

Mark: The First Gospel

Session I

Misreading Mark

It may be that studying the gospels, and especially the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), poses some of the greatest challenges for modern readers of the Bible. To begin with, even for Christians who don't know the Bible well, the stories of Jesus are likely some of the more familiar, and we may be inclined to think we "already know it."

Christians also have an understandable tendency to harmonize the stories found in the different gospels. Witness the nativity scenes at Christmas, complete with Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus in a stable, attended by shepherds, angels, animals, and wise men. That such a scene never occurs in the Bible seems unknown to many. And when it is pointed out, it still does not seem all that important. After all, it is merely a matter of combining events reported in Luke and Matthew to give a fuller picture of what truly happened.

This points to what is likely the biggest difficulty confronting those who would study the gospels, the notion that they are primarily accounts, reports of events, history and biography. As modern folks, we are familiar with a number of written genres dealing with people and events. Many of us read newspapers and news magazines. We've read biographies of famous people and encountered history books, at least in our days as students. We understand that all of these can fail to get the truth exactly correct. Mistakes happen and even deliberate distortions occur, but we all agree that the purpose of history or biography or newspaper article is to get the facts straight, to tell what happened.

When we pick up the Gospel of Mark (or any other gospel) we quite naturally see it in light of these other forms we know, newspapers, histories, and biographies. Obviously Mark is too short for a biography or history book, and it says nothing about Jesus' birth, about what he looked like or sounded like. It leaves out much we might expect from a biography and is far less detailed than most histories. It also covers a much broader scope of material than we might expect in a standard article, but nonetheless, it looks familiar enough that we read it following the rules for history, biography, or reporting. We assume that a gospel has an interest in getting the facts straight, in telling us what happened.

And so when we find shepherds at the manger in Luke and wise men at the house in Matthew, we assume these are different reports from different witnesses. Combining them serves to paint a fuller picture of Jesus' biography. If we notice the same stories told differently in different gospels, we chalk that up to different writing styles and different emphases by the different reporters/biographers. And in those places where gospels seem to contradict one another, we may wonder if there was a corruption of the text over many years of reproducing it by hand, or we may suspect it is an example of different people seeing the same event and not quite agreeing as to what happened, like witnesses giving contradictory descriptions and accounts to police after an accident.

But suppose the author of Mark never dreamed his readers would take his writings as history. Suppose it never occurred to him that people would later use his text in attempts to construct an account and chronology of Jesus' life. This is in fact precisely the case, and herein lies the great difficulty in "understanding" Mark or other gospels. We have in front of us a genre that doesn't easily fit into our worldview, and when we try to use it and understand it by the rules for documents that seem similar, we often are led astray from what Mark and others intend for us to hear and do.

What is a Gospel?

Most people are familiar with labeling the first four writings in the New Testament as “gospels.” Many also know that the word “gospel” means “good news” or “glad tidings.” A few may even know that the Greek word translated “gospel” or “good news” (*euangelion* εὐαγγέλιον) has a verbal form that gives us our word “evangelize” (*euangelidzo* εὐαγγελίζω). But none of that may be very helpful in recognizing that gospel, as the term is applied to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is a peculiar literary form that is quite different from the forms we are more used to reading.

Mark is the only gospel which actually labels itself as such, “The beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1, NRSV) Many scholars believe that Mark invents this form of literature, creating it to meet the need he saw before him. The author was certainly familiar with histories, biographies, and hero-stories, all of which were popular in the Greco-Roman world of that day. But what he writes is quite different from those forms, and it has very different purposes.

Mark doesn’t write in order to tell people the story of Jesus. He was not creating a tool for spreading the gospel or telling others about Jesus. Mark writes for Christians who already know the story, people who are steeped in a rich oral tradition of Jesus’ teachings and sayings, miracle stories, passion account, and resurrection appearances. Along with this was a growing body of epistles or letters, a common device of that day used by Paul and others to instruct congregations in how to live and behave, how to understand the meaning of Jesus life, death, and resurrection, and so on. Likely there were also written collections of Jesus’ sayings and teachings. And so Mark has no need to tell anyone the facts of Jesus’ life.

So what is Mark up to? While we cannot say with great certainty what events or crises may have prompted him to write, we can say with much more certainty what he is trying to do. Something has caused Mark to worry that Christians need help understanding the significance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and understanding the nature of discipleship. He might have written a letter as Paul had so often done, but for some reason, he chooses a different approach. He decides that the best way to explain the meaning of Jesus and of Christian discipleship is by using stories about Jesus and about disciples.

Mark takes these stories, many of them already well known by his first readers and hearers, and he arranges and interprets them so as to make certain points. Mark’s stories refer to historical events, but they are not history. His stories are about Jesus, but they are not biography. They are gospel, an attempt to proclaim good news that requires a clear understanding of who Jesus is and who we are called to be.

To appreciate what Mark is doing, we need to read him as gospel and not as history or biography. But how to do that? A number of writers suggest approaching Mark more like approaching a sermon. Indeed, this idea that a gospel is like a sermon was the most common comparison made by the scholars I read in preparing this study.

Think about how you might approach listening to a sermon. Are you expecting to receive mostly factual information? And what about the intent of a sermon? What might a preacher hope to accomplish with a good sermon?

Preaching is rooted in historical events. It grows out of the study of events in the life of Jesus, Israel, etc. But its purpose is to elicit a response, to claim people in God’s grace, to call them to lives of discipleship, to open them to the work of the Spirit, and so on. Gospel works in very similar ways, and we will hear Mark more clearly if we will listen for proclamation and good news, rather than for history, biography, etc.

Gospel as sermon

Insomuch as Mark's gospel is like a sermon, it is meant to be heard at one sitting. In all likelihood it was meant to be heard and not read. Much of the force of Mark's interpretation comes from how his images pile up and how events relate to and interpret other events. All of this means that the typical way of preaching from Mark, not to mention studying Mark, breaks it up into pieces that obscure much of what the author is trying to do.

There is no way to completely do away with this problem if we want to look carefully at this gospel, but there are things we can do to mitigate the problems. The first is to read the gospel at a single sitting. Let me repeat that. ***Please sit down and read the Gospel according to Mark from start to finish.*** The Gospel is short and can be read in an hour. Having some sense of Mark as a coherent unit will be helpful for understanding the gospel as a whole.

Additionally, as we study discreet blocks of Mark, try to view them as they fit into their larger context. Keep trying to connect the individual stories to the larger gospel.

Mark alone

Mark is the first gospel written, yet many of us are more familiar with other gospels. This can pose something of a problem in hearing what Mark has to say. Because the same stories in Matthew or Luke may be developed or interpreted differently, we need to set those understandings aside in studying Mark.

For example, in Mark 2:23, we hear the story of Jesus and his disciples going through a field on the Sabbath, plucking grain as they do so. In Matthew, they pluck grain heads because they are hungry, but nothing is said of that in Mark. If we assume the disciples are hungry because we heard that in Matthew, we may miss Mark's point. (In fact the translators themselves may have been influenced by Matthew. The NRSV's "...and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain" is perhaps not the best reading of the Greek. A more obvious translation might be, "...and his disciples began to make a way by plucking the heads of grain," indicating that the disciples were making a path through the field. This may seem trivial, but whether or not the disciples are hungry and eating will make a tremendous difference in how you understand what Jesus means when he brings up the story of David eating the Bread of Presence.) So to the degree you can, let's interpret Mark without reference to other gospels.

Some interpretive keys

Pay attention to the various titles used for Jesus. We may view Messiah/Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, King of the Jews, Son of David, and others as virtual synonyms, but Mark does not. Pay attention to who uses which titles, including the ones Jesus prefers for himself. Think about why the different titles are used and whether some might be better than others. (Some Bibles will say "Christ" in the same place where others say "Messiah." The Greek word *christos* χριστος translates the Hebrew word "Messiah" which means "Anointed One.")

Mark declares Jesus the Messiah/Christ and Son of God in the opening verse, but he worries that Christians need instruction in the meaning of these terms. Watch for what Mark is doing to give people a more correct understanding of these titles.

Recognize how much focus Mark puts on Jesus' passion. There is an often quoted definition of a gospel which declares it "a passion narrative with an extended introduction."

Pay attention to how the disciples are portrayed throughout the gospel. They will come off quite differently than they do in other gospels. Consider what accounts for their occasional

successes and more frequent failures. What might Mark be communicating to disciples who come after them?

Be aware of some of the literary devices Mark uses. One is something called an “omnipresent narrator.” In other words, the narrator knows all and lets the reader/hearer in on things that characters in the story don’t know. This is important to keep in mind because it allows you to come to more complete understandings than the characters in the story.

Another device is bracketing, where two similar events bracket other material, marking off a section. For example, two different healings of blind men bracket material highlighting the “blindness” of the disciples.

Similarly, Mark will sandwich one story inside the start and finish of another, literally intertwining two separate stories, so that the two interpret each other. This process is referred to as *intercalation*. The stories of Jairus’ daughter and Jesus cursing a fig tree are examples.

Yet another device shows events with two layers of meaning, both literal and figurative. For example, Jesus’ ability to heal a blind man may speak to more than miraculous, healing power over disease. It may also be saying something about blindness that is not physical.

Mark also makes repetitive use of the word “immediately.” Forty-one of the fifty-one occurrences of this word in the Bible are in Mark, though he uses it only four times after Palm Sunday. Unfortunately some translations remove a few of them thinking they serve little purpose. But take note of the occurrences you see, and especially take note when they cease.

Watch for paradox and irony in the Gospel. For example, those Jesus tells to be quiet often shout and proclaim what he has done for them while the women refuse to tell of the empty tomb when told to do so. And Jesus’ enemies unwittingly speak the truth about him at his trial.

One other technique is invisible in English translations, but much of the action in Mark is written using the present tense where past tense would seem appropriate. This use of the “historical present” is akin to our saying in a joke, “A man goes into a bar,” and is meant to draw the reader into the action of the story.

We’ll revisit these keys along the way, but having some of them in mind may help your straight-through reading of Mark be more productive.

Outline of Mark

Outlines can be helpful for understanding the flow of any story and the same is true for Mark’s gospel. Of course different students of the gospel will see different breaks and divisions in that flow, and no outline should be seen as definitive. The outline that follows is simply one attempt to organize what Mark is saying through his gospel. This outline comes from Paul Achtemeier, a renowned New Testament scholar, so it is certainly worth your attention.

Notice that his outline is more than simply a structural division of the text. It also contains important thematic divisions that may be significant helps for understanding what Mark’s Gospel is trying to say. For example, numeral IV points to an example of bracketing, along with a two layered blindness that is both literal and symbolic.

Also note that Mark 16:9-20 is treated as an appendix. We’ll deal with this more fully at the end of the study, but in your straight-through reading of Mark, it may be helpful to realize that 16:9-20 is added later by Christians who found the abrupt end at 16:8 unsatisfactory.

