

Preaching in Mark's Voice

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In a groundbreaking study of thirty years ago, Amos Wilder observed the close relationship between a biblical text's form and its meaning. Form, said Wilder, shapes the meaning of a text. As he noted, "The character of the early Christian speech-forms should have much to say to us with regard to our understanding of Christianity and its communication todayWe can learn much from our observations as to the appropriate strategies and vehicles of Christian speech and then adapt these to our own situation."¹

Wilder was referring primarily to short forms of literature, such as the parable, poem, and story. Yet his insights are also valid for lengthier literary forms like the New Testament genre of a gospel. In this article, I want to suggest some cues that preachers can take from the writer of the Gospel of Mark. Mark's message and its well-crafted presentation can instruct those of us who proclaim the good news. If we pay attention to Mark as a preacher, we can discern some directions on how we are to preach.

1. To affirm Mark as a preacher is to affirm that he intended to be heard. Preaching is primarily an aural art. The human voice lifts the word off the page for a particular gathering of hearers. A script or text may be committed to paper for the sake of posterity, but that is not its final destination. Likewise, Mary Ann Tolbert claims, "the Gospel of Mark is an aural text, located in the intersection of speaking and writing."² It is both a written record of Mark's spoken proclamation and a script for the church's continuing speech.

The importance of this aural dynamic cannot be overstated. Hearing the Gospel of Mark is a different experience from simply reading the text. When Mark speaks, we hear him gasping for breath, straining to tell what God has done in Jesus Christ. He uses active verbs, simple nouns, and direct speech. He preaches an urgent and immediate word with abrupt transitions and jolting juxtapositions. Of all the Gospel writers, Mark most exemplifies Reinhold Niebuhr's comment on parish preaching, "I will never aspire to be a preacher of pretty sermons. I'll keep them rough just to escape the temptation of degenerating into an elocutionist."³

At the same time, the writer of the Second Gospel uses established oral techniques that appeal more to the ear than the eye.⁴ He is fond of repeating words (the Greek word for "immediately" shows up twelve times in the first chapter) and phrases ("tax collectors and sinners" appears three times in 2:15-16). Like every good storyteller Mark speaks in patterns of three: three predictions of the passion, three times Jesus finds the disciples sleeping, Peter denies Christ three times, Pilate asks three questions to the crowd. Mark also dangles unanswered questions before the listener to keep mind and heart engaged: "Who is this?" (4:41); "Why does this generation ask for a sign?" (8:12); "Who do you say that I am?" (8:29); "By what authority are you doing these things?" (11:28); "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the Son of David?" (12:35); "Are you the King of the Jews?" (15:2); and "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" (16:3). This preacher grants freedom to his listeners to respond and fill in the gaps.

2. Let us think of Mark as a leader of a congregation. He is not a detached academic

who writes obscure theses for the guild. Neither is he an ultraspiritual prophet who sits apart upon a mystical mountain. Mark addresses a gathering of fellow pilgrims who wonder if there is any good news in a dark, dangerous, demon-infested world. He does not choose to speak timeless verities to all people in all places. He speaks of Jesus Christ to *those* people in *that* place.

Scholars have attempted to reconstruct Mark's community of faith with mixed results. Most have discerned hints of persecution and faithlessness among the people addressed by this Gospel. Fear was in the air. Deserting Jesus (13:50) or running away scared and silent (16:8) had become ever-present possibilities. To put it mildly, the church was in trouble.

In response, the writer sets Christ's ministry both in historical context (what the historical Jesus did) and in the listener's mythical world (what the Risen Lord is doing). Mark indirectly addresses the current circumstances of his church by speaking of "back then" so that his hearers can identify themselves and their challenges. His witness mediates the hearers' experience of Jesus. Occasionally he turns aside to clue in his congregation,⁵ but Mark's voice normally resembles that of a narrator who carefully guides the imaginative eyes of his audience. He directs our gaze to holy wonders and ugly horrors. He invites us to struggle with the profound mystery of God-in-Jesus, a mystery that cannot be flattened out or explained away.

3. Mark the preacher takes seriously the context of his sermon. While he affirms that Jesus has come to proclaim the kingdom of God, he also knows that this kingdom is a disputed sovereignty. A cosmic struggle is waged in the ministry of Jesus. As Fred Craddock points out, "With Jesus comes the word of power to heal, to help, to give life, and to restore. In Mark, a battle is joined between good and evil, truth and falsehood, life and death, God and Satan."⁶

The opposition to God's reign has two different faces. One face is the collective image of the unwieldy forces within creation: demonic powers that overwhelm humans (1:23),⁷ unruly storms of nature (4:37), various diseases (1:32-34), leprosy (1:40), paralysis (2:3), withered limbs (3:1), hemorrhages (5:21), deafness (7:32), blindness (8:22), and death (5:35). The other face is human unbelief that resists God's reign in our world. It is found primarily in religious institutions and their leaders (3:6), crowds (6:6), and individuals (4:38, 14:43, 14:63, 14:68, 16:8). In every chapter, the Marcan Jesus confronts the powers that resist God's dominion and damage human life. James Robinson believes the real issue, both in Mark and in our chaotic world, is *cosmology*.⁸ The primary questions are "What kind of world is this?" and "Who's in charge?"

