their/our spiritual eyesight is **a process**, as seen in the healing stages of this blind man.

"Mark regards the disciples as semi-blind until the resurrection; until then, they are in the position of the half-cured man who could barely distinguish between men and trees."[7]

Every Christ-follower is a work in progress, a learning journey "on the way"!

As the front end of the bookends, Mark uses this action parable to represent what is to follow on the way to Jerusalem, i.e., Jesus will ask the disciples more penetrating and soul-searching questions, to help them to see/understand the gospel of the kingdom and what it means to follow this Servant-King.

This leads to the second practical application that will help us to see Jesus better:

Humbly accept Jesus' loving corrections in our faith journey.

Humility is shown in the blind man willingness to let Jesus grab his hands to lead him out of Bethsaida, as an expression of his growing trust in Jesus' guidance, acknowledging his present limitations and powerlessness. It's a moving scene of truth and grace when the semi-cured man answers Jesus' question with honesty, admitting to the lack of clarity of his sight.

Jesus doesn't punish but show compassion – He doesn't shame this man's lack of faith but assures him with his gentle touch; He doesn't abandon but accepts him in the healing process.

As long as we are on this side of eternity we must remember that we do not see the whole truth and that

[7] Morna Hooker, p. 198.

even with the little truth we see, it doesn't mean we see clearly all the time.[8] (Cf. In one of my pastoral visitation, when I invited the individual to dig into scriptures, the answer was, "I'd read the bible and I know it and don't need to do it again.")

Recognize that faith seeking understanding involves a life transformative process that depends on Jesus' power to change from the inside and our understanding can only be strengthened by our obedience to His instructions. All the while be thankful for Jesus' compassion and patience, as He tenderly corrects us with His gentle touch.

[Response Moment: *Will you accept Jesus' correction and change?*]

Now let me just do a simple recap of what we have covered today:

Jesus' question to every disciple, "***Do you see anything?***" is primarily about spiritual blindness, "***You don't fully grasp what it means to follow Me."***

It's essentially about our need for His healing touch – He is willing to open our eyes to see clearly the Jesus Way. His call to action includes:

We are challenged to soften our hearts and submit to Jesus' leading.

We must humbly accept Jesus' loving corrections in our faith journey.

Let us close this time by joining our hearts together and pray out loud the following prayer:

Lord Jesus,

Open our eyes so we can see you more clearly.

Renew our minds so we can understand you more fully.

Soften our hearts so we can trust you more deeply.

Shape our wills so we can follow you more closely.

Amen.

[8] Cf. Jerry Starling, "Mark 8:22-26 – Why Did He Do It Like That?", https://committedtotruth.wordpress.com/2010/04/26/difficult-passages-mark-822-26/.