- I. 1:1-3:6 – Jesus appears, preaching the kingdom of God with power
 - A. 1:1-13 – Beginnings: John the Baptist
 - B. 1:14-25 – Jesus’ ministry introduced
 - C. 2:1-3:6 – Conflict with religious authorities; Jesus rejected
- II. 3:7-6:6 – Jesus’ ministry in Galilee
 - A. 3:7-35 – True and false followers of Jesus
 - B. 4:1-34 – Many things in parables
 - C. 4:35-5:43 – He did wondrous things
 - D. 6:1-6 – Conflict with his own; Jesus rejected
- III. 6:7-8:21 – Jesus begins his final journey: mission and miracles
 - A. 6:7-29 – Journey for mission and the death of John
 - B. 6:30-56 – Wondrous feeding and wondrous acts
 - C. 7:1-23 – Teaching on the law
 - D. 7:24-8:10 – Wondrous acts and wondrous feeding
 - E. 8:11-21 – Pharisees and disciples; Jesus misunderstood
- IV. 8:22-10:52 – Jesus opens blind eyes: teachings on discipleship
 - A. 8:22-26 – Opening event: blind eyes healed
 - B. 8:27-9:29 – First Passion prediction and attendant events
 - C. 9:30-10:31 – Second Passion prediction and attendant events
 - D. 10:32-45 – Third Passion prediction and attendant events
 - E. 10:46-52 – Closing event: blind eyes healed
- V. 11:1-16:8 – Jesus in Jerusalem
 - A. 11:1-12:44 – Jesus in the temple: action and reaction
 - B. 13:1-37 – On events before the end
 - C. 14:1-42 – The final acts of Jesus (failure of the disciples)
 - D. 14:43-15:57 – Jesus the king (failure of the authorities)
 - E. 16:1-8 – On the third day (failure of the women)
- VI. 16:9-20 – Later appendix: Death could not hold him¹

Authorship, date, and place of Mark

It surprises some to learn that we do not know who wrote Mark (or Matthew, Luke, and John for that matter). All the gospels are anonymous. Gospel writers’ names come from early church tradition, tradition that may or may not have much basis in fact.

Second century writings quote Papias who names Mark as the author and calls him an interpreter or translator of the Apostle Peter. There is a Mark called “my son” in 1 Peter 5:13, but this letter most certainly was written long after Peter’s death. Mark was a common name at the time and people named Mark or John Mark show up several places in the New Testament, but there is no way to connect them with the author of our gospel. And in the fourth century, St. Augustine seems unaware of the tradition from Papias. Augustine thought that Mark was a truncated version of Matthew.

Based on Papias, Mark’s gospel is often said to be a record of Peter’s eyewitness accounts. Arguing against this is the fact that Peter is nowhere mentioned as the source, and the fact that Peter comes off so badly in Mark’s gospel. (In an interesting twist, the early church claimed that such an unflattering portrait of Peter must surely have come from his own mouth.)

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier in *Mark, Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) pp. 39-40.

Finally, not a great deal can be said about the author. Scholars even debate whether he is Jew or Gentile. More choose Jew but others point out that he sometimes seems to have a poor understanding of some Jewish festivals. In the end, the author remains hidden, perhaps intentionally. After all, this is “the gospel of Jesus Christ” not of anyone else, and the author wants our gaze fixed on Jesus. For convenience sake, I’ll refer to the author as Mark without implying any particular person by that.

The place of the gospel’s writing founders on the same issues that affect authorship. The tradition that it is written in Rome comes from Papias. As soon as one decides that Papias’ Mark need not be the author, then a location in Rome is no longer required. Mark does not seem overly well versed in the geography of Jesus’ stomping grounds, but the most that can be said with certainty is that Mark was probably written in a city with a Christian church somewhere in the Greco-Roman world. Wherever it is written, it is written for a Gentile audience.

Much more consensus surrounds the date of Mark. Most agree it was written in the range of 65-75 CE. By 65, persecution of Christians had become an issue, one that some suggest as the reason Mark writes. There is disagreement as to whether the gospel comes prior to or after the Jewish Revolt that leads to the Temple’s destruction in 70 CE. But there is near unanimous agreement that a date later than the mid-70s is impossible because Mark is clearly a source for Matthew and Luke.

It should be noted that during much of its history, Mark was belittled as an inferior gospel. Already mentioned is Augustine’s judgment that it was little more than a condensed version of Matthew. Its relatively simple Greek vocabulary and an apparent carelessness about time and geography in the first two thirds of the gospel led some to conclude that this was an unsophisticated attempt to catalogue some of the stories circulating about Jesus. That Mark calls 1:2-3 a quote from Isaiah when only a portion of it is, seems to fit this notion of Mark as crude undertaking. But with the recognition that Mark preceded the other gospels, Mark’s inferior status changed dramatically. Beginning in the late 1800s, Mark probably received more attention than any gospel because it was thought to be more pristine and unadulterated. While that view is no longer held, the intense study of Mark that began just over 100 years ago helped reveal the very sophisticated interpreter we now know Mark to be.

For further study

I have drawn on a number of sources in producing this Bible study. Seminary lectures by Dr. John Carroll still color how I read Mark, and a number of commentaries and books have helped me put this study together. Chief among them are listed below. The works by Williamson and, particularly, Deibert and Hare are written for the non-scholarly reader.

Achtemeier, Paul J. *Mark, Proclamation Commentaries*, Gerhard Krodel, editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

Best, Ernest, *Mark: The Gospel as Story*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd. 1983).

Deibert, Richard I. *Mark, Interpretation Bible Studies* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999)

Hare, Douglas R. A. *Mark, Westminster Bible Companion*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

Williamson, Lamar Jr. *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, James Mays, editor (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983)

The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

Session II Beginnings

Readings for this session

Mark 1:1-3:6; 1 Samuel 21:1-6

Exploring the readings

If we are expecting or hoping for a biography of Jesus when we open Mark, we are immediately disappointed. The “beginning” reported by Mark is not the beginning of Jesus’ life or the beginning of events that shape his life. Instead the story begins abruptly with an announcement. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark has no interest in the beginning of Jesus’ story, only in the beginning of the good news or gospel connected to him.

The phrase “good news of Jesus” is even more ambiguous in Greek than it is in English. It could mean “the good news about Jesus” or it could just as easily mean “Jesus’ good news” or “the good news that comes through Jesus.” More likely, Mark wants us to hear all the possibilities. The good news is about Jesus but the good news also *is* Jesus.

With the opening verse of the Gospel, we see the *omnipresent narrator* at work. Before the story begins we are told Jesus’ true identity. He is Christ, Messiah or Anointed One, and he is Son of God. Since most Bibles read “Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” it is important to remember that Christ is a title and not a name. Reading “Christ” as “Messiah” may help in that regard since Christ has come to function like a second name for Jesus.

What impact do you experience from Mark beginning his story so abruptly? What is the effect of not introducing Jesus or telling us about him, instead diving right into his story?

The second and third verses of Mark purport to be from Isaiah. In truth only v. 3 is from that prophet (Isaiah 40:3) while v. 2 seems to be a combination of Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20. It is possible that Mark simply mixes up some Scripture verses. Remember, no one had a Bible in the desk drawer. Handwritten scrolls were not readily available, and New Testament writers likely quoted Scripture from memory. (Paul’s Scripture quotes are often imperfect.) And it could also be that Mark simply understands the conflated Malachi and Exodus verses as fitting into the Isaiah prophecy.

There is something of structural oddity in these verses that may easily be missed, especially if one is familiar with Matthew or Luke’s accounts of the same events. Verses 2-3 are often taken to apply to John the baptizer, but that is not suggested by a simple reading of the text. Nearly every time the formula “as it is written” occurs in the New Testament, it refers to what precedes the text. Assuming that is the case here, Mark means the quotation to be about Jesus. (In fact both Matthew and Luke place their version of the Isaiah quote after their description of John. It

may be that Mark wants his “Isaiah” quote to refer to both Jesus and John. After all, both are found in the wilderness in the opening of Mark.

Mark has his own unique picture of John, one that may help us understand his view of the “good news.” In Mark, John is titled differently than in Matthew and Luke where a noun meaning Baptist or Baptizer forms the title. But in Mark it is a verbal form of the same word so that John’s title literally reads, “the one who baptizes.” (The NRSV shows this by translating “John the baptizer” rather than “Baptist” as in Matthew and Luke.) **Look at 1:4-9 where John’s ministry is described. What is the primary activity of John?**

Without reference to any other gospel or to anything you think you know about John, looking only at 1:4-9, what is your best guess as to the “good news” John’s preached?

How does what you see here conflict with your preconceived image of John?

The Gospel of Mark often seems to be a gospel in a hurry. Mark’s favorite word is “immediately,” a word that translators often feel compelled to render with various synonyms, presumably because the repetition seems tedious. Unfortunately, this makes it impossible for those without a Greek text to notice the word pile up the way the original hearers/readers would have. To give at least a sense of this effect, here are the verses where the word occurs. If you look at those where your Bible has something besides “immediately,” you can usually reword the sentence to see it closer to the literal text. The occurrences are found in Mark 1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42, 43; 2:8, 12; 3:6; 4:5, 15, 16, 17, 29; 5:2, 29, 30, 42 (twice); 6:25, 27, 45, 50, 54; 7:25; 8:10; 9:15, 20, 24; 10:52; 11:2, 3; 14:43, 45, 72; 15:1.

This hurried pace of Mark is perhaps seen in the very cursory report of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Nothing at all is said of the content of Satan’s temptations. **Given this rapid pace, why do you think Mark bothers to tell us of John the baptizer? If he is in such a hurry to get to the heart of Jesus’ story, why not leave John out entirely?**

Jesus opens his ministry by proclaiming the “good news,” now described as “the good news of God.” But notice that the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is preceded by two less upbeat sounding events. First is the temptation by Satan followed by the report of John’s arrest. **Assuming (as I do) that John’s arrest is not reported for purposes of historical chronology, what sort of foreshadowing do these two events give to Mark’s gospel?**

Jesus also says “the Kingdom of God has come near.” Though we might not yet be clear on what this Kingdom is, we already have some clues as to how to get ready for it. **Based on the opening of Mark, how does one get ready?**

The calling of the first disciples is reported with little fanfare. Jesus sees them and calls them. This is the first picture of disciples in the gospel. **What sort of portrait is it; positive, negative, indifferent?**

What does this story say about Jesus?

We will see many healings and exorcisms in Mark. While such events seem rare in our world, they were standard fare in the ancient world. Stories of heroes doing similar things were a dime-a-dozen in Jesus’ day. Since the report that Jesus can do healing miracles is not all that unique, it may be helpful to pay special attention to what Mark says besides the bare report of a miracle. In the synagogue at Capernaum, for example, the exorcism story includes information relating to Jesus’ identity. The unclean spirits recognize Jesus, something that only we and the narrator know. In addition, the people pose the question of who Jesus is, this one who teaches with authority and even commands unclean spirits.

In between healings at Simon’s house and healing a leper, Jesus is portrayed retreating to a deserted place to pray. This will not be the last time we see Jesus’ ministry buttressed by prayer. Assumedly Mark is saying something to us about the need for ministry to be rooted in prayer.

The healing of the leper in 1:40-45 not only shows Jesus’ compassion, it also reveals a strange paradox. While Jesus has power over spirits and illnesses, he seems helpless to slow down his own stardom. He can command unclean spirits but his command that the healed leper “say nothing to anyone” has absolutely no effect, and his fame grows like wildfire. **Do you see any symbolism in this?**

The healing of the paralytic offers another opportunity to see Mark's expansion of the standard miracle story. The standard format involves identifying the problem: a paralyzed man, making a request to the miracle worker, the friends lowering the man down to Jesus, and the miracle worker fixing things. "Take up your mat and go." Into this standard miracle format, Mark inserts an entirely different issue. As such, the story is no longer a standard story claiming that Jesus, like countless others, can do healings. Now it makes a much larger claim. **What is that claim, and how does the healing miracle serve to support the claim?**

The healing of the paralytic introduces open conflict into the story. The arrest of John and the temptations by Satan have warned us that the powers of evil will not sit idly by while Jesus prepares the way for God's Kingdom. The calling of Levi in 2:13-17 hints at further conflict.

