

A
Study Curriculum
For

THE
BEGINNING
OF THE
GOOD NEWS

A Live Performance of Mark's Gospel
By Philip L. Ruge-Jones

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Introduction: Using This Resource

This project comes with two major elements. The first is the DVD performance of the Gospel of Mark. This performance was the result of more than a year of daily preparation since I do it by memory. The performance itself took place at the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Lay School, an amazing group of faithful people who engage in academically rigorous study and spiritual formation on a monthly basis. They helped finance the taping of the gospel by the skilled professionals of Seraphim Communications [Thanks, Todd and Kevin].

The second element is the sixteen-session curriculum that you now see before you. Each session works through a chapter of the Gospel of Mark providing you with all the elements you need for a one-hour session. The hour needs no preparation, although the leader may wish to take twenty minutes to preview the DVD segment and become familiar with the background material and questions.

A typical session would look like this:

Begin by having one of the participants offer the prayer.

Next, the group reads over the background material. This provides information about the context of the world that first heard the story. In other words, I inform you about things that the original audience would have already known. Sometimes I also help you make connections with the way that the story is told. With an understanding of the world behind the text, you are ready to view the actual story itself. The background sheet is kept to one page so that you can hand out copies with that material on one side and the questions on the other.

Watch the actual story itself. The DVD has been split into the chapter divisions you will find in any bible. Try to imagine that you are at the performance itself and not simply watching a DVD. As an audience member you become part of the crowds that gather around Jesus as he speaks through me directly to you. Notice whatever seems interesting or important to you. I have memorized a translation that started with the text from *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd edition by David Rhoads, Joanna Dewy, and Donald Michie. They were very attentive to the oral qualities of the original Greek and took pains to preserve those features. I have modified their translation in relation to my own understanding and research.

I provide you with a set of questions to help you reflect on what you have watched. The opening question is always about what struck you as interesting or important in the story. I would be content if you never moved beyond this question and spent the rest of the hour discussing how the story itself impacted you and the group. In order to support your reflections when that

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does *not* happen, I have provided some questions that might help you engage the story more deeply. I have imagined that you would not be referring back to a print copy of the bible, but would discuss your memory of the performance, as early Christians would have had to do, but you may find that referencing a bible will be helpful. Do what seems right to you. Do take each and every opportunity to weave your own congregational stories and personal experiences into the fabric of Mark's story.

I would suggest closing with a prayer. You could even use the one that started the session. Hopefully it will say even more for you since the actual story and your reflections upon it can fill it with new meaning.

At the end of the curriculum, I supply you with a brief set of resources that will be helpful for those who desire further study on the Gospel of Mark and on performing biblical stories. I also include a poster to advertise the study.

I hope that *The Beginning of the Good News* draws you more deeply into the way of life that Jesus brings to us. I thank the wonderful people at Select Multimedia Resources and especially Greg Kaufmann for his encouragement and vision that led to all that you have received.

I am happy to receive feedback and address any questions you might have through my email at Texas Lutheran University where I teach undergrads in a fine university of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (pruge-jones@tlu.edu) I may also be reached through this address for workshops and performances.

I dedicate this resource to:

Lori Marie Ruge-Jones

my partner in storytelling and life

About the author/storyteller:

Phil Ruge-Jones is an Associate Professor of Theology at Texas Lutheran University. He has performed multiple biblical stories around the country and authored of *The Word of the Cross in a World of Glory*, *Cross in Tensions*, and co-edited *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*. He is ordained in the ELCA and has served congregations of Spanish speaking people. He currently lives with his beloved and their two wonderful children in San Marcos, Texas.

Chapter 1: The Good News Proclaimed

Opening Prayer

Holy and gracious God, you break into our world and turn everything around. Let our study today be a new beginning for our life in you. In the name of your beloved Son Jesus. Amen.

Background Material

Why explore the Gospel of Mark in the form of a performance? More likely than not, this is the way that everyone experienced it in the early church. The world in which early evangelical storytellers proclaimed the gospel was immersed in oral communication. This gospel was created through a process of continual performance. Rather than sitting down with paper and pen, the storyteller stood with memory and audience as the main tools of the trade. Even the phrase “good news” that opens this story refers to the act of oral proclamation.

People in the ancient world had a capacity to listen for long periods to extended stories. You may find the two and a half hours required to hear the whole story very long, but in the ancient world people routinely listened for extensive periods to stories and other forms of performance. Stories entertained, taught, and shaped the character of those who listened. This was true in synagogue worship, but also in the Roman world engulfing the people who lived in Palestine. The oral word was seen as a living media and was contrasted by the written letter that was often described as dead.

The early Christians heard the gospel in performance because for most this was the only way to experience its power. Scholars estimate that in the community where Jesus was born as few as three percent of the population was functionally literate. The production of hand written manuscripts on costly materials was very expensive. Furthermore, those who have studied the literature that has roots in performance note that Mark’s style reflects this origin. He tells a story in short episodes and he uses frequent verbal repetition and formulas that make committing the text to memory easier.

Hearing a text has a different feel than reading one. You will sense much of this as you watch this taped performance, but some of the energy of a live performance does not translate clearly into this media. Imagine that the storyteller is looking YOU in the eyes as you become the character in need of healing or one whom Jesus challenges. Storytellers do not seek abstract ideas; they proclaim words to have a direct and concrete impact on the audience. This gospel was told not simply to inform, but to form, even transform. Spoken words were believed to have the power to change people and recreate them as surely as God had spoken in order to create the world.

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Watch the Gospel of Mark 1. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) What are the differences between the way you heard the word today and the way you are accustomed to engaging it? Make a chart noting the contrasts between two different ways of encountering the word:

- 2) Who is coming out to hear John? Do you sense the storyteller inviting you to be part of that crowd?

- 3) How would you describe the relationship between Jesus and John the baptizer?*

- 4) This story draws on several images of Israel's story that would have helped the early hearers connect this story with the extended story of God's actions in the world. What are some of the stories that were invoked? How might remembering these echoes enrich our hearing today?

- 5) Whom does Jesus call to follow him? What kind of crowds is Jesus gathering? What is he doing during these first days of his ministry?

* Be sure to notice both similarities. On the one hand, Jesus is portrayed as stronger than John who claims to be not worthy in his presence. On the other hand, Jesus takes his first sermon almost directly from John's message about the empire of God. Notice Mark says nothing about them being cousins.

** There are several images that are invoked. The opening verse echoes God's beginning in Genesis 1, Isaiah and the exile are remembered. John is portrayed in Elijah's garb, the Jordan was the place Israel entered the promised land and where Elijah was taken up to heaven, and the Exodus desert wanderings are present also.

Chapter 2: Conflicting Characters

Opening Prayer

Holy God, your wisdom has been showered upon your people to guide us into lives of faithfulness. Keep us open to the guiding of your Spirit anew in our own day and let us not so cling to the gifts of yesterday that we miss the gift of your people standing in need before us today. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

This chapter outlines a series of conflicts that Jesus had with the religious leaders of his day. In this chapter we meet two groups of these leaders for the first time: legal experts and Pharisees. The word for legal experts is also rendered as scribes or scholars in other translations. They are people who have dedicated their lives to interpreting divine law and doctrine, to discerning its application in daily life, and to teaching the faithful to follow it. While here they appear in Galilee linked with the Pharisees, later they will be linked to the temple and the chief priests who ran it. On the other hand, with one exception, the Pharisees have encounters with Jesus far from the temple. They are men Mark locates in Galilee. They wish to live out faithfulness guided the law in every occasion of life. They taught others how to maintain Jewish identity in perilous times.

