

“Jesus the Wonder Worker”

Baptism, Temptation, Announcement of the Kingdom

Mark 1:1-15

Teaching with Authority, Exorcising Unclean Spirits

Mark 1:21-28

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Today our congregation begins an exciting three month journey through the Gospel of Mark. Our purpose is to reconnect our individual and collective hearts and souls with the story of Jesus, so that we can see afresh what God is doing in our lives and in the life of this congregation. I hope that in your heart and mind you have committed to making this journey as a committed participant, and not just an accidental drag-along. I hope you have resolved to read the Gospel of Mark, and declared it publicly for all the world to see by putting your footprint on the journey map in the narthex. That public witness strengthens and encourages us all, as, together, we rediscover what it means to be children of the Heavenly Father.

Each of the four Gospels tells the same story of Jesus' life and ministry, but each Gospel writer presents Jesus his own special light. Matthew is writing to primarily Jewish Christians in Syria, so he presents Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews, the fulfillment of all of God's promises to his chosen people. Mark, however, is a coworker of St. Peter, ministering to the church in Rome. In that congregation, there are Jewish Christians, but there are also many Romans and Greeks—non-Jews, who grew up, not on the stories of Moses and Abraham, but on the stories of great heroes of Greek and Roman mythology—Achilles, Odysseus, Hercules, and the like.

So Mark presents Jesus as an action hero, a wonder worker. In many ways, the theme of the Gospel of Mark is 1:15, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” Jesus is saying, “I'm here. The kingdom of God has arrived. Now, let's see what that looks like.” Mark's Gospel is full of action and drama. He records more of Jesus' deeds than of his sermons or teachings. In Mark, it's one event after another, and Mark's favorite word is “immediately.” Reading Mark is almost like reading one of Frank Miller's graphic novels, or a Marvel superhero comic book, with “wham” and “bam” and “pow” on every page.

Look with me at Mark, Chapter 1. In Mark there is no long genealogy of Jesus, as in Matthew, to set the stage. There are no stories of Jesus' birth, as in Luke, to provide some background. No, Mark announces his theme in 1:1, and instantly, in verse 2, John the Baptist is on the scene announcing that a more powerful one is coming, who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus appears. The story of his baptism is alluded to in v. 9, but not really told. Then in v. 12, the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness to do battle with Satan. Again we get no details about the temptation of Jesus because the next thing you know, Jesus is back in Galilee

announcing that the kingdom of God has come, and calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John, his first disciples.

There is no interlude for training in discipleship. There is no Sermon on the Mount. Instead, Jesus and his disciples appear in a synagogue in Capernaum, where Jesus is accosted by a demon. Jesus rebukes the demon, casting him out of the man he had inhabited. And “at once,” (look at verse 28), “his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

But the pace doesn't slow. V. 29, “As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew,” where they healed Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. That very night, says v. 32, the whole city crowds around him for healing. The next morning, Jesus tries to get in a little private prayer time, but his disciples hunt him down. “Everyone is searching for you,” they say. But Jesus refuses to be bogged down in one place. His reply to the disciples is, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.”

You know what? We're not even out of Chapter 1 yet. It goes on like this for eight chapters, when the climax is finally reached. In Mark 8:27, Jesus takes his disciples out of the land of Israel, up to the Gentile city of Caesarea Philippi. There he puts before them two important questions. “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” You know what? People are still trying to answer those two questions. Every Christmas and every Easter, Newsweek, Time, and other major publications run major stories about who?—Jesus of Nazareth. Over and over again, they investigate his birth, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion, and the mystery of his resurrection. Over and over again, we are confronted with the questions, “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” “What does the kingdom of God look like?”

Well, what evidence did the disciples have? They did not have the ruminations of centuries of scholarship. They did not have the opinions of hundreds of journalists. They had only the evidence of what they had seen. And what they had seen was Jesus in action in four important ways.

First, Jesus had demonstrated his power over sickness. Over and over again, Jesus had healed. He healed lepers and paralytics (end of Mark 1 and beginning of Mark 2). He healed a man with a withered hand and a woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5). He healed a blind man (Mark 8), and Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1), and many, many more who Mark never names and whose stories are never told.

Why was Jesus a healer? What would that tell the disciples and us about him and about the Kingdom of God? All through the Old Testament, the promise is repeated that, when the Messiah comes, he will “bring healing in his wings.” Isaiah (35:5-6) says that when God comes to establish his kingdom, “the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” Healing was a sign that God's kingdom was near. And wasn't that what Jesus had said, “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news?” The kingdom of God has come near. Jesus is still a healer.

Second, Jesus had demonstrated his power over nature. In Mark 4, Jesus stilled a storm which threatened the life of his disciples, and in Mark 6, Jesus came to his disciples walking on the water. Now, there is more to these miracles than what appears on the surface. This, too, is a sign that the Kingdom of God has come. To the ancient Hebrews, the sea was symbol of chaos and danger. They were afraid of the oceans and the deep, and never became a sea-faring people. You can almost hear a sigh of relief in Revelation 21:1 when John speaks of the coming of a new heaven and a new earth, and then adds, “and the sea will be no more.” Only God could control the seas and the storms. Psalm 89:9 praises God with the words, “You rule the raging of the sea; when its waters rise, you still them.”

We don't much fear nature any more. We think we have tamed her power and might. But then there are tsunamis and hurricanes, tornadoes and floods, and we are reminded that we, too, hope for a time when God will forever put to rest the destructive power of nature.

Third, Jesus demonstrated his power over the demons. In Jesus' day it was firmly believed that the world was subject to the rule of Satan and his demonic hosts. There are many in today's world who would deny the existence of Satan. But no one can deny the power of evil that continues to drive people to hate each other and make war. Christians still believe that the old evil foe continues to be at work in all of this. Jesus declares that One stronger than Satan has come and is despoiling his goods. The stories of Jesus exorcising the demons illustrate that the power of evil does not rule the world. God is King, and in God's kingdom, the demons are sent away defeated.

Fourth, Jesus demonstrated his power over death. Mark tells only one story resurrection miracle—the raising of Jairus' daughter in Chapter 5. Death, of course, is the greatest enemy, the final and most powerful result of humanity's sinful rebellion against God. And if the kingdom of God has truly come; if God is truly redeeming his people; if sin is being banished and there is any salvation at all in Jesus, then death will be overcome, defeated and banished. The raising of the daughter of Jairus from the dead is but a down payment for future resurrections, a promise of what is to become true for all of us.

So, based on the evidence of these deeds of Jesus, “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” I don't know about other people, but I agree with Peter, who boldly confessed, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” That's where Mark wants to take us. That's the conclusion he wants each of us to reach in the depths of our hearts and souls. Now, it became very clear very soon that St. Peter didn't really understand what he was saying when he called Jesus the Messiah. But do we ourselves fully understand who Jesus is and what it means to be his disciple? I think not. In Mark, Jesus never forsakes his disciples, even when they fail to understand. He is always there to nurture them to spiritual health. And the promise of Mark is that Jesus is there for us, too.

The public ministry of Jesus began when he was baptized. On that day God declared Jesus to be God's beloved Son, in whom he was well-pleased. What pleased God most was that, in Jesus God's plan for a world without sin, death, sickness, hunger, and danger, were being fulfilled. In Jesus, God and humanity were being reconciled, nature was renewed, the oppressed were being

set free, the sick healed, the hungry fed. That's the kingdom of God. That is the story of Mark. It is a story in which we participate, because we, too have been baptized. We have been baptized into Christ, and so we, too, and God's beloved children. The question is, how do we, as individuals and as a congregation, show to the world that the Kingdom of God has come?