Mark announces good news on both accounts. After Jesus was baptized, he emerged to see the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him. He heard the heavenly Voice affirm his ministry. Immediately Jesus was driven into the wilderness, a territory where demons lived.⁹ He trounced them on their own turf and was waited upon by the angels. When John the baptizer was arrested, Jesus preached the good news of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled and the reign of God has come near (1:15)." With that announcement, he gathered supporters and initiated a full-scale campaign against the powers and principalities, beginning with an inaugural exorcism in Capernaum (1:21-28). After evil and unbelief swelled up to kill Jesus, God raised him from the dead. The Risen Lord has been turned loose to keep confronting his enemies, until the day they are put beneath his feet.

The bottom line? The world may be haunted by evil, but it belongs to God. We may be in love with our own destruction, but we have been visited and claimed by the strong Son of God. Jesus was murdered, but God is stronger than hatred and death. The Risen Lord is set free from the grave to continue proclaiming God's kingdom in Galilee (16:7) and, through his followers, to all the nations (13:10).

4. This conflict and its resolution-in-progress are keys to understanding Mark's view of ministry. Christian ministry is defined as following Jesus (1:17, 2:14, 8:34) who enacts the word of God's intrusive kingdom. As one Marcan scholar observes, Jesus' eschatological task is the preaching of the (good news). This preaching is more than the poetic eloquence of gifted public speech. This preaching was the eschatological realization, the making immediate, of the kingdom of God . . . Jesus' preaching, and often the preaching of those helped by Jesus, is purposely aligned with healing stories. And in Mark's mythical presentation healing is more than a medical redress for a physical malady, it is a confrontational battle waged against demonic forces. Jesus' preaching-associated victories, in this regard, are every bit as cosmic as they are therapeutic. They represent the power of God's eschatological kingdom.¹⁰

Mark's Jesus proclaims the reign of God in word and deed, thus mandating and underwriting the church's mission. For Mark, good preaching does not fill heads with pious, otherworldly thoughts. It challenges hearers to engage the world as disciples of Jesus. Mark does not preach in a way that reinforces the status quo or increases the building endowment. He wishes to make a qualitative difference in a painful world. Preaching is proclaiming God's intrusive and mysterious reign, announcing a present and coming dominion that is stronger than the ways of death. Mark insists this kind of eschatological preaching is the fundamental work of the church, although in this age such preaching may take the shape of a cross.

5. Mark relies on rhetorical strategies to speak his message to people who may or may not have sufficient character to understand it (4:33). While some think this evangelist is not "a born writer,"¹¹ it is clear he has significant literary abilities. Mark uses his skills, however limited, to undermine opposition to the word of the kingdom and affirm the active faith of the church.

One skill is his use of irony, as Mark juxtaposes differing perceptions of reality in consecutive blocks of the story. For instance, Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection three times (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). Each occasion is met with resistance by the disciples: Peter rebukes Jesus (8:32), the disciples argue among themselves about who is the greatest (9:33-34), and James and John request preferential seating in the coming glory (10:35-40). Jesus uses each opportunity to teach deeper insights about the servant mission of the kingdom (8:33-38, 9:35-37, 10:42-45). But the disciples clearly miss the point. This series of ironic episodes is bracketed by two stories of blind people who are healed by Jesus (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). It is Mark's way of saying that Jesus can heal those who cannot use their eyes; but there is another perceptual blindness that can prevent the church from joining Christ's self-giving, sacrificial mission.

At the same time, Mark prompts the church's belief through the subtle use of refrains and textual echoes. If his hearers pay attention to the unfolding narrative, they will hear things that they have heard before. Careful listeners will reexperience and confirm earlier affirmations of faith.

Mark says, for instance, that the heavens were "torn apart" when Jesus' identity was disclosed at baptism (1:10). The same Greek verb reappears near the cross, as the

temple's curtain is "torn apart" (15:38) at the disclosure of Jesus' identity by a Roman centurion. This reference to the curtain sounds like a non sequitur, until the hearer recalls the previous revelation by the Jordan. In 3:27, Jesus speaks an obscure parable about a strong man who is "bound" and whose house is plundered. The context suggests that Jesus has bound Satan and has come to plunder the house of evil. Yet Mark uses the same verb in 15:1 as Jesus' opponents "bind" him, implying God's strong man is about to be plundered himself. Mark also uses Jesus' exhortation to keep awake "in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn" (13:35) as a way to structure the passion narrative that immediately follows.¹² He implies that every watch of the night offers an opportunity for wakeful action or sleeping renunciation. In telling his listeners about one lost opportunity after another, the writer indirectly challenges them to faithful obedience in their own circumstances.