The greatest challenge to hearing what is said in this chapter is that over two thousand years we have learned a bias against the Pharisees and legal experts. We have made them into two-dimensional characters whose concerns are easily dismissed as hypocritical. For the original audience this would not have been the case. Both of these groups held influence in the community and their interpretations would have been seriously considered. The concerns raised in this chapter are related to practices that preserved Israel's identity for centuries; they are not trivial issues. They relate to rendering to God the things that are God's; in this case the role of pardoning, of maintaining purity, of practicing spiritual disciplines, and preserving the Sabbath are at stake. If we trivialize these things, or point to "those hypocrites" back then, we miss what the story offers to us. I have tried not to portray the religious leaders as hypocrites, but rather as people who have bound themselves to the blessing of the divine traditions that have been handed on to them by their elders. These good gifts and practices come from God.

These stories are meant to invite the hearers to reflect on how we can use even the best gifts of God as obstacles to living out the life-giving will of God in relation to our neighbors in need. Jesus challenges us (as an audience in a storytelling environment, we become those to whom he speaks) not to let our own truly precious traditions block our path to the neighbor in need. Do not take these stories as opportunities to "tsk, tsk" the faithful of an era in the past. Let Jesus appear to you today and challenge you!

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Watch the Gospel of Mark 2. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

1) What are the key issues involved in each of the conflicts that the legal experts and Pharisees have with Jesus?

2) Make the case as strongly as you can about each of the concerns that the religious leaders bring from their perspective.

a) Why do they accuse Jesus of blasphemy?

b) Why are they concerned with the people with whom he is eating?

c) Why do they value fasting?

d) Why is Sabbath observance important?

3) Look at each conflict story. a) With whom do the leaders have conflicts? b) To whom do they address their concerns? Why don't we deal directly with those with whom we have conflicts?

3) What are the precious traditions that we embrace that become obstacles to serving those around us? How do we balance preserving the traditions that have served us well and being open to people's needs in our own time and place?

4) If this were the only chapter you had to go on, what would you say are the central values that Jesus is putting forward? What are the practices he is emphatically rejecting?

Chapter 3: A New Kind of Community

Opening Prayer

Loving God, you gather us together into a community of love and support that is grounded in your will. At times being in this alternative community makes us feel like we have gone out of our minds. Help us to live in the alternative way that you put before us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

In this chapter, we see the conflicts becoming more intense. In the first conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders from last time, the leaders were among those who were amazed and glorified God at the healing of the paralyzed man; now they begin to plot against Jesus. Jesus' call to serve those who present themselves with needs trumps even Sabbath practices. I imagine the religious leaders thinking, "Couldn't he wait until tomorrow to heal this man's hand? What difference would one day more make?" They may have a point. Yet they are so angered that they themselves cannot wait another day to call a meeting in order to destroy Jesus. Their decision to act against Jesus happens right after Jesus points out that the Sabbath is a day for restoring, not destroying.

Those who love in the way Jesus did and who live in the way that he proclaimed meet with hostility. Sometimes it comes from those who have power in society; sometimes the concerns are raised closer to home! Both of these will occur in this chapter. Jesus will speak of the faithful members of God's way as an alternative kind of family. In early Christianity, the house churches that gathered in Jesus' name often provided a surrogate family for those who had lost loved ones in the conflict with Rome or who had become alienated from their own families for whatever reason. In the fellowship gathered in Jesus' name, they found support. Community was needed to sustain the alternative lifestyle; something that was so radical could not be sustained alone.

An interesting dimension that lies behind this chapter is the strong hierarchical background of the day in which it was told. Rome sat at the top of a pyramid of power looking down on those below who were there to serve Rome's needs. But even in smaller and more basic social units such as the family, someone sat at the top: this would be the father. The father had the status, power, and right to make decisions that affected the rest of the family. Interestingly, when Jesus speaks of the new family God is creating, he makes no mention of fathers, only brothers and sisters and mothers. This does not mean that no fathers participated in the early church. But in the new kind of kinship that Jesus establishes, no one, not even Jesus himself, gets to play the role of father. This community will not be ruled top down, but is a circle on which all stand with the same God-given status: men and women, young and old, insiders and outcasts. Later when Peter describes all they have left, Jesus summarizes their losses with the list that includes fathers; he promises a one hundredfold return on the other losses but drops fathers from the list since in this new kind of family no one calls the shots (Mark 10:20-30).

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Watch the Gospel of Mark 3. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) How does the story of the healing of the man with the withered hand relate to last week's set of conflicts?
- 2) If you were the man with the withered hand how would you feel throughout that story? What does Jesus say is the purpose of the Sabbath? What do the religious leaders do on the Sabbath immediately after chastising Jesus for doing things on the Sabbath?
- 3) What is Jesus doing that draws such large crowds? Why do you think he doesn't let the demons say who he is?
- 4) Why does Jesus call the twelve?*
- 5) What strikes you in the conflicts with Jesus' family and with the Jerusalem legal experts? What are their interpretations of Jesus at this point? What are his responses? How would those sit with the people who heard them?
- 6) How would you feel if you were part of Jesus' biological family? How would you feel if you were one of those in the room with him? What does it look like when we "do the will of God"?**
- 7) If this were the only chapter you had to go on, what would you say are the central values that Jesus is putting forward? What are the practices he is rejecting?

* The story names three reasons: that they be with him, that they proclaim the good news, that they cast out demons.

** Let Jesus' activity guide you here in defining this.

Chapter 4: Riddles of the Empire

Opening Prayer

Sower of the Word, cast your seeds upon us and give us the ears to hear that we might yield thirty, sixty, even one hundredfold the fruits you would have us produce. Keep us free from the concerns of this age, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for things. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

The people who first heard this gospel story lived under the shadow of the Roman Empire. This imperial power was the global reality that dominated and shaped their lives on even the most intimate levels. The storyteller remembers how Jesus spoke of another empire, the empire of God. Although we are more familiar with the translation the “kingdom of God”, the translation “empire” used throughout the performance captures the tension within this proclamation of Jesus. He was intentionally oppositional. I live in Texas where the fall religion of Friday night is high school football. My daughter has a button that reads, “Hey, what is the football team doing on the marching band field?” Her statement sets up a tension between the dominant reality and an alternative one. While so much around her says these fields are made for football, she uses the phrase “marching band field” to propose a different interpretation about what matters. Jesus uses the phrase “empire of God” in this same manner.

For those who knew too well the brutality of the Roman Empire, Jesus proclaimed and enacted a very different kind of empire. This empire had God's initiation as its source and it gave people healing, bread, and life. Jesus' commitment to proclaiming and living in this alternative empire eventually cost him his life. Rome wants no rivals.

Jesus tells a series of riddles or parables. I have stayed with the translation “riddles” from my source translation because riddles are not so much object lessons as things that get our thinking started. They force us to reflect outside the framework that works on a day-to-day basis and to pay attention to a new way of thinking about things.

There are some things you should know that will help the riddles get you thinking in a fruitful direction. Normal seeds in the time of Jesus produced about an eight-fold yield, so look how amazing the yield he speaks of is. It is off the charts! Also be careful to think about the various kinds of soil that Jesus speaks of in the terms that Mark lays out for us. Do not assume that you know what good or bad soil is apart from this narrative. You should also know that mustard seeds are a weed. Although ancient Israel had often hoped that God's kingdom or empire would grow like a cedar of Lebanon (huge and impressive). Jesus describes it as a weed (yes, one as tall as high as nine feet) that is invasive, and out of control.

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Watch the Gospel of Mark 4. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

1) Notice that people are on the “land” while Jesus is on the sea. He preaches about seeds sown on land and later explains that the seed is the proclaimed word. How are his activities and his sermon itself related?