The calling of Levi parallels that of the four fishermen in chapter one. Mark makes note of the parallel by use of the word "again," something he will do repeatedly. He doesn't use "again" quite as frequently as "immediately," but he does use it enough that translators sometimes use other synonyms. Still, if you watch for "again," you can see Mark remind you of a previous event that had similarities with the current one. (Interestingly, while Levi's call story parallels the previous call of disciples, Levi will not be in Mark's list of the 12.)

The awareness of Jesus' purpose ("come to call not the righteous but sinners") and the impending conflict grow through the rest of chapter 2. Note the mention that the "bridegroom" will be taken away in 2:20. The plucking grain on the Sabbath incident raises a new issue for conflict. Unlike other synoptic reports, the disciples are not said to be hungry or to eat the grain-heads. Since Mark avoids any mention of disciples' hunger, it may be that he does not want us to connect their activity with that of David's men eating the Bread of Presence. **If Jesus' argument with the Pharisees is not, "David's men did it so mine can, too," what parallel might Jesus be drawing with David?**

"Again he entered the synagogue in 3:1," but this time opponents are watching. The ministry of Jesus has barely begun, but already people plot to destroy him. **Why do you think Mark shows opposition to Jesus rising so quickly?**

Session III Followers and Parables

Readings for this session

Mark 3:7-4:34

Important Terms

Scribe has a somewhat different meaning from what may jump to mind when we hear the word. This office was not anything like a stenographer, secretary, or copyist. The scribes were the experts in the Jewish Law. They were lawyers of a sort, though their concern was with religious rather than civil law. They would have been very learned and respected people.

Exploring the Readings

Our reading begins with Jesus once again engulfed in crowds, so much so that he has a boat standing by to take him away. Note that the crowds now come from outside Palestine. People hear about Jesus and follow after him. Whether they will become true followers will be dealt with in this section.

Something we have already seen occurs again here. The unclean spirits recognize him as the Son of God, but Jesus orders them to be quiet. This is a continuing motif in Mark, the meaning of which is debated. It is sometimes referred to by the term *messianic secret*, a deliberate hiding of Jesus' true identity throughout much of the gospel.

Readers/hearers of the gospel have known that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah and the Son of God since the opening verse, but Jesus repeatedly hushes those who would make this identity public. (Recall that the "Interpretive Keys," on pages 3-4, urge paying attention to the titles used for Jesus.) It is important to realize that titles like Messiah and Son of God were well known terms with strong political overtones for the people of Jesus' day. Even in our day, the terms are well known by Christians and likely conjure up certain sorts of images for many.

At one time in the history of Bible study the question would have been, "Why did Jesus want to keep his identity secret?" But as awareness that Mark is not uninterpreted history has grown, the more appropriate question seems to be what purpose this *messianic secret* plays in the overall story. **Since we as reader/hearer have already been told Jesus' true identity, why do you think Mark repeatedly refocuses our attention on that identity? Why tell the readers Jesus' identity but not let that identity enter the story?**

Next Jesus appoints *the Twelve*. *Disciples* and *the Twelve* are not synonyms. We've already seen that Levi is a disciple, but he is not one of the Twelve. The Twelve are an inner circle with special roles. Most people assume that the number 12 corresponds to the 12 tribes of Israel. Also notice that Judas' betrayal is reported now. This may not have any real significance. It was apparently common practice for ancient narratives, which were meant to be heard, to be fairly devoid of suspense.

When Jesus returns home in 3:19, we begin a story which shows a Markan penchant for weaving two short narratives into one another. This story begins with Jesus' family worried that he has gone off the deep end, moves into a controversy with the scribes, then moves back to the issue of family. Generally, when Mark does this he means for us to let the two intertwined stories help interpret one another.

The story begins by telling us that Jesus' family goes out "to restrain him." We are not told that the family thinks Jesus crazy, but they certainly act on others' assessment that he is. As readers/hearers, we know who Jesus is and therefore know that he is doing the work of God's kingdom in the world. But to many, this work is interpreted as mental instability. **What warning might Mark be giving us regarding judgments about God's activity in the world?**

In one sentence we are talking about Jesus' family and their concern for Jesus' mental state and in the next scribes from Jerusalem are saying Jesus is demon possessed. (Remembering that demon possession and insanity were pretty much synonymous in Jesus' day helps connect the statements about Jesus in v. 22 and 23.) Jesus' family thinks he might be crazy. The experts are sure that Jesus is infested with a major league demon. In fact, they interpret his ability to cast out demons as proof that he is possessed by a more powerful one.

Jesus responds to their charges with what Mark labels parables. (In the Greco-Roman world, the term *parable* includes what we think of as parables along with proverbs, wisdom sayings, riddles, etc.) On the one hand, the meaning of Jesus' words is obvious. Rather than having a demon, Jesus has power over them. Jesus is the strong man who has tied up Satan and will now plunder his house. But some of Jesus' words can be read with a double meaning. We have already been told that one of Jesus' own will betray him. His own house is divided against him, and his own family seeks to restrain him.

It could be that Mark doesn't mean to warn the church in this second layer of meaning imbedded in Jesus' words. He may merely be hinting at the fate that awaits Jesus. **Regardless, think about how Jesus' words might serve as a warning to us in the church. How are the warnings of "a house divided" applicable to modern situations?**

Jesus ends his words to the scribes with a warning about unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. On the surface, it seems ridiculous that Jesus would promise forgiveness for all blasphemies, which would include blasphemy against God, but then says blasphemy against the Spirit can never be forgiven. That seems rather capricious and arbitrary.

But when we remember that the early church (to whom Mark writes) understood itself as animated by the Spirit and that the same Spirit has come upon Jesus at the start of his ministry, Jesus' words may take on a new cast. The notes in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* read "Care in judging the inspiration motivating people is important, especially if one is inclined to make a negative judgment. It is forgivable to wrongly judge the evil as good, but it is unforgivable to judge the good as evil."

It seems to me that Mark is offering a stern warning about how easily we may misconstrue the work of the Spirit (i.e. the coming of the Kingdom). Care must be exercised lest we pronounce the Spirit's work evil, crazy, bad, etc. (Witness the activity of Jesus' own family and learned scribes.) **With this in mind, what are examples of where we should be very careful lest we declare the work of the Spirit evil?**

In 3:31, Jesus' family arrives on the scene, completing the action that began in 3:21. Note that his mother and brothers and sisters are "standing outside." In other words, they are not part of Jesus' community. Jesus states this explicitly in vv. 33-35. **Since the story portrays the family on the outside, seemingly as ones not doing God's will, what understanding of "God's will" does that suggest?**

Jesus clearly states that the natural allegiance of family is superseded by allegiance to this community constituted around God's will. **Think about the many allegiances that are part of our lives, and say something about how Jesus' words condition those allegiances.**

Compared to Matthew and Luke, Mark puts more emphasis on miracles and less on parables. In fact, there are only two extended parables in all of Mark, and both of them have significant negative overtones. The first is *The Parable of the Sower* in 4:1-9, and the second is *The Parable of the Tenants* which comes near the end of Jesus' ministry in 12:1-12.

It is likely that the parable of the sower gives the first hearers of Mark a yard stick by which to measure events that take place during Jesus' ministry. The characters and crowds that inhabit the rest of the story can be evaluated with reference to this parable.

Curiously, Jesus tells the disciples (and us) in 4:10-12 that the purpose of the parable is to obscure meaning, that some may hear and yet not be forgiven. (Recall that in the Greco-Roman world *parable* can have the sense of a riddle.) It seems rather cruel that the possibility of forgiveness would be purposely hidden from some, but remember, Mark is not telling us a history. Everyone who hears/reads the Gospel is given the insider's explanation. This may be a literary device Mark uses to place us in the same inside position as the original disciples.

Look at the parable of the sower and Jesus' explanation of it. Notice that there are four different categories of seed. **What is the relative "success" to "failure" rate? What insights might that give us regarding what we see when we look at the world around us?**

Since we are on the "inside" with the disciples and understand the parable, what opportunity do we have when we compare ourselves to the categories and find ourselves wanting?

Jesus is teaching the disciples (and us) about the meaning of faith and discipleship. (Note that in 4:13 we get the first hints at the failure of the disciples.) The parable of the sower warns us that both persecution and the lures of wealth are threats to our faith and discipleship. But lest we misunderstand our "insider" status, Jesus tells the proverb about a lamp on a lampstand. We are not to cloister ourselves but share our good news with the world. Finally, the *Growing Seed* and *Mustard Seed* parables remind us that the Kingdom does not come by our efforts. **Since we do not bring the Kingdom, what is our place in it?**

Session IV Amazing Miracles; Amazing Unbelief

Readings for this session

Mark 4:35-6:6

Exploring the Readings

In this section, a series of miracles will produce awe and amazement, but not necessarily faith. The amazing acts will be followed by Jesus' rejection at the hands of his own hometown, something Jesus will find amazing. As you read these verses, think about the relationship to being amazed by Jesus and faith in Jesus. It may be that the two are not that closely linked.

The first miracle story is the well-known account of Jesus stilling the storm. The Sea of Galilee is no ocean, but it can experience violent storms that come up quickly. And the boats fishermen used there were small, open craft. (Some years ago, during a severe drought in Israel, the level of the Sea of Galilee dropped significantly, and an ancient boat was found encased in the mud that had been the sea bottom. You can find pictures of this boat in many books or online. It is preserved in a museum on Galilee's western shore.)

In this story, the increasingly negative portrait of the disciples is developed. Jesus stills the storm at their request, but afterwards says to them, "Have you still no faith?" (Matthew's version softens this to "little faith.") That the disciples have "no faith" is rather disheartening when you remember all they've seen up to this point.

The disciple's cluelessness is emphasized by their question at the end of the passage. "Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?" We've known who Jesus is from the start, and Jesus' power over nature would seem to be a pretty good clue as to his identity, but the disciples seem unaware. They are awed and amazed by Jesus' power, but, according to Jesus, have "no faith." **Using this story as a guide, what seems to be Mark's understanding of faith?**

Jesus' amazing powers continue to be displayed as soon as the boat reaches the far shore of the sea. A spirit-possessed man meets Jesus and his disciples the moment they come ashore. This story has an element of humor to it. Unfortunately, modern folks often miss the humor in part because we don't expect it from Scripture and in part because our reading the text as historical account raises troubling elements that keep us from laughing.

The spirit, named Legion, recognizes Jesus just as other spirits have done. This spirit begs not to be sent out of the country. (This may reflect the common belief of that time that spirits and deities were connected to particular locations.) Jesus grants Legion's request to inhabit a herd of swine, an act of hoped for self-preservation that immediately backfires when the possessed swine rush pell-mell into the sea. To an audience hearing Mark read aloud, and not the least bit concerned with whether the story accurately reported the event, the humor of the situation must have been inescapable, and doubtless laughter would erupted among the hearers at this unexpected demise of Legion at his/their own hands.

As is often the case, the basic miracle story is not that different from miracle stories that were common throughout the Greco-Roman world. The really interesting material involves how people respond to what Jesus does. Verse 5:20 reports that “everyone was amazed” at the story of the former demoniac, but very different responses are reported in 5:14-20. **Look at those verses. What are the two different responses to Jesus’ power, and what do you think accounts for them?**

Jesus’ next miracles are related in the already seen pattern of a story within a story. The healing of Jairus’ daughter surrounds the story of a woman healed of a hemorrhage. The interweaving of these stories provides rich opportunities for interpreting and understanding both.