6. Mark the preacher is disciplined in using an economy of words. He gives spare descriptions and leaves us to savor what few bits he feeds us. Aboard a fishing boat, for instance, Jesus lays his sleepy head on a "cushion" (5:38), evoking a wonderful glimpse of the humanity of Christ. An apparent throwaway detail like "green grass" in the wilderness (6:39) calls to mind the blossoming desert of Isaiah 35 and suggests a new homecoming embodied in the ministry of Jesus. Mark does not have to paint the whole picture; he simply hints at it.

The writer of Mark's Gospel does not worry about sanding down the rough edges of his book. His book is neither polished nor completed.¹³ The writer jumps "immediately" from one episode to another, sometimes without providing context or clarification. Mark believes that mature faith requires the capacity to integrate the pieces.¹⁴ "Indeed," notes Stanley Hauerwas, "I think that one of the things I am trying to learn about the art of the sermon is how you do not want to say too much. For if you say too much, then people do not do any work as part of their hearing of the sermon."¹⁵

Like the person of Jesus he depicts, Mark the preacher entrusts the gospel as a seed sown. He realizes the word of the kingdom will fall on many crusted and undernourished patches of soil, but he trusts some seed will also take root as God allows. As Paul described his own ministry of the word, "Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who gives the growth."¹⁶

Conclusion

Four characteristics will distinguish the preacher who speaks in Mark's voice. First, the preacher will speak with an informed sensitivity to the nuances of oral communication. The preacher will perceive the congregation as a listening assembly of struggling Christians. She will speak to be heard, and she will speak good news.

Second, those who preach in Mark's voice will hold a vested interest in God's coming and present reign as it draws near in Jesus. The weekly sermon may never fully unveil Christ's presence. But it can point ever so subtly to God's new dominion, inviting listeners to claim full citizenship in an alternative commonwealth that Jesus' advent makes possible.

Third, like Mark, the preacher must anticipate resistance to the good news of God's reign. Every sermon that truly proclaims the gospel is an offensive attack in a cosmic battle. It pits the kingdom of God against the kingdom of Business as Usual. Therefore the preacher will attempt to speak a wily word that undermines every opposition to God's gracious and healing power.

Finally, anyone who speaks in Mark's voice must remain patient in waiting for a response. Mark alone depicts a sower who scatters seed and goes to sleep (4:26-29). The sower's future does not depend upon attentive vigilance over the life of the field, but upon an unseen benevolence beyond human control. Therefore, faithful preaching is a threefold act of freedom. It sows the liberating good news of the kingdom, gives ample room for listeners to respond, and ultimately waits for a hidden and unfettered God to harvest a beloved field.

NOTES

¹ Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 4-5.

² Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 90.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1929), 15.

⁴ See Dave Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 35-62, for a more complete summary of Mark's stylistic features.

⁵ In 13:14(b), Mark glances to his hearers and says, "let the reader understand." He also translates Aramaic terms for the reader seven different times.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B*, (Valley Forge, PA, Trinity Press International, 1993), 92.

⁷ Mark may indeed consider all the evil forces on this list to be caused by demons. See the article on "demons" by T.H. Gaster in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 1, 817-824.

⁸ See "The Exorcism Narratives," in James M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1982), 81-90.

⁹ Gaster notes that desert and sea were commonly regarded as the natural habitat of unclean spirits. See *Interpreter's Dictionary*, vol. 1, 821.

¹⁰ Brian K. Blount, "Go Fish! An Eschatological Charge to Confrontational Discipleship," (Unpublished paper delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary, May 19, 1994).

¹¹ Reynolds Price, in the foreword to Rhoads and Michie (xi), writes, "It is part of (Mark's) charm and power that he labors visibly; he is not a born writer."

¹² "When it was evening" the disciples gathered at the table to hear about Jesus' impending betrayal (14:17). Around midnight, Peter, James, and John cannot "keep awake" as Jesus prays in anguished solitude (14:37). At "cockcrow" Peter denies Jesus three times (14:68). "As soon as it was morning" the chief priests and fellow villains lead away Jesus to flogging, mocking, and death (15:1).

¹³ A variety of endings for chapter 16 have been provided by the church. The best manuscripts for the Gospel of Mark end in midsentence at 16:8 with the preposition *gar* ("for").

¹⁴ In a personal conversation, Tom Long has expressed a hunch that Mark 5:1-20, the story of the Gerasene demoniac, may be an important narrative for the Gospel writer's self-understanding. The madman is put back together by Christ's word, an act which creates alarm and astonishment among onlookers. He is clothed, seated, and "in his right mind." The unnamed man is not permitted to clutch Jesus or climb into his boat. Instead he is commissioned to proclaim the Lord's merciful activity. Perhaps this scene foreshadows a certain young man in 16:1-8, likewise seated and clothed (and presumably "in his right mind") who speaks as a witness to an astonishing and alarming act of God.

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Preaching to Strangers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 76.

¹⁶ I Corinthians 3:7.