2) Name from memory the four kinds of soil. Can you think of stories from Mark’s Gospel so far that may illustrate some of the different kinds of soil in terms of responses to the word? What do you feel about this sower carelessly throwing precious seeds in all directions?

3) What do you make of the moment when Jesus explains that the riddles are to keep those outside from being forced to turn from their sins? Do you agree with the irony in the storyteller’s tone? What do you make of Jesus’ assertion that the riddles are understandable to the disciples and then his immediate realization that this simply is not the case (What? You don’t understand either?)

4) What does the image of a lamp under a basket make you think of? How about the notion that a farmer who simply awaits the harvest that is not of his own doing? How about the notion that the empire of God is like a weed?

5) What do you take away from these riddles of God’s empire?

6) What about the story of a storm at sea? Have you ever found yourself engulfed by chaos and the threat of death and wondered if God or Jesus was asleep? When was this?

7) If this were the only chapter you had to go on, what would you say are the central values that Jesus is putting forward? What are the practices he is emphatically rejecting?

Chapter 5: Comic Resistance and Crossing Barriers

Opening Prayer

Lord of the whole earth, you free us from all that would possess us, that would rob us of our voices, and lead to our self-destruction. You refuse to recognize the barriers we have put up between us and them, thus bringing your people together into a new community. Thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

Some stories are so odd that you have to wonder why they were told. I suspect you will find this one such a story. There are some things that might help you to sort out, if not figure out completely, the strangeness in this chapter. The two main stories we encounter in this chapter are set in different places. The first takes place in Gentile territories and the second takes place back in the Israelite region of Galilee. Throughout this gospel, the storyteller cues you when this particular shift occurs, usually with a phrase indicating that Jesus made them go “to the other side.” Other clues in the stories help you keep track of where you are. When you are in a region with huge herds of pigs, you know you are not in the land of Israel. The Jews see pigs as unclean and do not eat pork. Later when they go back across the sea and Jesus is met by a leader of the synagogue, you know that you have returned to Galilee because synagogues were gathering places in Israel.

The first story is doing more than recounting events. Remember what we discussed in the first session. The stories were not to inform people but to transform them. In this story Jesus meets a man possessed, we might say “occupied,” by demons. Their name is Legion, the word for the large military units with thousands of Roman soldiers who occupied Jesus' land. For those who first heard this story, they would link the demons' name with their own experience of having their land occupied by Rome. The particular legion that had once occupied Gerasenes had as its mascot a wild pig; this is the image that their military banners carried. Occupation does horrible things to people. It robs them of their voice, it surrounds them with death, and it often leads to self-hatred and destruction. Yet occupied people find ways of challenging the power of the empire by laughing at them behind their back. This story may be such a practice.

The other cultural norm of the time that you need to be aware of is the practice of dividing people and things between what is clean and unclean. The woman in the second story is unclean. She apparently has a menstrual dysfunction that leads to a perpetual period. This renders her unclean. In such a state she is not only poor, having spent everything she had seeking a cure, but she is also barred from normal interactions in community. Anyone she would come into contact with by touching them would become unclean for a time and thus also be barred from normal interaction with others. Watch what happens when an unclean woman makes Jesus unclean. How will this affect Jesus' reputation?

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Watch the Gospel of Mark 5. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) Describe the setting of the first story. What are some of the details that you recall? What do those details say about the context that the story takes place in?
- 2) What are the characteristics of the man possessed by Legion? What would the change that occurs to him mean in his life?
- 3) What do you think about the fact that the ones who seem to have the greatest clarity about how Jesus is in Mark's gospel tend to be the demons? What does this mean?
- 4) What do you sense is the tone of the pig story? The storyteller has presented it as a rather funny story. What might this story say about the relationship of Jesus to the forces that were occupying people in Jesus' day?
- 5) Do you remember the way that Jairus and the bleeding woman fall down before Jesus? What do you make of this shared posture before Jesus?
- 6) How would Jairus feel when his urgent mission is interrupted by the unclean woman? How would she feel when she is caught in the middle of the other family's grief? What would the friends of Jairus have thought when they saw Jesus with the unclean woman?
- 7) What is the relationship of health and well-being for those like Jairus who have status in the community and that of those denied status? What barriers does Jesus cross over? How could the parents not say anything about what happened? Wouldn't those who had been at the funeral notice if the corpse is now alive?

Chapter 6: A Birthday Party Gone Bad

Opening Prayer

God of dignity and life, be with all those who die due to tyranny and also be with those who have bought into the illusions of death dealing systems. Let us turn from violence toward the life that you bring. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

In this chapter a gruesome story of life in the Roman Empire is juxtaposed with stories of service in the interest of God's empire. Pay attention to the way these two ways of living in the world reflect upon each other.

Notice that the storytelling is shaped by an interruption. In the middle of an account of the disciples extending of Jesus' ministry, the storyteller stops to do a flashback to an event that has already occurred in the past—the brutal murder of John the Baptist by Herod.

There are several Herods in this historical context making it difficult to keep them straight. The one who will appear in this story is Herod Antipas who governed in Galilee from 4 to 39 AD. He was criticized by John the Baptizer for marrying his half-brother Philip's wife Herodias. Apparently while Herod was visiting Philip, he had committed adultery with Philip's wife, divorced his own legal partner, and then married Herodias. Philip was still on the scene and these actions were filled with political rivalry and motives. That the son of Herod the Great might be engaged in illicit relations is not strange when one recalls that his father managed to have ten different wives. Herod is a man of influence who is able to gather important political, business, and military leaders at this party. The context of the party makes the events of that day all the more gruesome. Some traditions have made the young girl dancing into a seductress, but the language used to describe her would fit for a very young girl who is hauled out at the party much in the way I make my children play their musical instruments for guests at my home.

This account of the utter indignity with which John is murdered stands over and against the healing ministry of the disciples that surrounds it. God is initiating a healing empire through their work; they have the power to bring freedom to those occupied by demons. Herod's banquet scene is also a striking contrast to Jesus' feeding in the desert.

We should recall at this time that Jesus was baptized by John and that after John's arrest Jesus proclaimed a message very like John's. Jesus' ministry was enough like John's that on a couple of occasions within the gospel people specifically associate Jesus' activity with John. We see this in the story of this chapter when Herod is among those who make this connection. In this sense, the death of John is a frightening sign of the fate that awaits those who stand up against the regimes of power as Jesus is doing.

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Watch the Gospel of Mark 6. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) What do you make of Jesus' experience in his hometown? Why do you suppose those people had such a difficult time trusting in him?
- 2) What activities does Jesus send his disciples out to do? How successful are they? Why do you think the story of their mission is wrapped around the remembrance of John's death?*
- 3) What do you make of the dynamics of the story of John's beheading? How is the little girl drawn into things that she does not really understand? What do you feel it would be like to have someone you cared about murdered in such a dishonoring way?
- 4) What does that story tell us about the brutality of those who held political power? What happens when prophets speak truth to power?
- 5) What do you notice in terms of the humanity of Jesus and the disciples in the feeding story? Did you notice that while Jesus talked of *giving* the crowd something to eat, the disciples speak in terms of *buying*?
- 6) What other biblical stories touch on similar themes to this feeding story in the desert?***
- 7) What do you make of the walking on water story?
- 8) If this were the only chapter you had to go on, what would you say are the central values that Jesus is putting forward? What are the practices he is emphatically rejecting?

* Wrapping one story around another is a storytelling device that Mark uses in order to have one interpret the other.

** Certainly the LORD's feeding of the wandering Israelites in the desert with manna relates to this story. Also the actions of Jesus with the bread will be repeated in the very last meal he shares with his disciples.

