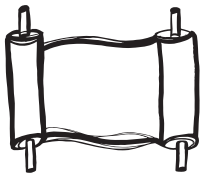

An Introduction to Mark in Lectionary Year B

Mark was the first of the four canonical gospels to be committed to writing. It was written in the shadow of a devastating event of apocalyptic proportions in the latter half of the first century: the Roman destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. We sometimes imagine gospel writers as if they were contemporary novelists: writing in casual clothes, peering at a laptop, hanging out in the local coffee shop, waiting to turn some wispy memory into a truly great story. The truth of the matter is that Mark's gospel was driven by a massive crisis that haunted early Christian communities. Mark's story about Jesus was told precisely in the rubble of Roman destruction.

This historic crisis may explain in part the heaviness and intensity of Mark's gospel narrative. Mark doesn't have the luxury of Matthew's list of biblical ancestors and stories of the holy family (Matt. 1–2). Mark doesn't have time for flourishes, unlike the well-educated Luke, who writes in much better Greek and whose Christmas narratives still evoke a kind of primal coziness twenty centuries later (Luke 1–2). Mark doesn't even have John's introductory *Logos* hymn to prepare readers for twenty-one chapters of solemnity (John 1:1-18). Mark has far too little time for such niceties. He has to help people deal with the shocking destruction of the temple (Mark 13). I suspect that's why Mark's sentences are short and choppy, not florid. The narrative moves at breakneck speed with words like "then," "after this," and "immediately." Mark's scant sixteen chapters contrast with all the other gospels in the canon. Mark is to the point. Mark is in a hurry.

Preachers and worship planners might start worrying at this point. To fill out a church year, don't you need Christmas narratives, ancient canticles, and of course, lots of post-resurrection appearance stories? How can a bare-bones Markan gospel that ends prematurely at 16:8 suffice for the liturgical year? Mark's terse narrative will prove a bit disruptive in year B. But maybe that is not as bad as we think.

Mark's gospel of the gospel

The flip side of Mark's plainness and hurried feel is that the writer has a clearly urgent word to share: the gospel (*euangelion* or "good news"). From the get-go, Mark signals this with a kind of superscription in verse 1: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." Mark's gospel is about the gospel, and the gospel is about Jesus Christ. Put another way, it's about Jesus, and it's only the beginning.

Why just the "beginning"? Mark will take all the verses from 1:2 to 16:8 to fill this out. Yet just thirteen verses after that superscription, this same Jesus, named as the personification of the gospel, shows up preaching not the gospel of himself but, rather, "the good news of God" (1:14). Since it's Jesus preaching, we'd be wise to keep listening. Jesus himself proclaims what this "good news of God" refers to: "The kingdom of God has come near" (1:15). The gospel is just beginning, but like God, it is coming ever closer.

So, to sum up tersely: Mark's gospel is about the gospel. And this gospel is about Jesus Christ. Yet it's also about God's kingdom-purposes. In the chapters to follow, Jesus bears witness to God's reign in his words (teachings and self-disclosures) and deeds (feedings, healings, exorcisms) narrated here. Mark's gospel is important for a time of historic crisis. Yet we need to remember that it's only the *beginning* of the gospel.

From beginning to ending and back again

This distinction about the beginning of the gospel becomes important because the ending of Mark at 16:8 is so confusing. Not only are there no post-resurrection appearances as in the other canonical gospels, but the alternative endings in 16:9-20 are not Markan and were likely added by a later hand (thus, they are in brackets in the NRSVue). What Mark narrates about Jesus' resurrection is sparse and jarring. We have the women going to the tomb; a young man (an angel?) who greets them, points to Jesus' empty tomb, and reminds them of Jesus' promise to go ahead of them to Galilee (16:7; see 14:28); and the women fleeing and saying nothing because they are afraid (16:8). There are no post-resurrection selfies here. And unlike the other three gospels, the women here say *nothing, zip, zilch*. Ouch!

Scholars have puzzled over Mark's abrupt ending for quite some time. The earliest interpreters of Mark (namely, Matthew and Luke) followed the core of Mark's narrative but told the story of the resurrection with greater fulsomeness. They didn't seem satisfied with Mark's narrative ambiguity. Contemporary scholars have posed questions about Mark's abrupt ending: Could we, Mark's hearers, be charged with completing the story the disciples failed to finish? Or, perhaps, does the

countervailing evidence that this narrative is now somehow in our hands and hearts prove that somebody *did* actually tell the good news? These views are tempting.

I tend to follow the view that the ending of Mark is a return to the beginning of the gospel's gospel. The angel's declaration that the risen Jesus is going ahead to Galilee is essentially a return to chapter 1 and the very beginning of Jesus' proclamation of the gospel of God. Now the words of Mark's abrupt ending resound just a bit differently: "He is not here" (16:6), yes, but also, "he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (16:7). What's more, by virtue of his future promise to go ahead, Jesus takes a crowbar to the present to pry open a little room for gospel praxis here and now. *Our everyday life is "Galilee," where we will see him.* As Donald Juel comments, Jesus is "on the loose."[1] It seems his gospel is on the loose too.