The stories begin in straightforward enough manner. Jairus, a leader of the synagogue comes to Jesus begging that he heal his daughter, and Jesus goes with him. As Jesus travels with Jairus, a separate story unfolds. A woman has suffered a hemorrhage for 12 years. This is likely some sort of continual menstrual bleeding. Under Levitical law, this would make her unclean and exclude her from the synagogue and conventional society. (There is debate regarding whether or not such laws were enforced in Jesus’ day.) She approaches Jesus stealthily, believing that touching him will heal her.

Her faith is rewarded, but then Jesus wants to know who touched him. She apparently interprets Jesus request harshly for she came to him “in fear and trembling.” But despite this fear, she “told him the whole truth.” Jesus’ response is not what she expects. He calls her “daughter” and extols her faith. (Some commentators see an illusion to Mark 16:8 where the women who are sent to tell the disciples of Jesus’ resurrection say nothing because of their fear. But this woman, who Jesus will praise for faith, speaks the truth in spite of her fear.)

Jairus has seen all this when people arrive to tell him that his daughter is dead. They urge Jairus to trouble Jesus no longer, but Jesus tells him, “Do not fear, only believe.” Is Jairus perhaps being called to draw a lesson from a different “daughter,” this one who has just been healed?

Jesus’ delay in reaching Jairus’ home sets the stage for an even greater miracle. Jesus takes pains to keep the audience for this one small. Jesus raises the girl from the dead and then insists that no one be told about this. This stands in contrast to the very different command given the Gerasene demoniac. We also learn that this daughter is 12 years old, a length of time equal to the healed woman’s hemorrhage.

The intertwining of these stories offers many opportunities for interpretation. **For example, what significance can you draw from Jairus’ daughter and the woman with a hemorrhage sharing the title daughter and the time of 12 years?**

Do you think it coincidence that 12 is also the number of disciples? Why or why not?

What do you make of Jesus healing and praising the faith of an unnamed woman in the middle of a story about healing the daughter of an influential, named man?

Already noted is the contradiction between the command to the Gerasene demoniac to tell and the order that Jairus' family remain silent. It seems Mark isn't being entirely consistent in how his *messianic secret* applies. **Why might Jesus want to downplay this particular miracle? Stated differently, might the incredible nature of raising this little girl from the dead tend to produce a response to Jesus other than what Mark wants?**

Following these extraordinary events, Jesus visits his hometown, apparently Nazareth, though that is not stated in the text. Obviously they have heard the reports about him, and when he teaches in their synagogue people are "astounded." They speak of his "wisdom" and note the "deeds of power done by his hands!" But as they remember he's a hometown boy, "they took offense at him." The Greek word is *skandalidzo* (σκανδαλιζω), the root of our word for scandal. We could translate very literally, "They were scandalized by him."

Clearly this scandal or offense happens because they cannot fit the Jesus they see into the image of Jesus they already have. Not only do they reject Jesus but his ability to help them is compromised, and it is Jesus' turn to be amazed. **Are there ways in which our expectations of how things are and what can happen, developed over long years of experience, get in the way of recognizing Jesus and responding in faith?**

Session V
The Shepherd Feeds His Flock

Readings for this session
Mark 6:7-56; Exodus 16

Exploring the Readings

Despite numerous indications that his disciples “don’t get it,” Jesus now commissions them to do the same work he has been doing. The disciples travel about in pairs, calling people to repent, casting out unclean spirits, and curing people of sickness. Given the increasingly negative portrayal of the disciples in Mark, this is pretty impressive stuff. **What might Mark be communicating by the fact that these disciples, cast in such a negative light, are able to cast out demons and heal the sick?**

In between the commissioning of the disciples and their return to tell Jesus of their deeds, Mark inserts the story of John the baptizer’s death at the hands of Herod. Herod has heard about Jesus’ ministry, and he worries that John, whom he executed, has been raised from the dead.

Mark relates how John’s death is ordered by Herod against his better judgment. Herod feared John, and his imprisonment is presented as a kind of protective custody. But eventually, the one who wants John dead is able to manipulate Herod, and Herod kills John to save face, even though he does not want to. **These events seem to foreshadow Jesus’ own fate. What parallels to you see between John’s death and Jesus’ impending death?**

Look at how Herod behaves in the story. Contrast what he believed about John with what he does to John. What commentary on the life of faith might Mark be offering?

Why do you think Mark reports the death of John connected to the success of the disciples’ mission? What is the impact of reporting this tragedy precisely at the moment of the disciples’ greatest success?

Following the report of John's death, we hear of the disciples' coming to Jesus and reporting the success of their mission. This prompts Jesus to suggest they come away to a deserted or solitary place to rest. This is reminiscent of Jesus' regular attempts to get away to a private place. The word translated "deserted" or "solitary" is the same word translated "wilderness" in other places. Literally, Jesus invites the disciples to get away to a "wilderness place," a term repeated three times in the span of five verses. Many Bibles obscure the fact that the "deserted place" of 6:31 and 32 is the "wilderness" of 1:12 where Jesus is tempted and where he retreats for prayer following his first healing miracles in 1:35. (The NIV even translates the word differently in 6:31 and 32, first as "quiet place" then "solitary place.") **Why do you think Jesus says the disciples need to get away for rest?**

As with some of Jesus' own attempts at seclusion, prayer, and rest, the crowd interrupts. Jesus and the disciples travel by boat but are headed off at the pass, and a crowd greets them when they land. Upon seeing the crowd, Jesus has compassion on them "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." The metaphor is a well-known one. Kings of Israel were referred to as shepherds, as is God in the 23rd Psalm. In Numbers 27:17, as Joshua is selected to succeed him, Moses prays that the people will not find themselves "like sheep without a shepherd." The events that follow will confirm that Jesus is the one to shepherd Israel.

As the story unfolds, the shepherd will both teach and feed his flock. Jesus' compassion is not simply about meeting their physical needs. **What might Jesus' actions say about the work of the present day church? How should our compassion for the world be enacted?**

The story of Jesus feeding of the five thousand begins with the triumphant return of the disciples from their mission, but the section marked by this feeding miracle and the feeding of the four thousand in 8:1-10 will present a decidedly negative picture of the disciples.

This is a good time to remember that we are chopping the Gospel up into blocks that fit our time frame for study. Thus we will look at the feeding of the five thousand this session and see the feeding of the four thousand next. But these stories certainly are meant to be heard together.

Many of us are familiar with the basic pattern of Jesus' feeding miracles, but we will do well to look carefully at them, noting the differences that occur from one account to another. In this story, the disciples suggest sending the crowd away so that they may find food. This may even be seen as concern for the crowds on the part of the disciples. But Jesus insists that they feed the crowd. The disciples' protest that the "two hundred denarii worth of bread" required reflects the impossibility of the task. One denarius was a usual day's wage.

Remember that this story takes place in the “wilderness place.” In the wilderness, Jesus has taught the “sheep without a shepherd.” **Recalling the connection of Moses to this phrase about sheep without shepherd, and the image of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus, what statements about Jesus might Mark want to make with this story?**

At the end of the miracle, there are baskets of leftovers. Compare this with the story of the manna in Exodus 16. What conclusions do you draw from this contrast?

At the end of the miracle, Jesus sends the disciples ahead while he dismisses the crowd. As he often does, he goes off by himself to pray. The arrival of darkness sets the stage for the next miracle. Jesus sees the disciples straining against the wind, but Mark says he came towards them, walking on the water, but with the intention of passing them by.

This desire to “pass them by” has led to endless speculation. Some say Jesus is trying not to scare them. Others suggest a connection to Yahweh’s glory passing by Moses in Exodus 33. Regardless, Jesus makes no effort to help the disciples as they struggle and strain. **What does finally motivate Jesus to come to the disciples’ aid? Why do you think this is?**

When Jesus earlier stilled the storm, the disciples were in awe, wondering just who this Jesus was. Now they have seen many more miracles and done of few of their own. They have also seen Jesus feed multitudes in the wilderness, outdoing Moses. Yet they are terrified when they see Jesus on the water. Mark tells us why they didn’t get it. “They did not understand about the loaves.” **What is it they don’t understand?**

Session VI Feeding and Understanding

Readings for this session

Mark 7:1-8:21

Exploring the readings

In the previous lesson, we saw Jesus miraculously provide food in the wilderness with an abundance of leftovers. Then we saw him walk on water. In this section we will again see him work wonders and feed the crowds. In between the miracles and feedings are teachings on the Law. Jesus' teachings are necessitated by the Pharisees' and scribes' complaints about Jesus' followers not abiding by the cleanliness rituals required by Judaism. (Issues of table fellowship and dietary restrictions would create significant conflict in the early church.)

Jesus' opponents essentially challenge his authority by pointing out his failure to comply with religious rules. Jesus will have no trouble engaging his opponents in verbal debate. But before we even consider the content of what Jesus says, consider the miraculous feedings which surround these verses plus the walking on water that comes immediately before it. **What does Jesus' Moses-like ability to feed the people in the wilderness and his walking on water say about his authority to speak about the Law?**

Jesus doesn't directly answer the question his opponents raise. Instead he attacks their hypocrisy, quoting from Isaiah 29 and accusing them of valuing human tradition over serving God. The example he gives is "Corban." The word can apply to anything dedicated to use in the temple, but apparently it was used to describe vows made to dedicate wealth or worldly goods to the temple and God's service. We know from later rabbinical discussions that there was debate about when one might be released from such a vow, with rulings many years after the time of Jesus making an exception in the need to care for aging parents, precisely the issue Jesus raises here. With these words, Jesus thwarts his opponents' attempt to damage his authority, a fact clearly shown by his calling the crowds and teaching them at 7:14.

There is a tendency to view the Pharisees as stereotyped bad guys, almost as cardboard characters with little connection to us. The ease with which some dismiss "Pharisaic legalism" is a case in point. But the fact is that kosher rules did play and have continued to play an important role for Jews in maintaining a distinct identity as God's people, a constant reminder of a life shaped by covenant relationship to God.

The problem exhibited by Jesus' opponent is not some rigid legalism which would never be a problem for us. Rather, it is a typical problem for all religious groups. Certain behaviors associated with a religion can become sacrosanct over time, sometimes shoving aside other behaviors that are more central to the fundamental claims of a faith. **Think about our rituals, the practices we engage in. What are the human traditions that the church has developed over the years which can sometimes substitute for true covenant life with God?**

Once he dispatches his opponents, Jesus teaches the crowds, and later his disciples, about the things that truly defile a person. Jesus doesn't deny that kosher rules might have an important role in shaping an ethnic, cultural, or religious identity, but he insists that such rituals play no role in making a person immoral, unpleasing to God, etc. Evil, he says, is not something you ingest, it is something that already exists within you. The worst sorts of defilement and evil emerge from within us. They are not introduced from outside. **When we worry about the problems of the world, about things that degrade and diminish our society, how might we take Jesus' words to heart? In what ways should we be less concerned with external things and more concerned with internal things?**

Jesus says that ritual practices don't make us right in the eyes of God. "For it is from within, for the human heart, that evil intentions come." **If keeping certain practices and rituals won't straighten us out, what is necessary?**

The story of Jesus' encounter with a Syrophenician woman is somewhat disturbing. Jesus seemingly embraces the racial and ethnic prejudices of his culture, even referring to the woman as one of the "dogs." Interpretations that say no slur is intended, that this word for dog speaks of treasured family pets, are driven more by a desire to protect Jesus' image than they are by good biblical study. There is no way to make Jesus' words kind ones.