Chapter 7: The Tradition of the Elders

Opening Prayer

God, you speak to us, often from our traditions, often from outside our traditions, sometimes to move us against our traditions. Give us ears to hear and wisdom to understand how you speak to us today. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

We revisit a theme from the background material in chapter two: do not treat too lightly the questions raised to or even against Jesus. Though we have lived with one resolution of the issues raised in this chapter for thousands of years, to the early Christians the issues were still unresolved. The concerns are voiced in the text because they reflect challenges that were arising still, even within the Christian community. In order to allow this text to transform us, we need to not shake our heads at “those people” back then, but examine when our own traditions might be usurping God's will.

The characters, as you will see, are religious leaders who meet Jesus on his home turf. They come from Jerusalem, the place that Jesus will suffer the consequences of his teaching and ministry. Once again we see that the religious leaders have issues with the disciples, yet they speak to Jesus.

The main issue they deal with has to do with the proper rituals involved in eating. These practices had served Israel well, keeping them from giving in to their oppressors or assimilating the culture of the oppressors. Ritual purity laws set them apart. A story set in the Maccabean period under the oppression of Antiochus IV involved a Jewish man who was threatened with execution if he did not renounce his faith. The symbolic act required by the oppressor was eating the defiled food, pork. He resisted even when the one threatening him diminished the demand to only *saying* he had eaten it. Later his praises are sung for not renouncing his faith even when tortured unto death. Thus when we hear of the tradition of the elders and Jesus' challenge to it, we need to remember what is being called into question.

Another issue raised in this chapter is that of *korban*. Jesus asks whether one's pledge of support for the temple trumps the need to care of one's mother and father. We will revisit this arena in a later chapter when we discuss Jesus' conflict with those who controlled the temple.

Finally, Jesus has an encounter with a Syrophenician mother. They meet embedded in a long history of conflict between Jesus' people and hers. She is a Gentile and comes from a place of power and wealth. He is Jewish and does not even have a place to lay his head. She is a woman in a man's world and comes in desperate need. Some reports suggest that Tyre and Sidon is where the taxed foods of the people of Galilee were brought and stored. The children of Israel's bread had been taken there. Be prepared to have this woman surprise you. It is only fair since she surprised Jesus!

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Watch the Gospel of Mark 7. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) Taking into account both the background material and the actual performance of this chapter, what is this part of the gospel about?
- 2) Remember that most of the characters in this story are Jewish with the exception of those met in Gentile territories. Jesus himself is Jewish. What Jewish source does Jesus appeal to in his conflict with the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem?
- 3) What are traditions that have served you and your people well in the past, but that may get in the way of the faithfulness that God calls us to in this particular moment? Can you think of times when you have had to rethink important traditions and teachings in light of new experiences you have had? What did that feel like?
- 4) What does Jesus identify as the source of defilement? What examples did he give of this?
- 5) What are your expectations when a character comes to Jesus and asks for help? How was the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman different than the other encounters? What do you make of this meeting? What surprises you? What seems to surprise Jesus?*
- 6) Take some extra time today to gather the things that Jesus' words and actions reveal about the values of the empire of God in the whole first half of the Gospel of Mark. What is the alternative that Jesus is calling people to live out?

* She is the only person in the gospel who teaches Jesus something. While some interpreters have argued that Jesus is testing her to build her faith, I found that trying to portray this interpretation made Jesus appear even harsher, almost like he is grinning and toying with this woman who has a real and desperate need. Invite anyone who has a different interpretation of what happened than the one I offered, to show the tone they would use to speak the most difficult line, "Let the children be satisfied first, because it isn't good to take the bread for the children and throw it to the dogs." Watch to see if it really can play that way.

Chapter 8: Bread for the Dogs?

Opening Prayer

Lord, you open your hand and feed the hungry. You open your arms and embrace all: Jew and Gentile alike. Help us to understand the things that are beyond us so that we might finally comprehend the generosity you offer the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

This session you may feel a moment of *déjà vu*. Once again Jesus will be in the desert and the crowds in front of him will be hungry. You may think you are hearing the same story again. The similarities will be remarkable but it is actually a very different story. Key to seeing this is remembering where we are in the story. Remember Jesus had that encounter with the Gentile woman. He has not crossed back to the other side so we are still in Gentile territory. In the first feeding miracle, he served a Jewish crowd in Galilee with just a few loaves and fish; this time with a few loaves and fish he feeds the Gentiles and that simple fact makes it a different story! The actions are all the same, but the characters have changed and this makes all the difference in the world. [I have added the word Israelites to the first story and Gentiles to this one. I wanted you to see what would have been clear to the original audience since they could keep track of the regional geography that is foreign to us.] What happened to open Jesus up to giving the Gentiles bread? Remember that encounter with the Gentile woman last time? Jesus has been opened up by her to give bread to those whom he had called dogs. This story probably reflects the challenge experienced by the early Christian movement of welcoming Gentiles as well as Jewish followers of Jesus to the Lord's Supper.

You will also notice that the disciples are not usually keyed into what Jesus has been trying to teach them. They often come across as clueless. We have seen this before. Remember the disciples asking him about the riddle of the seeds? Remember his perplexity at their lack of understanding? This theme comes out several times more in this chapter so keep your eyes open for it. To me it is rather amazing that a story would be written about the beginning of a movement by people from the movement and that they would portray the first generation of leaders as such a dense group. Why can't they see what Jesus is showing them? The story is written so that the disciples meet us in our own confusion. When Jesus explains difficult concepts to them, it also gives us as the contemporary audience a second chance to understand.

Speaking of needing a second chance, as the story starts moving toward Jerusalem Jesus will heal a blind man, but it takes him two attempts. At first the man does not see things clearly, so Jesus tries again and finally clarifies his sight. This is kind of like the disciples in the story and kind of like us in the audience whose eyes Jesus also wants to open. Sometimes the truth is so new, we do not see it clearly right away and Jesus needs to touch us once again.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 8. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) What similarities do you notice between this story of a feeding in the desert and the last one? What is different? What do you think of the idea that the Syrophenician woman opened Jesus up to a broad sense of the mission of God?
- 2) The disciples do not understand what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of the leaven of Herod and of the Pharisees? What is leaven? How much effect can a little leaven have on a bunch of flour? What have we learned of Herod and the Pharisees elsewhere in the story?
- 3) What do you think about how angry Jesus gets with the disciples? Does it surprise you that Jesus has such a human response to a very frustrating behavior?
- 4) What do you think of the story of the blind man? This story marks the beginning of the middle section of the gospel. In this part Jesus spends a great deal of quality time with his closest disciples trying to get them to understand what is going on. How are they like the man Jesus healed?
- 5) In the first verse of Mark we were told by our trustworthy narrator that Jesus was God's anointed one. The word translated anointed one may also be translated "Christ" or "Messiah". Who in the traditions of Israel was anointed?* What significance does it have that Jesus is called by this title?
- 7) What do you make of the two consecutive exchanges between Jesus and Rock?**
- 8) What new things have you learned this week about Jesus and the way he announces and embodies God's empire?

* Kings and prophets were anointed as a sign of their set apart role in God's work.

** You are probably more accustomed to hearing the nickname Jesus gives him as Peter, but it is meant to sound like the Greek word for Rock. I suspect this is a commentary by Jesus about how hardheaded Peter is.

Chapter 9: The Anointed One's Secret

Opening Prayer

Holy God, your beloved Son Jesus has dwelled among us to show us your way. Help us not to get in his way, but to set out on the way with him. In his name we pray. Amen.

