

PREACHING MARK-----YEAR B

The new liturgical year takes us into Mark's gospel. It is a short gospel, lacking the infancy narratives, so we will turn to Luke and Matthew for our Christmas readings. John will fill in Lent and Easter, as well as some Sundays during the summer. But for the most part, from now until next Advent, Mark will be our gospel. It was the first gospel written and had enormous impact on Matthew and Luke. Mark writes in the common Greek, he means to speak to the ordinary believer of his day. He is not writing a historical document, but a faith testimony.

It is short enough to read in one sitting, though we shouldn't let its brevity lead us into thinking it is a simple document. Reading it through from beginning to end reveals the sweep and themes of the gospel. Jesus is the focus of Mark. We note that Jesus starts instructing his disciples in Galilee but, as he meets rejection, he begins his journey to Jerusalem. Mark's gospel is a journey narrative, but not primarily a geographical one. He invites the reader to journey with Jesus, to become one of the disciples whom Jesus instructs on the way to Jerusalem. The instruction does not stop when they reach the Holy City; in fact, there it becomes most intense and takes a turn that repels the disciples. In Jerusalem, through his suffering, Jesus gives his most powerful "class" on discipleship.

Mark wrote around the year 70 A.D. for a community under persecution. His gospel helps his community and us see that those following Jesus have to share in his suffering. Jesus' fidelity to God's will put him at odds with the religious and political leadership of his day and persecution and death were the consequences. Will his disciples stay faithful to his calling even when discipleship comes at a cost? Mark intends to encourage the Christian community to trust that Jesus stays by us to steel our resolve on our journey to Jerusalem--- death and new life. Following Jesus in Mark's gospel will not be easy, we will constantly be confronted by hard choices and the temptation to compromise or run away. On our own we might give in, but with the crucified Lord as our life— we have hope.

Mark states immediately that this is the "good news of Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God." His gospel will unfold the meaning of this opening proclamation for disciples. Like us, they have their strengths and weaknesses. They respond to Jesus' initial call and are sent out and they even do the things he does (6:7 ff.). They are privileged to receive Jesus' private instruction about the approaching kingdom of God. However, as their journey progresses with Jesus, the disciples understand less and less, especially when he predicts his passion and death. Mark shows that Jesus is not what the disciples were looking for in a Messiah. In this gospel, it is the outsiders, strangers and outcasts, who comprehend--- the disciples miss the point entirely.

Why can't Jesus' followers be more heroic? What heroic story have we ever heard that includes such non-heroes as Jesus' followers? The disciples aren't heroes; they are more like us— well intentioned, sometimes misguided and stubborn men and women. One moment they can be admirable and the next so very dense, lacking all comprehension of what is really happening. Discipleship is a big concern in this gospel. If Jesus' own followers, who were "up close and personal," missed his message and misunderstood him, then what chance do we have? The preacher challenges the assembly to let go of our false gods and false notions of discipleship.

We cannot measure our faith by the usual standards of success used in our world.

The disciples do not get the full picture until after Jesus' death and resurrection. Maybe this explains the "messianic secret" motif in the gospel. After Jesus heals someone or expels their demon he tells them not to tell anyone. A curious, almost contradictory request, one would expect he would want the good news of his presence and works to be spread. But, if we read the gospel in its completeness, we notice that the reality of who this savior is can only be grasped by those who follow him to the cross and beyond. As we preach this gospel through the liturgical year, we might invite people to see things from the perspective of the disciples in each narrative. Be their public defender, build the case for their limited human vision and ambition. Help our listeners identify with the disciples' human boundaries and limits; then point to the One who brings the "good news" to the deaf, blind and lame. Mark depicts the human shortcomings of the disciples to help the Christian reader *see* better than Jesus' first disciples.

We disciples learn quickly that Jesus does not solve all of life's problems, take away all diseases, or guarantee worldly success. In fact, for the comfortable, self sufficient and well-placed, Jesus' message may cause, rather than solve, problems. To confess Jesus as Lord is to embrace the One whose life was destined for and over shadowed by suffering and death. His greatness is revealed in his humiliation on the cross. Perhaps this is why Mark has been frequently called a passion narrative with a long introduction. This gospel speaks to those of us who know how complicated and mysterious life often is. It gives us no quick exits from responsibility, self sacrifice and suffering. However, it does help keep our struggles in focus as we come to see how Jesus has walked our same path. Mark shows that baptism has joined Christ and his disciples into a new entity with a different future. Baptism begins Mark's story and the eucharist, the "bread for the journey," is at the end. Our journey has been well provided for, we have Christ at the beginning and each step of the way.

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