It may not be coincidental that Mark has Jesus speak to this woman using food as a metaphor. After all, feeding miracles are on both sides of this event. When the woman turns Jesus' words to her own advantage, she says that even dogs get the crumbs. **Look back at 6:42-44, the end of the first feeding miracle. What do those verses say that might help understand this exchange between Jesus and this woman?**

Another very curious element of this story is the woman's ability to match wits with Jesus. In the encounter with Pharisees and scribes that begins this lesson, Jesus quickly and easily dispatches those who would debate him about the Law. Yet this woman bests Jesus with a single retort.

What might Mark be trying to say through this encounter? What sort of broad, theological conclusions might we draw?

In the healing of a deaf man that follows, it appears that Jesus may still be among Gentiles, but it is difficult to say for sure because Mark's geography is impossible. This healing is another example of Jesus telling someone to keep quiet but the person spreading his fame far and wide. The healing also combines two highly symbolic features, hearing and speech, both of which are critical for the spread of the gospel.

In this miracle Jesus enables the man both to hear and to speak. It is the healing itself which allows the man boldly to proclaim what Jesus has done for him. **Comment on the symbolism of this story. What might Mark be saying about how people come to faith, about how the good news spreads?**

Notice the words in 7:37. **If we think of it in terms of a developing faith statement, what do the crowds understand about Jesus? Do they seem to be growing in their understanding of him?**

Now comes another feeding miracle. Given the brevity of Mark's Gospel, it seems a bit odd that he would report a second feeding miracle, especially one with so much in common with its predecessor. This event once again occurs in the "wilderness," ("desert" in NRSV and "remote place" in NIV). Notice also that Mark reminds us of the previous event, saying, "...there was *again* a great crowd without anything to eat."

It seems highly improbable that Mark simply knows two different feeding miracle stories and so includes both. He must have seen something very important in these events for him to highlight them so. One thing that stands out is the disciples' behavior. **Look at the disciples' question in 8:4. How is it that they can ask this after the events of 6:30-44? What is Mark doing by making them so patently obtuse?**

One possible reason for telling two feeding miracles may lie in their locations. As mentioned earlier, Mark's geography is a little suspect, but the preponderance of evidence suggests a site in Gentile territory. **Assuming this, what might be the significance of this second miracle?**

In 8:6 we are told, "...after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute." The Eucharistic flavor is unmistakable. **What does this seem to indicate?**

Mark 8:11-13 seems to intrude into the story, which might have flowed more smoothly if v. 14 followed v. 9. Some have argued that its placement is a mistake, but much more likely, it is Mark setting something inside another story so that all the elements play off each other.

The story doesn't assume that the Pharisees were at the feeding, but clearly they have seen and heard much that Jesus has done. Yet they ask for a sign, for incontrovertible proof of who Jesus is. Jesus' sigh says it all. Will they never get it? **Why do the Pharisees need more convincing proof? What is their problem?**

Mark 8:14-21 continues the action left off at v. 10. The discussion of bread and the yeast or leaven of the Pharisees connects both to the feeding miracle and to the Pharisees in vv.11-13. (Leaven is almost always a negative symbol in Jewish texts.) Interestingly, the disciples explicitly recount the separate details of both feeding miracles (refuting any notion that Mark simply reports two different accounts of the same miracle). The story ends with Jesus' question, "Do you not yet understand?" **What is it that they do not yet understand? How is their lack of understanding similar to that of the Pharisees and of Herod? In what ways is their failure instructive for us?**

Session VII Seeing Is Believing

Reading for this session

Mark 8:22-9:29; Daniel 7:9-14

Important term

Son of Man is Jesus' favorite designation for himself in the Gospel of Mark. The term is a Semitic way of saying "human being," but it also has strong messianic overtones. The "son of man" in Daniel 7:13-14 (translated "human being" by the NRSV) is associated with God's final judgment and the coming of God's kingdom. It may be that Jesus prefers the term Son of Man because it speaks of the coming Kingdom without all the political overtones of Messiah.

Exploring the readings

Here we enter a new section of Mark's Gospel. Now the action will turn toward teaching the disciples that Jesus must suffer. Some commentators argue that the healing of the blind man concludes the previous section, serving as a comment on the blindness of the disciples so clearly on display in 8:14-21. While it certainly does comment on the disciples' blindness, it primarily serves to frame the teachings the disciples will now receive.

This section of the gospel runs from 8:22-10:52, but due to time constraints, we must break it in half. Between two healings of blindness, there will be three passion predictions by Jesus as he struggles to teach his disciples what it means for him to be Messiah. As we should already realize, they will have the greatest difficulty "seeing."

In 8:22, some people bring a blind man to Jesus. Consider just how vulnerable the blind were in Jesus' day. There was no way for them to lead anything approximating a normal life. They were reduced to begging and could move about only if someone helped them.

One curious element of this story is the need for Jesus to act twice before the man's sight is fully restored. At first the man reports he can see people, but they look like trees. Only after a second attempt does the man see clearly. Some folks get caught up searching for literal meaning in the details of the story, but I suggest you look at the big picture. Jesus gives sight, but at first it is not clear. Upon further effort by Jesus, the sight becomes complete.

What sort of significance might the two-step healing have when we consider the problem of seeing Jesus, i.e. understanding who he is?

8:27-33 may actually help us understand the meaning of the two-step healing. Mark's version of Peter's confession of faith is quite different from other gospel accounts, ones you may be more familiar with. Jesus asks who people say he is and is told a number of answers which associate him with God's work but do not perceive his true identity. Finally Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah or Christ. But Jesus does not praise Peter for this answer. Instead he warns the disciples to be quiet. The word translated "warned" or "sternly ordered" is translated "rebuke" in v. 32 and 33. He also uses this word to silence the demons who know his identity.

While Jesus may not be admonishing Peter for his confession, neither does he say anything positive. Instead he warns all of them to tell no one, and then begins to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer and die. Peter's reaction to this teaching may help us understand why Jesus doesn't get particularly excited about Peter calling him Messiah, because now Peter rebukes Jesus. **How is it that Peter can confess Jesus as Messiah in one breath and then rebuke Jesus in the next? What is going on here?**

Think back to the two-stage healing of the blind man, where he can see people but they look like trees. How might Peter's "sight" be viewed as parallel to the partial sight of the blind man?

The fact that Jesus calls Peter "Satan" fits well with his "rebuke" of Peter after he confesses Jesus is Messiah. Satan and the demons know who Jesus is, but that does not mean they have any plans to help Jesus. Peter now is portrayed in the same light, as one seeking to thwart Jesus' work as Messiah. **How is it that Peter sides with Satan? He may have very different motives and intent, but his actions have the same effect. How is it that a follower of Jesus, who knows he is the Messiah, can work in tandem with evil?**

Now Jesus calls the crowd and teaches about the true meaning of discipleship. Up to this point, the disciples have participated with Jesus in his ministry of healing and preaching. But now he begins to speak of his ministry of suffering, and he insists that his disciples must join him in this work as well.

Jesus words, "...let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me," are well known, but the radical, counter-intuitive message sometimes gets lost in the familiarity. "Bearing the cross" has become an overused metaphor for any suffering or difficulty, a meaning quite different from what Jesus is stating here.

Some will no doubt note that the disciples could not have fully understood what Jesus means by these words. After all, they did not understand about Jesus' impending death on a cross. But we should keep in mind that Mark is not simply reporting what Jesus said, he is having Jesus speak to us, and we know all about the cross.

Jesus here insists that to follow him is to embrace his ministry of giving yourself for the sake of others. This runs counter to basic notions of self-preservation and survival, but Jesus insists that it is the road to full life. Seek to preserve your own life and safety and it will be taken from you. Willingly give up your life and safety for others and you will find true life. It runs against all common sense. Who can understand such a thing, unless they see more fully than most?

Jesus' words about those who are "ashamed of me and my words" fit with his call to see things counter intuitively and with the notion of the need for healed vision. One could say that Peter is "ashamed" of Jesus when he starts to speak of suffering and death. Peter is offended by such talk. Jesus here says that we cannot truly be his followers unless we are conformed to his way of seeing things. **Think about your daily life. In what ways do you see the world and life as Jesus does? In what ways do you exhibit offense or shame toward notions of self-denial, suffering, and powerlessness?**

At the close of his teachings on discipleship, Jesus speaks of some seeing the kingdom before they die. The natural assumption is to think Jesus is talking about timing. Some scholars speak of Mark writing at a time before the delay in Jesus' second coming became a problem for the church. That is certainly possible, but something very different could be going on. Jesus may not be talking about timing, but about the capacity to see the kingdom. (Notice Jesus' use of the perfect tense when he says "...until they see that the kingdom of God *has* come with power.) **Can we interpret Jesus' words in a way that some of those listening to Jesus did indeed see the kingdom prior to their deaths?**

Jesus' first Passion prediction is followed by the rebuke of Peter and teachings on discipleship. In turn, these are followed by divine confirmation of who Jesus is. Three from the inner circle, Peter, James, and John, are taken to the mountain top to witness this epiphany. The same three saw the raising of Jairus' daughter and will see Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. However, there is nothing to indicate that these three understand, or "see," any better than the other disciples. In fact, we have just heard of Peter's rejection of suffering and will hear of James and John's continued adherence to worldly ways in just a few verses more. In addition, all three will fail miserably at Gethsemane, despite the divine voice's command to them here on the mountain.

The scene on the mountain confirms Jesus' identity without a doubt, sharing the words Jesus heard at his baptism. The appearance of Moses and Elijah further confirm this, representing the Law and the Prophets respectively. But the disciples still do not "see." Peter babbles about erecting three dwelling or booths for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, and we are told explicitly that this is because he is terrified and doesn't know what to say. And when Jesus tells them not to tell

anyone of this experience until he is raised, they apparently comply in large part because they do not understand what he is talking about.

Instead, the three disciples question Jesus about the coming of Elijah, presumably because they have trouble seeing how Jesus can be Messiah if Elijah has not yet come. Jesus tells them that Elijah has already come, though he couches his words with images of Elijah's and his own suffering and death. **When had Elijah returned? And why have the disciples not recognized this? (Their inability to understand and embrace Jesus' suffering may be helpful in answering this.)**

As Jesus and the three disciples descend the mountain, they discover a crowd gathered around the remaining disciples as scribes argue with them. When Jesus wants to know what is going on, we learn that the scene involves a demon-possessed boy whom the disciples have been unable to help. This is the only exorcism in this section of the gospel. Healings and exorcisms recede as Mark moves Jesus toward the cross, and this event may function more to talk about faith, belief, and spiritual blindness compared to earlier healings.

The disciples' failure to help this boy elicits an angry response from Jesus, but it is not directed at the disciples as we might expect. "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you?" Assumedly the disciples are a part of this "generation," but the charge is against the people at large.

Still Jesus asks that the boy be brought to him. The father explains the terrible situation, accompanied by a demonstration as the spirit convulses the boy. The father's plea for Jesus' pity and help is accompanied by "If you are able..." This elicits a second angry response from Jesus, perhaps illuminating his charge against this generation in his previous outburst.

At this point, the father both separates from and associates himself with this generation. "I believe; help my unbelief!" Jesus now performs the exorcism as easily as he has performed others, although those who witness it think the boy has died. (Perhaps there is symbolism here similar to that with the two-stage healing of the blind man.) But Jesus lifts him to his feet, with a slight nod to the power of resurrection seen by some commentators.

Given Jesus' charge against this "generation" and the father's claim to believe but need help with unbelief, what is the problem Jesus encounters here? What is the problem with this generation (and perhaps ours as well), and what hope is there for a solution to the problem?