Background Material

In the first story of today's chapter, a theme will again arise that has appeared throughout the gospel. The inner circle of disciples will glimpse the identity of Jesus. As they are heading down the mountain, Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about him. Scholars of Mark tend to refer to this as "the Messianic Secret". Few people in the story seem to get who Jesus is. If you remember from last week, even when they do, they do not understand Jesus' specific way of being the Anointed One. Remember how last week Rock knew the title, but had the job description all wrong? Only the demons seem to know who Jesus is—which makes it interesting that Jesus called Rock "Satan." When the demons make Jesus' identity known, he silenced them. When Rock recognized Jesus as the Anointed One, Jesus "rebuked them to tell no one about him." He does not commend Rock's wisdom and insight in Mark's gospel; he "rebuked" Rock, a verb that normally describes what Jesus does to demons, and then silenced the disciples about this.

When Jesus heals people, he tells them not to say anything about it. They never listen to this command. As you recall the raising of Jairus' daughter would be a difficult to hide when people had seen her corpse at the grief session he interrupted. The greatest obstacle to understanding why Jesus wants his identity kept a secret is our own expectations. We have been taught that Jesus' main message is about himself as Son of God. But that is John's gospel. Mark's Jesus focuses on the strange empire that God initiates among us.

So, why the secret? Interpreters have put much thought into this question. Your group can come up with your own theories. Here are some of the main ones my students have suggested. Some say it is based on the life of Jesus. He knew that when word got out, the authorities would not be pleased with him. Given what happened to John the Baptist, this seems feasible. A handful of my students think it is a marketing technique. If you want to spread a word, tell people to keep it a secret. Others see more theological motives in the theme. Jesus says the empire of God is not about self-promotion so he does not self-promote. In Mark, the narrator keeps telling us Jesus is "Son of God" but the character Jesus does not. Others note that in today's story, he says to guard this word until after his resurrection. Many in Jesus' day had thought the Anointed One would be a king like David who would kick out Rome and set up a political kingdom. But Jesus redefines what it means to be the Anointed One especially on the cross. So he does not want people to know who he is until they see all that this will mean. Finally others note that this command has an impact on the audience. We think, "How could anyone keep this silent?" and then we ask ourselves if we have announced the good news to anyone lately! The impact of the devise is to make us feel that this is good news no one can keep it to themselves even if Jesus says we must.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 9. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) Did you notice the theme of the Anointed One's Secret? Do you find this strange or not? Why do you think this theme appears over and over again in the gospel?
- 2) What do you make of the event on the mountain? What are the importance of the two people who appear with Jesus?*
- 3) Why do you imagine that Rock responds as he does?
- 4) In the story of the possessed boy, what stands out to you in this story? What do you make of the father's cry, "I trust, help my lack of trust!" Have you ever responded in this way to God? What do you make of the translation of "faith" as "courageous trust" (David Rhoads)?
- 5) This driving out of the demon story is like a little resurrection before Jesus' own resurrection. The storyteller is saying that resurrection is not something that happens only after death but it meets us often through Jesus in the middle of our daily lives and struggles. Can you think of others whom Jesus "raises up" so far in the gospel?**
- 6) So now what more can you say about Jesus and the values of the empire that he announces and embodies?

* Moses and Elijah stand for the central traditions of Israel, the law and the prophets.

**When one starts to look at this, especially as a storyteller playing the role of Jesus, one sees that he is constantly raising people up. The most obvious example is the daughter of Jairus. But Jesus also raised up Rock's mother-in-law when she had a fever and then she served them. Levi the tax collector rose at Jesus' command, left his booth, and followed him. The paralytic who was lowered to Jesus was raised from his paralysis and walked away pardoned. The man with the withered hand was commanded to rise as Jesus brought him to the center of the community. Resurrection happens whenever people are released from the power of death, freed up for service, moved from collaboration with oppressors to following the new way, forgiven and liberated from whatever paralyzes them, or moved from the margins of our communities to the center.

Chapter 10: Difficult Turning

Opening Prayer

Holy God, your way is so different than the ways we normally live. So gather us up into the winds of your Spirit that we may find ourselves walking in newness of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

For the last two chapters we have watched a journey as Jesus and his disciples moved out of Galilee and traveled toward the capital, Jerusalem. You may have noticed that he already knows the consequences which will come from the way he has chosen to live his life. In chapters 8, 9, and now 10, Jesus announces to his disciples that his death is coming. This whole section is about what life looks like on “the way”. He is trying to teach his disciples about the way of God, but over and over again they show a lack of understanding. (“People of the Way” is one of the oldest names for Christians.)

Remember that this is a truly remarkable element of Mark's Gospel. The founders of the Christian way are so often portrayed as clueless. We see Jesus growing frustrated at their lack of understanding. Three times Jesus predicts what awaits him in. Three times the disciples show they do not understand what he is teaching them. Three times Jesus attempts to correct their confusion. In chapter 8, Jesus predicted his torture, death, and resurrection. Then Peter tried to keep him in Galilee where it was relatively safe, and Jesus explained about being willing to embrace death and even apparent failure for the sake of others. In chapter 9, Jesus predicted his torture, death, and resurrection. The disciples argued with each other about who was greatest. Jesus told them not to worry about their greatness but to look after children, that is, to look after those who are utterly vulnerable. Watch today as this pattern of prediction, misunderstanding, and redirection occurs for the third time.

I believe that the Gospel of Mark was told at ancient baptismal services as a kind of commencement speech for the baptismal candidates. “Before you commit, let me tell you about this new beginning in your life.” Remember the story starts with “The beginning of the good news” and tells a story about baptism. In the baptismal service the postulants ritually turn around as part of the ceremony. They begin facing the west where the sun sets (robbing them of light), and they reject demonic powers and empty promises. Then they turn around and face the east with its rising sun, and they declare allegiance to the risen Son. I will courageously trust this one!

The journey section of Mark's Gospel translates this ritual turning into a turning around of our way of life. We are to turn from certain concrete emotional responses, dispositions, attitudes, and actions toward the new way that Jesus teaches. As Jesus tries to get the disciples to turn around their own thinking, we identify with them—we too want power, we too worry about our own greatness in the eyes of others, we too seek self-interests instead of tending to the vulnerable. We also are caught up in using power as tyranny and domination. Through the story, Jesus comes to turn us around and set us on his way.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 10. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) What are dimensions of the baptismal turning that you have noticed on your way through Mark's gospel so far? Make a list of things that Jesus is steering us away from and compare it to the values he is turning us toward.
- 2) How might the teaching on divorce fit into the broader issues just discussed, especially in terms of looking out for those who are vulnerable? Who was most vulnerable in ancient society when a divorce occurred?
- 3) Whom does Jesus hold up as the center of the empire of God? Why does he do that? How does this relate to the turning we are discussing?
- 4) What turning is difficult for the man who had great wealth? Do the disciples seem to assume that the wealthy are more likely to enter into God's empire than others? If you imagine the poor people who were surrounding Jesus at this moment, how would his word to the rich man have moved them?
- 5) Take out a Bible and compare the two lists in Mark 10:29-30. What does Jesus note that they have left? What does he note that they will receive a hundredfold within the way?*
- 6) Do you see the prediction, misunderstanding, and redirection pattern in this chapter? What is the content of the turning in the story of the sons of Zebedee?
- 7) Remember the journey section began with sight given to a blind man, how does it end?
- 8) Where do you find the turning that Jesus describes most difficult? Most compelling?

* The lists are nearly identical with three exceptions. They will leave their fathers, but they will not have anyone play the role of father in this new community. As we discussed in the chapter 3, fathers controlled and ruled the others in the family, but in this new community no one, not even Jesus, gets to dominate others. (It is interesting that James and John in their lack of understanding are still defined by their relationship with their father, Zebedee.) Secondly, they can expect persecution for living in this alternative way. Finally, though they will also receive eternal life.

