

A Word from the Gospel of Mark to Cancer Survivors

Gary W. Charles
Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

When Mac and Anne Turnage arrived at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta in 2007, Anne asked me:

“Does Central have a cancer ministry?”

“No, we don’t.”

“Why not?”

I wish I could claim the cancer ministry was my brainstorm, a pastoral response to the relentless presence of cancer in the four congregations I have served. Fortunately, God’s grace is not reliant upon my pastoral instincts or lack thereof. Thanks to Anne’s persistence, the vision of a compassionate company of deacons, and the wise guidance of my colleague, the Rev. Caroline Kelly, soon after my initial conversation with Anne, a cancer ministry was born at Central.

So, what is a cancer ministry? Each month, a group of cancer survivors and family and friends of cancer survivors gather for worship, for mutual support, and to explore different dimensions of living with cancer. They covenant to pray with and for each other, and they willingly serve as an information, spiritual, and educational community for those who are first hearing the life-changing words: “You have cancer.” I am not a cancer survivor, nor are some regular participants in this ministry, but given the devastating preponderance of this disease, each one of us is touched by cancer.

In January 2011, I was asked to bring “a word from the Gospel of Mark to cancer survivors.” I love the Gospel of Mark. I have spent countless hours studying the first Gospel, writing about this Gospel, and teaching and preaching from this Gospel. In 2003, Westminster John Knox Press published a book that Brian Blount and I wrote, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. Even so, when Anne Turnage asked me to bring a word of hope to cancer survivors based on the Gospel of Mark, I swallowed hard. I had never engaged the Gospel of Mark based on such a provocative, fascinating, and pastorally important question.

When I met with the cancer ministry on January 8, 2011, I began with a brief overview of Mark’s Gospel and how it tells the story of Jesus.¹ The presentation below is one way to wrestle with this question. By God’s grace, may the words below bring a word of hope from the Gospel of Mark for cancer survivors.

Presentation – January 8, 2011:

What does the Gospel of Mark have to say to cancer survivors? Not a single thing. The concept of “cancer” was unknown to Mark, and if we approach the question simply in a literal, wooden way, this will be the shortest meeting yet of Central’s Cancer Ministry.

So, I suggest that we reframe the question in such a way that it will be hard to keep Mark quiet. If we understand cancer as something demonic, a destructive and relentless assault on the human body that God created and called good, then Mark

not only has something to say, but he has many things we need to hear.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus encounters the demonic. It starts in the first chapter of this Gospel and does not end until the crucifixion in Chapter 15. There are many battles in the Gospel of Mark, but none more persistent than Jesus battling the demonic. Whether in the synagogue as in Chapter 1 in which Mark establishes the definitive authority of Jesus over against the perceived authority of the synagogue leaders or whether it is a body of demons threatening the life of Jesus and his disciples in a boat by stirring up a chaotic sea at the end of Chapter 4 or whether it is a legion of demons occupying a Gerasene that Jesus relocates to a herd of pigs in Chapter 5 or whether it is at the end of Chapter 7 when Jesus tells a theologically astute Syro-Phoenician woman, "The demon has left your daughter," Mark pits the in-breaking healing power of the reign of God present in Jesus against the life-destroying power of the demonic rampant in the world.

In Mark's Gospel, God's reign is *eyyus* – at hand, all around us, working within and beyond us to accomplish God's redemptive purpose as incarnated in Jesus. At the same time, the demonic is all around us, trying to tear down God's good work, personal, social, and political. Toward the close of Chapter 15 when Jesus cries out, "Eloi, Eloi, lama, sabachthani," it appears that once more the demonic has proven its supreme reign in the world, but when the women come to the empty tomb on Easter morning, they are pointed back to Galilee and ahead to the risen Christ who will lead all who follow beyond the demonic and into the risen life.

In our post-Enlightenment age, it is tempting to dismiss Mark as a non-sensible remnant of ancient thought, a period piece that has little to say to our particular period in history. Mark knows nothing of technology, of i-phones and i-pads, of C.A.T. and M.R.I. and P.E.T. scans, of medical research done at such amazing centers of research as Johns Hopkins and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Is there anything that a gospel fascinated with demons – often talking demons, no less – can possibly say to us today, much less to survivors of cancer?

If you spend much time with Mark, you will find yourself out of breath. He is in a hurry to say what he has to say, and he waits to see how readers will finish the story of Jesus. Will we believe, truly believe, that God's redemptive, healing, loving purpose will defeat even the most intransigent demonic force? Reading Mark through this lens, we might find ourselves asking:

—Is demonic cancer a disease that strips us not only of our health, but our identity and integrity, a disease to which we can only submit? Or in cancer, as in every arena of life, is the reign of God at hand, battling the demonic in the world and in us, intent on the day when the demonic sees its last conquest?

—Is the question for us not really one of surviving cancer, but living fully and faithfully with and beyond cancer, knowing that we are claimed by the One who stared down the demonic, was tortured by the demonic forces of Pilate, and who by God's resurrecting power shut up the demonic?

There is something about the word "cancer" that makes me want to shout. It makes me cower in fear. It makes me dread its unwanted and unplanned grip on me. It makes me want to bow down to the gods of science to rid me of this dreaded interloper. Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus asks the crowd, his disciples, and the diseased "to believe" that the will of God is for healing and restoration despite the persistent "cancer" of the demonic.

There is a danger in reading Mark too literally at this point, as if to suggest that those whose cancer does not move into remission and who do not survive are of inferior faith. But there is an even greater danger in dismissing Mark's theological conviction that in Jesus, God's redemptive, healing, barrier-busting love is loose in the world. I doubt that if writing his Gospel today Mark would eschew chemotherapy or surgery or radiation for the treatment of cancer, but I suspect Mark would see each of them as instruments of God's healing, redemptive, in-breaking purpose.

As the Gospel closes in 16:8, the women who visit the tomb and are visited by a young man there leave silent and terrified by what they have heard. How many of you and how many people you know have left a doctor's office silent and terrified by what you have heard, by adding cancer to your list of uninvited intruders in your life?

The women at the tomb in Mark, though, had not heard demonic words, but life-saving words, and yet these words were so overwhelming that they were left stunned and speechless. As readers reach 16:8 in Mark's Gospel, they look around for those who will announce the risen life of Christ to a world encased in the demonic? Gone are the male disciples, and the faithful women in this Gospel are now terrified and silent. So, who will proclaim that even terror, torture, death, and the demonic cannot confine the life-restoring intent of God?

My prayer for all cancer survivors is for faith-filled trust that the reign of God is at hand, for the will to follow the risen One who leads us to confront the demonic in and around us, and for the confidence that the last word in life and death will be the promise of risen life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Notes

A brief introduction to reading Mark:

1. Mark was written in an apocalyptic time that centered around the imminent destruction of the temple in 70 CE or just after its destruction;
2. Mark is an extended sermon, attuned to the ear, designed to enlist disciples to follow Jesus, using rhetorical and literary devices and conventions common in Greco-Roman rhetoric and literature;
3. Mark establishes a privileged position with the reader, revealing the true identity of Jesus to the reader in the opening verse of the Gospel: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God";
4. Mark does not divide the world into sacred and secular realms, but believes God is sovereign over all of life;
5. Mark uses rhetorical devices to establish a theological sense of urgency in chapters 1-10 that slows to a dreadful pace with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in 11:1;
6. Mark's end to the Gospel in 16:8 is not a piece of the original ending, but is the intended ending, asking readers to follow the risen Jesus to Galilee, to be disciples who "finish the story."