Consider the disciples' failure to help the boy and Jesus' explanation of why. Are we to understand that the disciples do not know about prayer? What is the significance of this?

Session VIII Vision Problems

Readings for this session

Mark 9:30-10:52

Exploring the readings

We should treat these readings as a single unit with those from the previous session. Those began with the healing of a blind man, moved to Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, and then saw Jesus' first prediction of his impending suffering and death. All this highlighted the disciples' spiritual blindness and was followed by Jesus' teachings on self-denial and suffering, then divine confirmation of Jesus at the transfiguration. Finally, the session ended on the note of the disciples' failure and a "faithless generation."

These readings continue highlighting the disciples' inability to "see" and Jesus' insistence on the way of suffering and the cross. Twice more Jesus predicts his death, and the disciples continue to show how little they understand or "see." The section concludes with a final healing as we are reminded that Jesus can give sight to the blind.

Our reading begins with Jesus' second passion prediction. We are told explicitly that the disciples do not understand. Despite their confusion, they are unwilling to press Jesus for help. However, they are not the least bit shy about exhibiting their foolishness, engaging in an argument about who is the greatest. Their silence when Jesus asks them about it indicates that they at least know such discussions are inappropriate.

Jesus now teaches them that "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This, no doubt, is a different sort of greatness than the disciples had in mind. To illustrate his point, Jesus places a little child in their midst. We likely miss some of Jesus' message here. Our culture is much more enamored with children than was the case in ancient times. **Thinking about Jesus' command to be "last" and "servant," what exactly does Jesus mean by his words about a child? What different example might better express Jesus' meaning in our day and age?**

Once again the disciples demonstrate that they "see" things very differently from Jesus. They report on someone, not a follower, who is using Jesus' name to do exorcisms. (Such activity is widely known in the ancient world. Pagan healers would employ the revered names of religious figures in the belief that these names carried power.) The disciples assume that Jesus would want to control such activity, to prevent the "wrong folks" from representing him. Yet Jesus tells the disciples to stop worrying about such things.

Almost all religious institutions worry about boundaries, credentials, and the like. **How might we apply what Jesus says to our own day? What challenge does Jesus offer to us?**

The failings and “blindness” of the disciples set the stage for more teachings on the nature of discipleship. These teachings might have existed independently of the narrative, but they fit perfectly into the need for disciples to understand how their lives should be lived.

The first set of sayings in 9:42-50 can be troubling for present-day people who are prone to hear Jesus too literally. Jesus says that there are many opportunities to stumble, literally, to be scandalized. These sayings are concerned both with our putting temptations or stumbling blocks before others (“little ones” refers either to Christians in general or to those who are novices in the faith), and the many opportunities for us to stumble on our own. **The fact that Jesus is so concerned with this problem of stumbling implies something about the effort required to live as a disciple. What sort of difficulty might be inferred from Jesus’ words?**

The amputation metaphors in this section, along with the images of hellfire, are just that, metaphors. The notion is that our ability to become disciples may be compromised by things that are dear to us. **What are some of the things that get in our way, that we’d be better off without in order to live as God intends?**

These teachings conclude with sayings on salt. The opening “everyone will be salted with fire” may well have been a common proverb that simply meant everyone is tested by difficulties. This proverb helps segue to the commands to be like salt. Salt was extremely important and valuable in the ancient world. It was necessary for preserving foods as well as seasoning. **What does the command to be like salt say about how our lives should affect those around us?**

It is Pharisees who raise the next topic. Quite likely Mark wants us to remember the earlier picture of Pharisees substituting human tradition for God’s law. Jesus acknowledges that Moses permits decrees of divorce, but he insists this was necessitated by their “hardness of heart.” (That Christian divorce rates rival and sometimes exceed those of non-Christians may say something about our own hardness of heart.)

Jesus clearly sees divorce as contrary to God’s plan for human relationship, but it may be more instructive to think of Jesus’ words in the larger context of discipleship rather than debating

how literally we should take him. **Why is divorce troubling in this larger context? How is it illustrative of larger problems in following Jesus?**

For the second time in our reading, little children take center stage. Here we see a pattern that has occurred before. The disciples fail despite the fact that they should know better. Just as they wonder how Jesus could feed a vast crowd despite having done so before, here they shoo away children despite Jesus words in 9:37, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...” The disciples’ failure elicits Jesus’ famous words, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” **What do you think Jesus means by saying the Kingdom belongs to those like little children?**

This collection of teachings ends with a story that relates directly to much that has just been taught. A man comes to Jesus seeking instruction in eternal life. (We later learn he is rich.) Take care to view this man as Mark presents him, not with some preconceived notion about his motives. Notice that in 10:21 it explicitly states that Jesus “loved him.”

Clearly this is a man trying very hard to live as God wants. His statement on keeping the law is not arrogance, nor does it imply he thinks himself perfect. It means he has dutifully tried to live by the commandments all his life. But Jesus’ “one thing you lack” is too much for him, and he goes away shocked and disappointed. **How is this story illustrative of the difficulties of discipleship Jesus has discussed beginning in 9:42?**

Some hopeful comments conclude this story. (The disciples’ question about who can be saved if not rich folks reflects a common belief that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing.) The first hopeful comment reflects God’s ability to do the impossible, presumably to save those who seem to be un-savable. The second is that the sacrifice and self-denial of disciples is not without its rewards, although the list says “with persecutions,” and “the first will be last.” **How does this guide your understanding of the rewards of faith?**

Now comes the third and final passion prediction. Amazement and fear are present even before Jesus speaks, and the disciples' reaction to Jesus' words is not reported at all. However, they immediately exhibit their lack of understanding. James and John say to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." (Look at 6:22 for strikingly similar language.) James and John apparently expect Jesus to act in ways similar to earthly rulers like Herod. Obviously they do not understand what sort of Messiah Jesus is. They have not heard his call to suffering, nor do they understand that greatness is about service.

The other disciples hear about this and get upset, not because they understand any better but because they're miffed at James and John's attempt to get ahead of them in line. Jesus responds by stating as clearly as he can that he is nothing like Herod or other earthly rulers. And greatness among his followers is not about the best seats but about becoming a slave to all. This follows the pattern he sets as one who comes to serve and give his life for others.

We have already noted in this class that the level of hard-headedness and blindness by the disciples reaches levels defying all common sense. Perhaps Mark is speaking less about the failings of these particular individuals and more about how very different discipleship is from the ways of the world. **What are our deeply ingrained notions of how the world works that make it difficult to fully embrace the life Jesus calls disciples to live?**

This section of the gospel ends with a second restoration of sight. This is the final event before Jesus enters Jerusalem. Given how much is made of the disciples own blindness it is hard not to see some connection between this healing and the material that precedes it. Interestingly, a lot more is said about Bartimaeus than about Jesus in the story. Bartimaeus repeatedly cries, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" even though others try to quiet him. **What do you think the story might want us to learn from the behavior of Bartimaeus?**

What do you make of the final line saying, "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him along the way?"

Session IX The King Comes Teaching

Readings for this session

Mark 11:1-12:44; Jeremiah 7:1-11

Exploring the readings

Now Jesus comes to Jerusalem. Mark dedicates more than a third of his gospel to the events of Holy Week, beginning with Jesus' entry into the city. During the events of Holy Week, the Temple will serve as something of a focal point. Pay attention to the role of the Temple over the final three sessions of this course.

The entry into Jerusalem probably requires special attention with regard to not mixing different gospel accounts. "Palm Sunday," the familiar name given to these events, would likely be unknown if Mark were the only gospel. There is no mention of palms nor waving branches of any sort. The notion of a Messianic procession is also much more muted than in Matthew. Jesus riding on the "colt" (no donkey is mentioned) is not linked to any Old Testament texts or promises. Perhaps we are to draw our own connections to passages such as Zechariah 9:9, but perhaps we are to draw a different connection. The fact that the colt has never been ridden evokes images of never used, consecrated animals used in Old Testament sacrifices.

The context of these events is the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. This was a time when huge numbers of pilgrims would flock to Jerusalem. The Jewish historian Josephus says that nearly three million people would make the journey. Even assuming that Josephus exaggerates, the numbers must have been huge, and the scene was perhaps similar to what we have seen on television news reports of the Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

The first part of the story involves procuring the colt. Clearly these events are meant to show Jesus' foreknowledge of impending events as well as providing a dramatic sign when a stranger willingly provides the animal. Notice what the disciples are instructed to say to anyone who questions them. "The Lord needs it..." The word "Lord" carries many meanings in Jesus' day, but this may well be the most explicit religious use of the word with regard to Jesus in all of Mark. **What sort of religious connotations does the word carry here? How should the word "Lord" be understood?**

As Jesus heads for Jerusalem, people put cloaks and branches on the ground ahead of him. **Who are these people? How many of them are they? Where do these events take place?**

The chants of the crowd appear to come from Psalm 118: 25-26. ("Hosanna" literally means "save now.") Some also see Psalm 148:1. **What feeling do the words of the crowd give to this procession?**

Notice that in Mark's account, the procession ends prior to entering Jerusalem. Jesus' first appearance in the city itself doesn't cause much of a stir. He goes into the temple, takes a look around, and then goes to Bethany. (Very likely the huge crowds at Passover meant that Jesus, like other pilgrims, had to find lodging outside the city itself.) This is our first glimpse of the temple. **What significance might there be to Jesus going there and sizing it up on his first day in town?**

The next day Jesus and the disciples come from Bethany to Jerusalem once more. On the way a hungry Jesus looks for fruit on a fig tree, but finds none as they are not in season. And so Jesus curses the tree. Read simply as an account of events, this scene is disturbing. Surely Jesus knows what time of year figs can be picked. Getting upset over no figs at Passover is a little like being mad that there are no tomatoes in the garden in May. Besides this, taking out his frustrations on a tree seems a bit odd. Something else must be going on. The fact that we will see the tree again following the cleansing of the temple makes this a certainty. We are intended to draw some connection between this tree and the temple.

This connection is further enhanced by the word translated "season" in both NRSV and NIV. The Greek word is *kairos* (καιρος). It is one of two words usually translated "time." The other, *chronos* (χρονος), is used to speak of chronological time while *kairos* normally speaks of the right time, appropriate time, etc. It was often employed when speaking of the end times, God's time. The phrase, "The time is now," speaks of a *kairos* sort of time. It may well be that we are supposed to draw a connection to God's time, the coming day of the Lord, when we hear the gospel say "for it was not the time of figs."

After cursing the fig tree, Jesus comes into Jerusalem and enters the temple for a second time. But this time Jesus does not simply look around. He attacks the commerce that is going on there. All those pilgrims coming to town needed to offer sacrifices and pay the temple tax in Jewish currency. That made it necessary to sell animals and change Roman money into money appropriate for use in the temple. This would have gone on in the outer courtyards of the temple.

Jesus quotes scripture as he "cleanses" the temple. Isaiah 56:7 speaks of the temple as a "house of prayer for all peoples," and the "den of robbers" line comes from Jeremiah 7:11. Quite likely we are supposed to remember Jeremiah's entire complaint about false temple worship found in Jeremiah 7:1-11.

Remember that the temple will be a focal point for much of what happens during Holy Week. It is somehow critical to understanding the events of that week. **Look at what Jeremiah says about temple worship in 7:1-11. How might this help you better understand Jesus' anger about what is going on there?**

In what ways might the modern church fall into a similar state as the Jerusalem temple?

The next morning, presumably as Jesus and the disciples head to Jerusalem again, they pass the now shriveled fig tree. While the episode with the fig tree could stand as an example on the power of prayer all by itself, the use of *intercalation* (where the temple cleansing is between the beginning and end of the fig tree story) makes it highly likely that we are to relate the fig tree to the temple. That this is the only miracle during Holy Week, and it is a *negative* one, makes it more striking, as does the use of the word “*kairos*.” Further, there are numerous references by Old Testament prophets to Israel as a barren fig tree. (See Jeremiah 8:13; also Hosea 9:10, 16-17, Joel 1:7; Micah 7:1) **With this in mind, what does the image of the fig tree Jesus curses say about Israel, the temple, etc?**

When Jesus first enters Jerusalem, Mark evokes a royal procession, God’s anointed king coming into his city. But the behavior of this king is somewhat contrary to what one might expect. He does not raise armies or take his place in the palace. Instead he teaches. Even in the cleansing of the temple he is described as teaching.

The teachings on prayer that are part of the fig tree story are particularly troubling for many. If I really prayed without doubt would I be guaranteed a winning ticket in the next Mega Millions lottery? Jesus’ point about prayer is not that God will give us whatever we want, rather that God listens attentively to our prayers and so we should pray with confidence. The only specifics of prayer given here are an insistence on forgiving others when we pray. **Given this, what sort of attitude might you expect Jesus to have toward his opponents?**

Another day and Jesus enters Jerusalem again. He is questioned about the source of his authority. As always, Jesus’ ability to outwit his opponents is supreme. Notice that these opponents include the priests, scribes, and elders, the formal leadership of Judaism. And Jesus’ question to them is designed to do much more than thwart them. It is designed to reveal their true character. **What does the leaders’ answer to Jesus say about them and what authority they recognize?**

Jesus continues to teach using a parable. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants fits well with themes already established in the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree. **Insomuch as the tenants represent Israel or the temple institution, what is the basic problem Jesus sees?**

In what ways is it possible to find ourselves in the same situation as those wicked tenants?

Jesus' opponents again try to trap him with a question about taxes. (The parallels with the previous parable where the vineyard owner sought "to collect from them his share..." likely should influence our understanding of this story.) A key to understanding this story is knowing that Roman coins violated Jewish laws about images and idolatry. Contact with them was inevitable in a Roman dominated world, but that the Pharisees so easily produce such a coin and willingly look at its image and words speaking of the emperor's divinity reveals their hypocrisy. **Unanswered in the story is just what things are the emperor's and what are God's. How would you answer that question? Consider the parable of the tenants in your reflections.**

The topic now shifts to resurrection, a topic that we may be just as confused about as the Sadducees. The Sadducees' trick question for Jesus employs a view of resurrection that sounds similar to one I hear from many church people. **Look at how Jesus refutes them, and then say something about what we can (and can't) say about the nature of resurrection.**

As Jesus nears the end of his public teaching ministry, he is asked about the greatest commandment. In essence he is given the chance to define the core of his teachings. The commandments he offers are both from the Old Testament, the first from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and the second from Leviticus 19:18. Yet many leaders of Judaism resisted Jesus in part because their institutional concerns pushed these core Jewish teachings aside. **In what ways does our organized, institutionalized Christianity maintain Jesus' principles? In what ways do we push them aside?**

After his conversation with this scribe who is "not far from the kingdom of God," Jesus begins talking about the scribes' failings. In vv. 35-37, their understanding of scripture is questioned. (Jesus' interpretive method may seem a bit odd to us, but it was fairly common among rabbis of his time.) Sometimes missed in these verses is Jesus' rejection of the title, "Son of David." **What significance can you see in Jesus rejecting this title, and what does that rejection say about other titles given to Jesus?**

Jesus' condemnation of the scribes in vv. 38-40 obviously does not include all scribes, but it is a stern warning for all people with religious power. **Based on Jesus' criticism and his teaching throughout Mark, what would be appropriate behavior by scribes and other leaders?**

The well-known story of the widow's offering explodes the normal understanding of giving, the idea that charity comes from our surplus. **What general observations does Jesus offer us about church giving?**

Is it possible for this widow to serve as a model for people like us?

Session X Final Teachings; Final Failure of Disciples

Readings for this session

Mark 13:1-14:72; Daniel 9:26-27, 11:29-35, 12:5-13

Exploring the readings

Jesus' final teachings before the events of Thursday evening are on things to come. Chapter 13:1-37 contains what is often called Mark's "Little Apocalypse." The language of these verses clearly connects with themes from the apocalyptic portion of Daniel. Apocalyptic literature was a well-established genre by Jesus' time. There are hints of it in some earlier Old Testament prophetic writing, but we see it full blown in the second half of Daniel.

Daniel appears to be a two-part book with chapters 1-6 telling of a legendary Jewish figure of the Babylonians captivity. This section likely takes shape sometime in the third century BC. Chapters 7-12, on the other hand, are usually dated to about 165 BC. This section is fully apocalyptic in nature, visions urging the faithful to hold on for the promised day of God. Most likely the writer of Daniel is caught up in the events portrayed in the book, events that dovetail neatly with the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek ruler whose religious persecutions in Jerusalem ended with his death in 164 BC. The "desolating sacrilege" that Jesus speaks of in Mark 13:14 clearly points to the events related in Daniel, when Antiochus, with the support of some Hellenized Jews, profaned the temple in 167.

The book of Daniel, like all apocalyptic literature, uses visions and "coded" imagery to encourage the faithful who are facing troubles or persecution. Daniel speaks of "Babylon" as the enemy, code for Antiochus' Greek kingdom. Similarly the book of Revelation uses Babylon to refer to Rome.

People of Jesus' day and the early days of the Church were very familiar with apocalyptic literature and with Daniel. They were probably more inclined to draw support and hope from such works than to seek timetables for the future, a fascination that afflicts the later Church.

Discussion about when Mark was actually written often involves chapter 13. The temple was destroyed in 70 AD and many think that Mark has the turmoil of this period in mind as he writes. Others point to events around 40 AD where the Roman Emperor Caligula threatened to desecrate the temple and troops were sent to Jerusalem with many expecting war to break out. Either way, the times were tumultuous, and, even if Mark is written prior to 70, all but its very first readers would have known about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

The section begins with the disciples being impressed with worldly things, with the fantastic structure of the temple that Herod the Great had built. It was a colossal complex. The familiar "Wailing Wall" that can still be visited in Jerusalem today is but a part of the retaining wall that supported the complex. (Depictions of the temple can be found in many Bibles and other resources. Make sure to distinguish between Solomon's temple and this "Second Temple" built in the first century BC.)

Like all good prophets, Jesus sees beyond what others see. Contrary to what many think, prophets weren't primarily soothsayers or future tellers. While some may have had visions and used other trappings we associate with fortune tellers, they functioned much more like modern commentators who write newspaper columns and speak on TV. They pointed out the moral and spiritual failings of their world, announcing the dire consequences if things didn't get straightened out.

Jesus is doing a similar thing. We have already heard him speak of how Temple Judaism of his day has failed, how it is a barren fig tree and is occupied by wicked tenants. Therefore, no matter how impressive it is, it will fall, as do all human enterprises in the end. Jesus reads the signs and sees bad things ahead for Israel. Mark may also mean for us to connect the “stones” and “stone” of 13:1-2 to the “stone” that concludes the parable of the wicked tenants in 12:11.

When Jesus dismisses the disciples’ awe of the temple by saying it will be destroyed, they ask for a timetable. But Jesus never really answers their question. Instead he speaks of not mistaking evil and suffering in the world for a sign that the end is imminent. He warns against those who would mislead them with messianic pretensions and end time predictions.

Rather than giving them a timetable, in 13:9-13 Jesus gives the disciples and the Church its work in the meantime. **What is the work of the Church?**

Jesus says this work will not be easy. Just as he will be betrayed by his “family” of disciples, so Christians can expect to experience similar fates. I think it is safe to assume that the Christian community to which Mark writes must be familiar with the things Jesus predicts. They may have been hauled into courts and councils without legal counsel of any kind. Many of them were likely uneducated people and the experience must have been terrifying. **How could they stand up to such difficulties? Is the help and support they experienced available to us?**

Jesus then tells his followers to flee when they see the turmoil of the end times in 13:14-23. While the desolating sacrilege clearly points to Daniel, many also see either Jerusalem’s destruction or Caligula’s attempt to have his statue placed on temple mount as historical events connected to these words. I personally like the idea that Jerusalem’s destruction is in mind. The desolation of the temple could then be events performed by Jewish revolutionaries when they rebelled against Rome, events reported by the Jewish historian Josephus. If the destruction of Jerusalem is in mind here it serves as an example of the horrible way in which the end will arrive. The need to flee will be obvious and there will be no need to listen to false prophets and folks who have plans for dealing with such events. Assuming Mark does know of the temple’s destruction, these verses may also serve to let Christians know that its destruction is not in fact the end time, for that will be accompanied by the cosmic signs in vv. 24-27.

13:28-31 seems to say that recognizing the arrival of the end time will be as easy as recognizing the coming of summer. **If believers trust that the signs will be obvious, what impact does that have on speculations about the coming of the last days?**

As Jesus speaks of the desolating sacrilege in 13:14, the narrator “winks” at the reader with the words, “let the reader understand.” Much speculation has occurred about just what the reader should understand, and a definitive answer is likely impossible. **Nonetheless, read Daniel 12:5-13 and see if you can come up with a possible meaning.**

Jesus’ words about “this generation” not passing away until “all these things” take place are also a bit hard to understand. Exactly what “these things” refers to is a little unclear. It may also be that “this generation” doesn’t simply refer to those living at that time but to those who belong to this evil age. Regardless, the faithful can be assured that Jesus’ words will get them through whatever happens, for his words will endure even the end of heaven and earth.

In the meantime, Christians have work to do. Speculating about the coming of the end is not one of them. When it comes, we will know. At present, not even Jesus knows. In fact, precisely because its arrival will be unknown and unexpected, Christians are to be always at the ready. **Based on what Jesus has said in this section, what does it look like for Christians to stay alert, and keep awake?**

From this point forward, everything that happens takes place under the shadow of the plot to kill Jesus. As Jesus and his followers gather in the evening, an unknown woman pours expensive, fragrant oil (costing a full year’s wages) onto Jesus. There are allusions here to the anointing of a king, though Jesus speaks of anointing for burial. Some of the disciples object to this extravagance. Their hearts are perhaps in the right place, but they still don’t understand. In fact, you could say that this “outsider” does what the disciples should have done. **What is it about this event that makes Jesus praise it so? Is it possible to do something comparable in our day?**

The anointing story is inserted (as Mark often does) into the plot reported in 14:1-2 and Judas becoming part of that plot in 14:10-11. Perhaps this is simply to reinforce the notion of a burial anointing, or maybe it provides one last frustrating example of the disciples’ failure to understand, a failure that leads one of them to turn on Jesus.

The story now moves to the Passover meal and last supper together. Just as occurred with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Sunday, everything is just as Jesus said for the meal. As soon as they are gathered, Jesus tells the disciples that one will betray him. This is hardly surprising. After all, Jesus has said that families will turn against one another because of him.

As the story continues we learn that while only one betrays Jesus, all will desert him. None of them can comprehend how Jesus, this Son of Man who will one day come "in clouds with great power" (13:26) can go willingly to his death. When Peter objects that he will never desert Jesus, we learn that he will do worse and deny even knowing him.