Chapter 11: The Temple Destroyed

Opening Prayer

Humble God, your Son rides into your city not in majesty, but among the people. Help us to stand with those who have suffered and cry with them for the freedom that you bring. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

Jesus is only now going to enter the holy city of Jerusalem. He enters in an impromptu parade that begins the ironic portrayal of Jesus' way of being king. His entrance into the crowded city of Jerusalem as the Passover is drawing near is without pretension. He rides in not on a stallion of war, but on a donkey as old songs of Israel promised the Messiah would. The people improvise a celebration that parodies the way kings make their entrance. He has no outrageous show of wealth, nor swarms of soldiers, nor official welcomes. He comes into the city as he has lived, among the common people. And they chant once more a plea that had prayed for centuries: Hosanna. Or as I have translated it to capture the popular element of this event, "Freedom, Lord!"

Watch to see a rhythm in this chapter and the next. Jesus spends time both in Jerusalem where he experiences intense conflict with the religious elite and in the nearby town of Bethany among his followers. The storyteller's technique of wrapping one story around another in order to allow them to interpret each other is again employed as it was with the story of the sending of the disciples and the execution of John the Baptizer. This time a tree that bears no fruit and thus withers explains the destruction of the temple.

The temple was at the heart of Israel's religion. It was the heart of the central city, key to God's plan for the whole world. The temple was the dwelling place of God and the center for the sacrificial worship system that Israel had received from God. Yet because of the high expectations that God had for it, Jesus is heartbroken that the elite chief priests and their legal supporters, the scribes, had lost track of its purpose.

The temple was destroyed at the moment when the Gospel of Mark was being put together in performance. The gospel is itself part of the struggle to explain why this national, spiritual catastrophe occurred. The story becomes a vehicle for grief that is still remembered today as faithful Jewish people gather in crowds at the remains of the temple.

Jesus' accusation is that the temple elite had forgotten the purpose of the temple. He calls it a "haven for crooks". In other words, the chief priests and the scribes who support them are using the good gift of God to exploit people. You may remember the charge earlier in the gospel that pledges to the temple treasury were trumping assistance to parents. Jesus prophetically challenged those who were "devouring the houses of widows."

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 11. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) What do you make of the entrance into Jerusalem? Have you ever thought of it as an impromptu demonstration calling for freedom? What does the Passover context with its link to Israel's liberation from Egyptian domination add to this dimension?
- 2) What do you make of the fig tree story and the way it is wrapped around the story of Jesus' temple tantrum?
- 3) How much more intense is Jesus' conflict with the religious leaders becoming because of this event? Can you imagine someone throwing such a fit in a place that you think of as sacred? What would be your response? Are you surprised by Jesus' behavior?
- 4) Jesus speaks of the importance of prayer in terms of the destruction of the fig tree. What role might prayer have played when access to God was no longer able to be centralized in the temple?
- 5) What question do the religious leaders come at Jesus with? What is it that they demand to know? How does Jesus respond to them, both answering and not answering the question that they have brought to him?
- 6) How is the story as it is unfolding in Jerusalem, already different than the earlier part that was told about Jesus' Galilean ministry? What do you think Galilee and Jerusalem symbolize in the story? Where is Galilee symbolically today? Where is the center of our religious activity?
- 7) What might we add to our sense of what Jesus stands for and what he stands against in light of this chapter?

Chapter 12: Contested Traditions

Opening Prayer

God of grace, all good things have come from you; most of all the blessing of your Son, Jesus. We give you thanks that he offers all that he is to us for your sake. Help us to live out the generosity you have shown us, through Jesus the Anointed. Amen.

Background Material

The entirety of this story takes place in the temple that we discussed last week. This is the third time in Mark's gospel that the religious leaders and Jesus have a series of debates. One challenge in today's story hinges on the whether to pay a temple tax to Caesar or not. Jesus asks two questions in response to their attempt to trap him. He asks whose image is on the coin and we remember that Jewish people have a strict prohibition against any images. The second thing Jesus asks is whose inscription is on it. The content of the inscription is vital information that the original audience would have known just as you would not be surprised to find out that US dollars have "In God we trust" inscribed on the back. The inscription on Augustus Caesar's denarius describes Caesar as the "God and Father of the Nation". This helps us understand the cleverness of Jesus' response. He tells them to give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and flips the coin back to them with contempt. At this point it is clear that there may be much that Caesar claims that does not belong to him such as the title "God" or the land that he occupies. The coin is but one of the concerns. Having purged the temple the day before, Jesus implores them to give *back* to God the things that are God's. They are silent as are each of the religious leaders who come to trap him. He always has the last word. Later he accuses the Sadducees of not knowing their Scriptures nor the power of the God they claim to obey.

Just when we are thinking that no good will ever come from the religious elite and that they are beyond hope, a legal expert is portrayed as genuinely aware of what God desires and authentically seeking to learn from Jesus. Jesus draws on classic Jewish teachings about love for God and neighbor. He emphasizes that God desires our *whole* self (the word repeats four times) over and against those who would divide their loyalties between God and Caesar. The good scribe standing in the temple notes that what Jesus says matters more than all the whole sacrifices.

Earlier in Mark's Gospel Jesus said that many who are most important will be least and the least most important. This holds true even in the way the story is told by Mark. The only characters that demonstrate proper conduct as Jesus defines it are minor characters who would be defined as least in their society. The blind, the crippled, outsiders, the unclean, and in this chapter a poor widow are the ones who are held up as examples of faithful walking in the way. Those who are least in the ancient world are most important examples of the courageous trust Jesus desires.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 12. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) What difference does it make to recall that the setting is in the temple? What different feel does that give these stories compared with the conflict stories in chapters 2 and 3 as well as in chapter 7?
- 2) What do you make of the riddle of the vineyard? Can you connect what happened to John and what will happen to Jesus with what is going on in the riddle?
- 3) What attitudes do you sense are most prevalent in Jesus in this chapter? What attitudes do the other characters exhibit?*
- 4) What do you hear Jesus saying when he says, “Give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and give back to God the things that are God’s”? If Jesus feels the temple has been hijacked for purposes that God does not intend as we discussed last week, then why is it interesting that Jesus says this in the temple?
- 5) What do the Sadducees ask Jesus? How does he draw on traditions that they share in order to invite them to rethink their beliefs? Do you understand his argument?***
- 6) What do you make of Jesus’ perspective on the law? In what sense does loving God and neighbor cover the whole law?
- 7) What additional things have you learned in this chapter about Jesus and the empire he announces?

* As you have been making your list of things for and against the values of God’s empire, you might add one more of David Rhoads’ observations. If faith is understood as courageous trust, then its opposite is not doubt but fear. We see fear raise its head over and over again in the characters.

***His argument hinges on the present tense verb of what God said in the Moses encounter, “I *am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” not “I *was* the God of...” If God is still their God it must be because God has raised them.

Chapter 13: The Little Apocalypse

Opening Prayer

Holy and gracious God, you are true to your word, and we know that word from the mouth of Jesus. When the heavens are falling down around us, and the earth seems to be crumbling under our feet, keep us from panic, knowing that your word never ends. Through Jesus the Anointed. Amen.

Background Material

This chapter has a very different feel than the ones that have gone before it. Scholars often call this Mark's "little apocalypse". An apocalypse carries the message that God will set things right in the end and that in spite of the chaos and oppression that the people are undergoing they should not lose hope. The bible contains several writings dedicated to apocalyptic literature. The most well known is The Apocalypse of John, also called The Book of Revelation. The book of Daniel provides another fine example.

In this form of literature, cosmic images are used to describe the upheaval that people are undergoing, but God is portrayed as the one who sorts out those doing the evil from those suffering its consequences. The often wild images employed in this genre—a pregnant woman chased by a beast, people marked with 666 on their heads, angels slaying dragons in heaven—are fluid and capable of addressing whoever the reader decides to cast in the role of bad guy. This kind of writing arose with the goal of critiquing the empires of the world in the moment of writing rather than to predict specific events in the distant future. The message gets rather skewed when those hearing it cease to be the downtrodden and become instead those laden with power.