Markan themes for preachers and worship planners

Jesus' apocalyptic baptism is programmatic for Mark's gospel.
Scholar Ched Myers draws out the parallels between Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9-11), transfiguration (9:2-8), and crucifixion—specifically, his death and the torn temple curtain (15:33-39). He argues that these three "pillar stories" provide the basic structure to Mark's abrupt gospel. Each of the three scenes has apocalyptic elements (the rending of the heavens, the descending cloud, and the rending of the curtain in midday apocalyptic darkness) and a voice affirming Jesus' identity.[2] This pattern centers Jesus' baptism as both identity-conferring *and* apocalyptic. For Mark, Jesus' baptism confirms his identity as God's Son and reveals God's purposes in dealing with a world off-kilter. In some respects, Jesus' baptism embodies the tradition of proto-apocalyptic writings like (Trito-)Isaiah 64:1: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." God does just that.

Jesus' "reign of God" ministry is an apocalyptic struggle.
This programmatic reality shapes the way Jesus' Galilean ministry is described. Jesus is not merely fixing things, like some itinerant handyman; he is in the midst of an apocalyptic struggle. The exorcisms demonstrate this in a compelling way, but the same apocalyptic struggle also shows up in Jesus' teachings in Mark (such as his words "tying up the strong man," 3:27), his personal struggles (such as his encounter with Satan and the beasts in the desert, 1:12-13), his eschatological feeding events (the five thousand, 6:30-44; the four thousand, 8:1-9), and his rebuking of the storm (4:35-41). Jesus does not merely intellectualize struggles or theorize about the intransigence of evil. He's in the thick of it as part of his "reign of God" ministry, which began in 1:14. In Mark's gospel, this "reign of God" ministry is about Jesus and his struggles, to be sure, but it is also about the God who comes near to God's people in the midst of our struggles.

Mark's narrative is cruciform.
Martin Kähler once wrote that Mark, like all the gospels, is a crucifixion narrative with an extended introduction.[3] That may not be far from the truth. As we noted previously, Mark does not have all the bells and whistles that Matthew, Luke, and John have—and they were likely written years later than Mark. But what makes Mark's cruciform narrative special is the way it so firmly links Jesus' identity, mission, and struggle with the cross. Some scholars have argued that Mark's Jesus aims to keep his "messianic secret." Though he heals, exorcises, and works wonders, he charges those who witness these events to keep silent. Could it be that the apocalyptic fireworks of Jesus' ministry, and even his resurrection, need to be understood *in light of the cross*? Lutheran preachers and interpreters will find in Mark a friend in locating divine revelation not in success or power but in weakness and rejection.

Jesus lives in honest vulnerability.
This is underlined in the remarkable portrayal of Jesus in the run-up to his crucifixion. The Jesus of Mark's gospel is deeply impacted by what he experiences, and he pours out his heart to God in Gethsemane (14:32-42). Jesus' honest vulnerability embraces his humanity in ways that are profound and moving.

Sometimes transformation subjects identities to wrenching change.
A similar humanity shows up in many of the persons whom Jesus engages: the Syrophoenician woman who argues with Jesus' dig about the dogs (7:24-30); the man seeking Jesus' help when the disciples fail to perform an exorcism and heal his son (9:14-29); and the man who is blind and, at Jesus' first touch, only sees people who "look like trees, walking" (8:22-25). Beautiful humanity comes forth in Jesus' transformative interaction with others, who then must sometimes navigate difficult or incomplete change. For preachers and worship planners, these events in Mark allow us to view transformation as a work in progress.

The outsiders get the message; the disciples—not so much.
In Mark, the disciples often fail to comprehend what Jesus is saying and doing. But when that happens, others are not far off who understand in bits and pieces. In Mark's narrative, these are often the people who are healed or from whom demons are exorcised. They can bear witness to Jesus and what he represents in ways the disciples fail to do. Even those whom we might

1 Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 120.
2 Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Orbis, 1988), 391.
3 Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Fortress, 1964), 80.

be inclined to write off, such as the religious leaders with whom Jesus so often clashes, surprise us by their proximity to the reign of God (12:28-34). Mark's valorizing of those outside the disciples' circle should give us pause and ground our hope.

Final note: From Mark to John

Knowing that Mark can be abrupt, worship planners and preachers can welcome the insights of John's gospel at key points in the calendar. John helps to fill out key moments in the Lent and Easter cycles—and even makes an odd cameo appearance in the late summer. The beauty for us is that we don't need to harmonize Mark with John to keep things pretty. Preachers and worship leaders can enjoy the gospel buffet by letting John be John and Mark be Mark.

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