Just as the disciples' failures have accompanied Jesus' work throughout the gospel, they are on display here as the cross looms large. Yet despite the disciples' past and upcoming failings, Jesus does not turn away from them. **Look carefully at 14:22-28. What are the clear signs that the disciples' complete failure doesn't end their relationship with Jesus?**

The disciples are unable to see Jesus' death as anything other than a victory for his enemies. What do Jesus' words in these verses say about how he sees it?

Peter has said he would die with Jesus, and James and John declared in 10:38-39 that they could drink the cup Jesus would drink and undergo the baptism he would experience. But now they cannot even so much as stay awake in support of him. This, combined with the desertion and denial that follows, presents their failure as almost total. And yet the first readers/hearers of Mark likely knew about the martyrdom of some of these very same disciples. **If you had only recently heard of Peter's martyrdom, how might that affect your thinking about his earlier failures?**

What sort of man is this Jesus who prays in the garden of Gethsemane? What do we learn of him from his words, and in what ways are we to model his behavior?

Jesus' arrest is a disturbing scene. Judas, who has recently shared table fellowship with Jesus, now uses the trappings of friendship (a kiss) to betray Jesus. Judas is accompanied by "a crowd," and things quickly turn violent and ugly. Notice that Mark says nothing about who cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave. Jesus' followers are not named as the assailant. Neither does Jesus heal the man. For all we know, Mark simply narrates a horrifying mob scene where indiscriminate violence breaks out. Jesus himself notes the absurdity of the situation, an armed mob sent to arrest a teacher. The mob apparently poses a real danger to the disciples and others as is witnessed by the young man who must wriggle out of his clothes to escape them.

For all his power, Jesus does nothing to defend or save himself. Before the council, he now willingly accepts the title Messiah and Son of God. (The terms "Blessed One" and "Power" used in vv. 61-62 are circumlocutions used by Jews to avoid speaking God's name.)

The horrible injustice of the trial scene recalls Old Testament images of a suffering servant and of righteous sufferers in the psalms of lament. **Given the Old Testament's demand for justice for all members of society and the travesty of justice that condemns Jesus, what should Christians' attitude toward injustice be?**

Jesus' statement that his judges " 'will see the Son of Man... coming in the clouds of heaven,' " may be read as a judgment oracle against his accusers. This oracle seals Jesus' fate, and they now torment him, blindfolding him and taunting him to "Prophecy!" presumably about who struck him. The irony is that his accusers' actions confirm Jesus as a prophet. **Thinking back over Jesus' teachings in the last four lessons, how are the events of his trial confirmation that he is indeed a prophet?**

Peter's denial is now narrated. As is his habit, Mark places Peter at the scene, tells of Jesus' trial, and then returns to Peter. His claim to "not know or understand what you are talking about," in v. 68 perhaps echoes Jesus' own words in 8:17 and 21. Peter's failure is terrible, but his pose after it is quite different from that of Jesus' enemies. **What hope can be found in the words, "And he broke down and wept?"**

No doubt Mark's first readers faced the same sort of fear that led Peter to deny Jesus, and Peter's example may be meant to address that. But what of us? **What temptations to deny do we face? What do we do in the face of them?**

Session XI Death and Resurrection; Plus More Failure?

Readings for this session

Mark 15:1-16:20; Psalm 22

Exploring the readings

Following his appearance before the Jewish Council or Sanhedrin, Jesus is brought before Pilate. Pontius Pilate was the highest Roman official in the region of Judea, serving as governor from 26 AD to 36 AD. He protected Roman interests and holdings, made sure the taxes were collected, and commanded the troops garrisoned in Judea. His official residence was in Caesarea, but he often had to come to Jerusalem. He was apparently a brutal man with little use for Jews in general and not the least bit hesitant to execute anyone who might cause trouble.

Why Jesus is brought before Pilate is somewhat unclear. The Jewish Council had the power to execute (though not by crucifixion) and so there is no necessity to bring the Romans into the affair. From a historical perspective, several different reasons have been suggested. Many scholars think that the early Church wanted to downplay Rome's role so as not to offend Rome or potential Gentile converts. In this view, the Jewish authorities are blamed for what is essentially a Roman undertaking. Some even suggest that the Jewish authorities played no role whatsoever, merely becoming scapegoats used by the gospel writers.

Though the gospel writers likely do want to downplay the Roman role, Jesus' own refusal to play the part of revolutionary makes it somewhat unlikely that Rome would have seen him as a huge threat. There must have been some drawing in of the Romans by Jewish leaders who were opposed to Jesus. Quite likely the temple cleansing gives them the ammunition they need to suggest to the Romans that he could stir up the Passover crowds and start some sort of revolt.

It's worth noting that intrigue and jealousies among the different Jewish factions were a regular part of life in Jerusalem in first century Judea. During the revolt that led to Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD, battles between different groups greatly weakened the city's ability to fight the Romans, so it isn't at all surprising that the Jewish aristocracy which controlled the temple apparatus might have enlisted the help of the Romans in getting rid of this rabbi who was stirring up public sentiment against them.

While it is easy, from a historical point of view, to see how some Jewish groups could collaborate with Pilate in having Jesus killed, it is very difficult to reconcile the Pilate of history with the Pilate presented by Mark. That Pilate would consider Jesus innocent when he will not defend himself is remarkable, especially in light of Roman law which assumed the guilt of one who acts as Jesus did.

However, Pilate's behavior looks very similar to that of another authority we've seen in Mark, that of Herod. Think back on the death of John the baptizer in Mark 6:14-29. **What are the similarities between these stories and what point might Mark be making by portraying Herod and Pilate in such similar fashion?**

There has been a disturbing tendency over the centuries to “blame” the Jews for Jesus’ death. (The gospels of Matthew and John have likely contributed to this more than Mark.) Given that Jesus is Jewish and all his followers continue to think of themselves as Jews after Easter, it seems odd that Christian-sponsored persecution of Jews would later develop, but it did. Even though Jesus gives his life for others, people felt a need to blame those who took it.

Perhaps a more productive line of thought would be to consider, not “who” killed Jesus, but what led to his death. **What factors and forces combined to make Jesus’ execution inevitable?**

The reported custom of releasing a prisoner for the people at the time of Passover is unknown outside of biblical accounts, though certainly Pilate had the power to do so. Pilate offers the crowd Jesus’ release, but the chief priests get the crowd to ask for Barabbas. Barabbas is guilty of the crime with which Jesus is charged. (What insurrection he participated in is unknown.) That he committed murder makes him sound like something of a thug and a bandit. The Jewish historian Josephus reports that the Jewish War of 66-74 was fomented by bandits who gained control over Jerusalem prior to the war. If Mark is written after the start of that war, there is a strong sense of irony that the aristocratic priests contribute to their own demise in getting one such as Barabbas freed.

On a different level, the freeing of Barabbas serves as a concrete example of Jesus’ version of greatness in 10:45. **How might this episode be seen as fulfillment of Jesus’ vocation?**

Mark’s gospel never has Pilate actually pass a sentence on Jesus, but no crucifixion could have taken place without that sentence. The order to crucify Jesus places him in the hands of the soldiers. The actual crucifixion narrative both begins and ends with Roman soldiers, though with markedly different behaviors. Mark reports that an entire cohort (a group of 600 or more) mocks Jesus. The irony here is pronounced. **What is the point of this irony?**

The stray note about Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, carrying Jesus’ cross is likely an appeal to witnesses that some of the first Christians must have known. (Likely it is only the crossbeam that Simon carried.) Jesus’ refusal of wine with myrrh likely says something about him being fully conscious and alert for his death.

On the cross, Jesus is the abandoned, suffering servant. (The note that they divided his clothes by lot comes directly from Psalm 22, which Jesus will quote in v. 34.) There is truth in his tormentors' assertion that "He saved others but he cannot save himself" but their assertion that they will believe if only he will come down is obviously sarcasm. Yet by their statement they say something about the type of power they recognize, the sort of King they will follow. **In what ways can we claim to see God's power at work in Jesus on the cross? Can we recognize and embrace this sort of power, what the Apostle Paul labels "power made perfect in weakness?"**

Surrounding Jesus' cry of abandonment are divine signs. "Darkness" has all sort of metaphorical possibilities, but its appearance shows God at work. The tearing of the temple curtain is also a sign, though it isn't clear exactly what curtain this is. Perhaps it was the curtain that separated off the holy of holies. Some suggest that it was an outer veil, embroidered with signs of the zodiac. (Josephus reports such a veil in his histories.) If this is the case then it may be symbolic of a tearing of the heavens, perhaps even an opening of the heavens as occurred at Jesus' baptism.

The big surprise at the end of the crucifixion narrative is the centurion's confession. Presumably he is among the soldiers who have taunted Jesus, and he is part of the contingent that executes Jesus. **What does he see or hear that provokes his statement of faith?**

The note that women see these events from a distance (these women are unknown in Mark's gospel until this point) highlights the absence of the male disciples. The request of Joseph of Arimathea for Jesus' body also points to their absence. Joseph is a member of the council, the body that first condemned Jesus. Just as it was left to an unknown woman to anoint Jesus prior to his death (14:3-9), now a member of the same Jewish aristocracy that orchestrates Jesus' death honors him with a proper burial. Such a picture makes it nonsensical to blame "the Jews."

The women "saw where the body was laid," making the visit on Sunday morning possible. When Sunday arrives, the men are still nowhere to be found. They have fled and apparently have not yet returned. And so now comes the women's turn to fail Jesus.

The "failure" of the women raises the issue of exactly where Mark's gospel ends. The oldest existing manuscripts of Mark end at 16:8, with the last words being, "For they were afraid." That is an unsatisfactory enough ending in English, but it is even more so in Greek where the last word is actually "for," an extremely awkward grammatical construction.

This led to two separate "fixes" which are now in our Bibles, usually labeled "The Shorter Ending of Mark" and "The Longer Ending of Mark." Scholars are nearly unanimous that both of these are additions likely inserted in the 2nd or 3rd century. But while there is agreement that these

“endings” are additions, there is debate about how Mark originally ended. A slight majority argues for 16:8 as the true ending while others argue that the original ending has been lost.

It is not possible to definitively settle this debate, although I’m inclined to agree with those who think 16:8 is the original ending. It seems more in keeping with Mark’s gospel as a whole. He has refused to present Jesus as a king with any sort of earthly glory, and he has consistently highlighted the failure of the disciples. Their fear and lack of faith are now echoed by the women’s fear and disobedience.

Traditional stories of heroes who undergo great suffering and struggle usually provide some reversal at the end where they triumph and turn the tables on their enemies, but Mark appears to resist that. The resurrection is not seen, and the reader is drawn back into Mark’s story to remember Jesus’ promises that he will be raised and later appear to them, to remember Jesus’ transformation with Moses and Elijah which perhaps foreshadowed his resurrection existence, and to remember the promise of a coming day when the Son of Man will return in glory.

Obviously the first readers knew that Jesus had risen, but they didn’t necessarily know the developed Easter narratives we have in Matthew, Luke, and John. **Try to read 16:1-8 as if you knew nothing about Jesus appearing to Mary in the garden and so on. Read it knowing only that Jesus was raised and that the disciples went on to found the Church. How does this ending impact you?**

In 16:7, the angel tells the women, “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee.” **Why is Peter singled out?**

Assuming that 16:8 is the gospel’s end, what does Mark’s hesitance to show us the risen Jesus say about resurrection itself? (You may want to remember Jesus’ own words in 12:18-27 as you answer this question.)

Do you think the early Church’s unwillingness to accept 16:8 as an ending (modern claims of a lost ending may be a similar unwillingness), demonstrate a resistance to accepting Mark’s claim that true power is found in what appears to be defeat, that losing one’s life is truly the way to save it?