Jesus waxes apocalyptic in this chapter of the Gospel. You will note that the author remembers words of Jesus to help sort out the destruction of the temple that we spoke of in the last session. They remember that Jesus said to have hope even when the whole world is falling apart. He speaks this to an inner group of disciples: Rock, Andrew, James and John, not to a huge crowd. He speaks this days before their world will come crashing down as he is arrested, tortured, crucified and then raised. At his crucifixion, the sun will be darkened as though all of creation mourns his death.

It is important to note the tone of what he says. I hear grief in every word that is very different than those who today speak with joy of God punishing sinners with a vengeance and rewarding the righteous. There is not a single word of vengeance in this whole speech, but grief for the things that must occur and hope for what God will do is indeed offered. Finally, note that throughout the gospel Jesus has referred to himself as "the Human One" or in other translations, "the Son of Man." This may refer to an end time figure who comes to set things right. This is the way it appears in the book of Daniel. It also could be a fancy way of speaking of a human being.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 13. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) What do you make of the tone in Jesus' voice? Do you hear anger, grief, comfort, or something else?
- 2) How does the moving from one theme to another with difficult leaps to follow create the feel of the chaos that he is speaking of? Do you get the sense that trouble is coming from all sides?
- 3) What are some of the images that Jesus uses to describe the troubles that are soon to come? What does he offer as hope for the future? In what can they place their trust?
- 4) Imagine you are hearing the whole gospel in one sitting. By this point we are almost two hours into the storytelling. What strictly human reason might there be to include a section in which Jesus repeats over and over again, "Stay awake!" What are times in the Gospel when it is difficult for followers to stay awake in terms of faithfulness?
- 5) Remembering what you know of the Holy Week story of Jesus' arrest, death and resurrection, what warnings of the struggle to come connect well with that story? *
- 6) Thinking about your own life, when have the images Jesus uses connected with your experience? Have you ever felt the universe falling apart and had to lean on the fragile strength of Jesus' words?
- 7) How does having this chapter in the story change your understanding of Jesus?

* There are many. They will indeed have difficulty staying awake in the garden, Rock himself will find himself "asleep" in another sense "at rooster's crow", the sun will become dark at midday, and it will seem that the universe is falling down around them.

Chapter 14: The Consequences

Opening Prayer

God of justice, why is it that those who love must suffer in this world? Why is it that we do the worst to the best that you send us? What are the ways that we crucify in your name? Help us to sort out these difficult questions. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

As the title of this session suggests, the best way to understand the death of Jesus in Mark's gospel is as a consequence of the life he lived. The elite of his day could not tolerate his way of being in the world and so they had to put an end to him. While earlier Jesus said of this arrest, torture and death that "it is necessary", he did not explain why it was necessary. We should not impose onto Mark's story later understandings of the atonement or how the cross saves. Jesus is not portrayed in Mark's gospel as one whose death God requires in order to forgive the sins of the world. The one statement that Jesus makes that might explain his death was told several sessions ago: even the Human One came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. But he says this in a context in which he is calling all of the faithful to serve and be ready to give up their life for the sake of others.

Jesus foresees his death in the same way other martyrs and prophets have. Martin Luther King spoke before hand of the likelihood of his death; Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador, used Jesus' words to foresee the death he would die in service to the people. The necessity of Jesus' death lies in the fact that he is going to confront those who have power with a whole new way of being in the world, a way that lives in service to the most vulnerable. (Jodi, the preceding sentence was grammatically wrong. Not sure how to save it.) Since he is not afraid to speak truth to power in the same way as Israel's other prophets, then the consequence of that commitment will be death. Jesus exposes the violence of the powers that will destroy whatever threatens their sovereignty.

That said, a huge word of caution is required here. The stories we are about to hear have been used more often than not by Christians in ways that go completely against their intent. Christians have used this story about solidarity with the vulnerable to attack and annihilate vulnerable Jews, blasphemously invoking the name of Jesus in their violence. There were periods in the church where Holy Week tellings of the passion story were followed by roving groups of "Christians" looking for Jews to beat up! This is one tradition of *our* elders from which we must turn. The Gospel of Mark was written by a follower of Jesus who identified with the Jewish people. He understood the Scriptures, longed to be ruled by God rather than by Rome, grieved the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and challenged the practices of the elite from within that community. The crucifixion story does not ask, "What did Romans do to Jesus?" but "What did we do?" Like the prophets of old, the author knew that the community must own up to their own responsibility in the midst of tragic events that occur.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 14. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) Once again we have a minor character who understands what Jesus is about and acts on it? What does she do for him? How do others respond to this? How does Jesus respond? How does her act relate to his titles in the gospel?*
- 2) What do you notice about the meal that Jesus shares with those who are close to him? What is the impact of having the betrayal hang over his scene?
- 3) What does Jesus promise them will happen after he dies? Where will he see them?**
- 4) How does Jesus feel about the events that are approaching? Where do you see evidence of this?
- 5) What do you make of the naked young man? (Some people claim that this is the author inserting himself in the story.)
- 6) What strikes you about the religious trial of Jesus? What charges are brought against him?
- 7) What “trial” is Rock undergoing while Jesus is being tried?

* First of all, note that when Jesus says, “the poor you will always have with you” he is not speaking about the inevitability of poverty as much as the nature of his followers. If they are his followers, of course, they will be surrounded by the poor. Note that she actually does attend to a poor person, Jesus. She also anoints the Anointed One.

** He promises he will meet them in Galilee, the place where the healings, and feedings, and teachings all took place earlier.

Chapter 15: Familiar and Strange Ways of Power

Opening Prayer

Holy God, help us to understand the mystery of this story. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Background Material

In this narrative two ways of exercising power confront each other. The first is familiar to any who live in this world. Those who live to dominate over others bring their will to its crushing finale. It is necessary that those who refuse bend to their will must suffer the consequences.

But there is a much more excellent way of being powerful revealed in Jesus. Though he appears weak by the first definition of power, actually he is strong. Jesus is powerful not by accumulating more and more control over events, but by becoming vulnerable in order to be with the vulnerable to the very end. Jesus will shout out a cry in this chapter that echoes the cries of millions throughout the ages. In a strange way this cry of weakness makes a most powerful connection with those who have felt abandoned. In his weakest moment Jesus provides the words that powerfully connect him—and if him, then God—with all who have felt abandoned in the world, even or perhaps especially by God. While Mark does not tell a story about a sacrifice made to God for the sins of the world, he does tell the story of Jesus in such a way that people experience his oneness with them upon the cross. The story enters into their multilayered grief; Jesus makes our grief his own.

For the original hearers this would not be as abstract as it may be for you and me. In 70 AD when Rome crushed Jerusalem in the face of uprisings, Rome responded by crucifying thousands of men, women and children who were suspected of trying to overthrow the state. If Rome used the words that get bantered about today, they would say they used crucifixion to deal with suspected terrorists. You will note that I have used this term for those crucified with Jesus. From Rome's perspective that is precisely what they were, although many Israelites would call them freedom fighters. You may be more familiar with the translation "thieves."

