

Background for Week 11

Though all the gospels contain elements of conflict, Mark is especially rife with it. Each episode escalates as the story progresses until the culmination when Jesus is betrayed, arrested, accused, sentenced and executed. The gospel, as found in some of the most ancient manuscripts, actually ends at verse 8 of chapter 16, with the women fleeing from the tomb in terror and amazement. This open ending invites readers to finish the story themselves. There are though, two alternative endings that were added later on to attempt to close the book on a more satisfactory note.

Jesus, in this gospel, is not starting a new religion, but is revealing a new creation, a new development in the history of Israel. As the Oxford Annotated Bible (OAB) comments, "...religion is inseparable from the social, political, economic, even the physiological aspects of life."

You might notice that, unlike the other synoptic gospels (Matthew and Luke), Mark does not begin with Jesus birth narrative, but rather with John the Baptist making the first appearance as active messenger preparing the way for Christ. Synoptic simply refers to the first three gospels that present Jesus and his life in a similar fashion and draw from common sources compared to the gospel of John.

Mark was written in what might be referred to as an apocalyptic context. The apocalyptic worldview here is defined as: "secret knowledge of the structure of the universe or impending final judgment where the faithful are vindicated and the wicked are held accountable forever." If you read the whole account through, you'll find the conjunction 'and' as well as the word 'immediately' used frequently which gives it a sense of urgency. It was meant to comfort, encourage and exhort a community feeling beset and besieged in trying and tumultuous times.

Though we call this the gospel of St Mark, the author is actually anonymous. It's believed that it may have come from John Mark (mentioned in Acts 12:12, 15:37), but there is little evidence to support this theory. It is the shortest of all the gospels. It is thought to have been written first, between 66-70 CE, and used to compose Matthew and Luke. During this period there was the Jewish revolt. The Temple was destroyed for the second time (first time was 587 BCE the Babylonian Exile), the local leadership is gone, they've fled, infrastructure is destroyed and Judah is absorbed into the empire.

At the point we enter into the Markan story, Jesus has done quite a bit already. He's been baptized and tested, he's been preaching and teaching, has called the disciples, performed numerous exorcisms and healings, has escaped to pray by himself, broken human contrived rules and reinterpreted Scripture, commissioned the twelve, and calmed a storm as they were crossing the sea. It is right after this miracle that we delve into the narrative.

Text for this week: Mark 5:1-20. (We encourage you to post your answers to these questions on our 100 Key Texts Facebook Page and engage in a discussion with the others.)

1. Read Mark 5:1-20 in its entirety. What jumps out at you in the text? What thoughts are inspired by it? What questions arise?
2. Next, we'll break it down by verses. 1-13:
 - a) Our current circumstances influence how we read scripture. First explore how you perceive this portion of the narrative. How do or don't you relate to it? Then consider other perspectives such as those in prison and the loved ones of a person with epilepsy or schizophrenia. If you know someone in such a situation, ask them how they connect to it.
 - b) Vs 1: Having been in the region of Galilee this whole time, they've now traveled from one side of the sea to the other, to the country of the Gerasenes. As the OAB study notes mention, the territory is in central Transjordan, which is made up of mostly a non-Jewish population. So we see a movement here that reaches beyond the nation of Israel.
 - c) Vs. 2-5: The Greek word for 'tomb' here can also mean grave. Why do you think the author uses the word 'tombs' three times within these 4 verses? Compare and contrast this community to ours in dealing with people in such situations. What chains/shackles do you experience? What about Messiah? The whole church on earth? Marquette? Our nation?
 - d) Vs. 6-8: This man who, as far as we know, has never met Jesus before calls him by name and refers to him as the Son of the Most High God. He also adjures or implores him "by God." What do you make of these statements? In addition, he asks Jesus not to torment him. How does that sit with you? Have you ever felt tormented? By what and/or whom? In the text right before this one the disciples experience Jesus verbally commanding the elements of nature, and they obey. Here again he speaks a directive and the oppositional forces obey. Where else in scripture is there a spoken word and then things happen? What do you think the author is trying to convey here?
 - e) Vs. 9-13: The pronoun 'him' in verse 9 might throw us a little here, making us think that Jesus is talking to the man rather than the unclean spirit that Jesus has just cast out. Vs. 10 though seems to give us some direction because it makes more sense that the demon, rather than the man, would plead not to be kicked out of the country. Is this supernatural scene one you interpret literally or figuratively? Where do you stand in regards to the supernatural and why?
3. 14-17:
 - a) Jesus has just arrived in this community for the first time, and is already causing a stir. After the conversation with the demon, 2,000 livestock were killed. Was it Jesus or Legion that drove the pigs off the cliff? Either way, not only have some of the citizens lost their livelihood, but the town is now without a significant source of food. What message does this relay about the kingdom? How would you preach this text to a community divided on a similar issue, such as the conflict around the mines in Marquette county? What is the gospel or good news?

b) 15: Note that when we first came across the man, there was nothing or no one that had the strength to subdue him. Now, however, after his encounter with the Son of the Most High God, we, along with the fearful townsfolk, find him completely transformed. When have you witnessed a phenomenon that you couldn't explain? How did you react?

4. 18-20:

a) vs. 18: The man given a new lease on life asks to journey with Jesus. How have you responded to God's mercy, to being released and transformed?

b) vs. 19: What is your initial gut reaction to Jesus' answer? Why do you think Jesus tells him to "go... and tell..." rather than grant his wish? Have you ever received a similar type of answer, a "no, but..." response to a prayer or request?

c) Decapolis, according to the OAB notes, was the district of "ten cities" in the Jordan valley and in Transjordan. When was the last time you were amazed by what Jesus did for someone or by the work of God in another person's life?

For your prayers:

Dear Divine Physician, you still perform miracles today: through our intelligence, through the exercise of our gifts and skills, and through advancements in medicine. Still, many of your children suffer from disease and social stigma. Help us see beyond the illness and accompany our neighbors. Empower us to work for systemic change so that many of the vulnerable are not left to wander the streets alone. Amen.

Next week: John 11:1-44