You will see that Mark uses a great deal of irony in this story. People say and do things that make it clear that they mock Jesus' kingship. They dress him in a king's crown and cape though the crown is made of thorns and the cape over his shoulders is the only dignity offered to his naked body. They declare him king with salutes and plaques but they mean it as a joke. Yet Mark says, "You joke that he is king, but the joke is on you because he actually is the king. You simply do not understand God's vulnerable yet powerful way of ruling the world!" They believe that if he is a king, the Anointed One, he should save himself, but in his way of ruling, power is created by giving up one's life in service to others and enduring the consequences. Jesus lives out what he had taught to the end.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Watch the Gospel of Mark 15. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) Why might the crowds have switched from cheering Jesus on to now calling for his execution?
- 2) What are various levels of humiliation that Jesus undergoes in this chapter? Where today do people experience this kind of humiliation?
- 3) What do you make of Jesus' cry of abandonment? Who would find these words resonating with their lives? How might the original audience who had seen other family and friends crucified by the Romans have felt about remembering Jesus' died in a similar manner? Have you ever felt intense abandonment? When?
- 4) The curtain of the temple was eighty feet high and had a panorama of the sky embroidered upon it. It stood protecting the holy of holies where God's presence was believed to reside. If it was ripped from top to bottom, who did the ripping? What significance does it have that this event happens right after Jesus' death?*
- 5) What do you make of the fact that the executioner confesses Jesus as "Son of God"? If he can come around to confess Jesus, then might not anyone be so transformed?
- 6) How is this death of Jesus related to the life he has lived?
- 7) Why did the one who put this story together wait so long to tell us about the presence of women followers of Jesus?

* This story echoes the ripping of the heavens at Jesus' baptism. Both stories claim that the barrier between God and humanity has been destroyed. God is out and about, his presence is not restricted to any one place.

Chapter 16: An Abrupt Ending, Our New Beginning

Opening Prayer

God of all life, you promise to meet us in our own Galilee, help us run there to meet you with great expectations. Calm our panic and give us voices to proclaim this good news. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The final reflections

Today I suggest you *begin* with the DVD of chapter 16. I have ended the story just as the oldest manuscripts did. I will then offer some brief comments and invite you to pull together the story as a whole.

Watch the Gospel of Mark 16. Discuss what struck you as interesting or important in the story.

More questions:

- 1) How did the women feel approaching the tomb? What did they find?
- 2) How is this account different than other gospel accounts of the resurrection?
- 3) What is the significance of returning to Galilee?
- 4) Why do the women flee in fear? What kind of ending is this?
- 5) What do you make of the fact that Jesus does not make a resurrection appearance within the narrative?

Background

The word used to describe the one in the tomb is not an angel, but “a young man” dressed in white robes. The only other time that this word is used in Mark’s gospel was when the naked young man fled when Jesus was arrested. Comparing these two images, they look like part of the baptismal ritual. A person is clothed, then naked and undergoes Jesus’ death, and arises to be given a white robe. Part of the message in this may be about the author and part may be about baptism. The author may be saying that once he lived in fear and naked vulnerability, but having passed through the death and resurrection, he now courageously proclaims the good news of Jesus.

In this gospel Jesus does not appear after he is raised, but he does promise to meet the faithful in Galilee. If they return to the ministry that they had done with Jesus in Galilee freeing the captives, feeding the hungry, healing the sick and proclaiming God’s empire to the outcasts, then they also will experience the power and presence of the risen Lord. They do not possess the Lord, but his promise drives them forward toward those in need. I believe Mark had seen in his life what is done by those who believe they possess truth. Even when the truth they hold is beautiful, they can hold it over others and act against them. So Mark does not give us a glorious ending to take captive to our own interests. Instead he leaves his story unresolved like the lives we live. We dwell between profound experiences of death and the promised hope that awaits us in Galilee.

The women flee from the tomb afraid. Finally the hope of God’s empire must reside in God; it is too much for humans to embrace without fear. The way the story is written it ends in mid-sentence: they said nothing to anyone at all, they were afraid because... The reason the storyteller can stop in mid-sentence is because the fear is well-known to his audience in the wake of recent events. His look says, “because...well, I know I don’t have to explain this to you!” Yet the audience wants more. How can you hear that Jesus is risen and not say anything to anyone about this good news? Once again the question turns on us and turns us around, “How can I hear that Jesus is risen and not announce that to all I meet?” Thus the ending of this story invites us to step into the beginning of the proclamation of the good news!

- 1) In light of the above commentary, what do you think about this resurrection story?
- 2) What impact has hearing this whole story had on you? How was hearing it and seeing it different than reading it?
- 3) How has Jesus through this story turned you in a new direction?

For Further Study

Books on the Gospel of Mark

Horsley, Richard. *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Story*.
Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.

This book examines Mark and its performance in the imperial context.

Juel, Donald. *Master of Surprise*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002

This book unpacks the story in a rich theological way.

Malbon, Elizabeth Struthers. *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide*. Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press, 2002.

This book is a very basic introduction to Mark's gospel designed for congregational use. It would be a fine companion for this curriculum that all could read between sessions.

Rhoads, David, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*. 2nd edition. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.

A beautiful introduction to how narrative works in the Gospel of Mark. Not quite as basic as Hearing Mark, but very accessible. The translation I use started with this book.

Swanson, Richard. *Provoking the Gospel of Mark: A Storyteller's Commentary*.
Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005.

A provoking approach to the gospel. Swanson demands that Christians take the Jewish leadership and their concerns seriously and gives us the tools to do just that!

Articles on Performance and Bible

Hearon, Holly and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds. *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*. Eugene, OR.: Cascade Books, 2009.

A collection of articles exploring multiple issues related to ancient and contemporary performance of the bible. The authors are some of the most important scholars in this field offering their insights for a general audience.

Learning to tell stories by heart

Boomershine, Thomas. *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*.
Nashville: Abingdon, 1988.

This is the classic book that taught me and many others a basic method for learning biblical stories by heart and performing them.

Websites

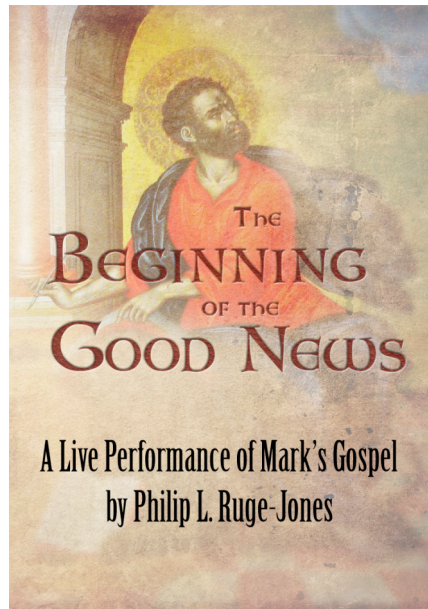
For those looking for a community of biblical storytellers go to the Network of Biblical Storytellers. They have a wonderful festival gathering each summer. <nbsint.org>

For those preparing Sunday lections for performance or preaching: <gotell.org>.

For those interested in articles on the developing field of biblical performance interpretation go to: <www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org>

Bible study based on a performance of the Gospel of Mark

- Study the world in which the bible was formed
- Experience a performance of the gospel as the early Christians did
- Discuss the impact of the story and weave it into your personal story



Comments on this resource:

"informative, entertaining, fascinating. . ." --Jeff Ohvall, Our Savior's Menomonie, WI

"Ruge-Jones proves himself to be a worthy storyteller who brings the gospel to life-animating the people, acting out the conflicts, embodying the humor and the pathos, and making real the failures and the triumphs." --David Rhoads, Biblical Storyteller, Author & Professor of New Testament, LSTC

"The performance gave me goose bumps and made me cry. I went out in awe and reinforced in my belief." --Beverly Krumm, First Lutheran New Richmond, WI

"I've studied the Gospels for the past 45 years, and read through them many times. But nothing compares to hearing it done 'live'." --Greg Kaufmann, Assistant to the Bishop, NW Synod of WI

Where:

When: