

Whose Work? Whose Healing?

Mark 7:31-37

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The Text

Sermons preached from the Gospel of Mark these days tend to be far too timid. By this, I do not mean that preachers avoid prophetic and justice themes, navigating instead closer to the safe riverbanks of the personal and spiritual—though this is probably true, as well. What I mean is that we preachers often sand away the most radical aspect of Mark’s Gospel, namely that Mark presents Jesus as a divine warrior (I am aware that “warrior” language is out of vogue, but this is right on my point.) doing battle with the powers of death that hold humanity captive and in thrall. Almost unaware of what we are doing, many of us who preach on Mark perform a subtle downshifting from Mark’s vision, namely, what God is doing, performing, and enacting to redeem the world through Jesus, to our own vision of our responsibilities and potential, namely what *we* are doing (or supposed to be doing) in the world as ethical and righteous folk. In short, in our sermons Mark’s theology frequently gets reduced to our ethics.

Ironically, some students of Mark want to argue just the opposite: that Mark’s Gospel is indeed all about our ethics. For them, the starting point is the widely-accepted probability that the original manuscript of Mark ended at Mark 16:8, which means that Mark concludes with a strange non-ending, one that depicts the women at the cemetery on Easter morning fleeing from the tomb in terror, amazement, and silence. If Mark ends *that* way, then it is clear that Mark’s Gospel, the earliest Gospel, includes no post-resurrection accounts.

This odd fact gets treated in turn as *prima facie* evidence that Mark is not concerned about the theological idea of the resurrection.¹ After all, goes the argument, since Mark omits the post-resurrection narratives, he must want to direct our gaze away from the resurrection itself, with all its fussing about the empty tomb and the character of the risen Christ, and toward the this-earthly Jesus who taught and healed and broke the rules of pious religious people. This Jesus, they say, is a mentor, a sage-like teacher and role model for us as we go about doing our own teaching, healing, enacting justice, and shattering a few pious conventions ourselves. This argument gets further entwined into a larger argument that Mark, the original Gospel, points us toward a Christianity more concerned with faithful living than correct believing, with orthopraxis and not with orthodoxy.

Aside from the fact that this view of ourselves as ready followers of Jesus’ wise mentorship and good ethical example turns out to be naïvely optimistic and ultimately self-congratulatory, it is also untrue to the Gospel of Mark. As recent studies of that Gospel have shown, Mark is designed as an exercise in re-reading (or, perhaps truer to its own setting, re-hearing).² What this means is that Mark is constructed as an endless loop, one that always sends readers and hearers hurtling out the enigmatic back door and around again to the front door of the Gospel for another go at comprehension. Mark does not expect his readers fully to understand what is happening

when they experience the Gospel the first time through. In fact, the disciples, who are stand-ins for the readers of the Gospel, are consistent in their half-awareness and misunderstanding of Jesus. Only when readers and hearers have made it to the end of the story can they return to the beginning and possibly recognize what was hidden from their eyes the first time through.

So, when the white-robed figure outside the empty tomb tells the women, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:7), everyone—James, John, Peter, *and the readers and hearers*—everyone is sent back to Galilee, back to the beginning of Mark, back to square one. Now that you’ve been to the cross, now that you’ve seen the empty tomb, and now that you’ve heard the declaration, “He has been raised!”, now go back and re-visit the whole Gospel. This time through, you will see it with new eyes. This time it is the risen one who heals the leper, casts out the demon, and tells the parable of the seeds. Now it is the eschatological and risen Christ who tells the dead little girl to “be raised” and who calls Peter “Satan,” not because he muffs some fine point about Jesus’ mission, but because, we now see, he is on the wrong side of the apocalyptic battle between God and the powers of death that is raging all around him.

Understood this way, far from any notion that Mark is disinterested in the resurrection, it can now be seen that the resurrection and the power of the risen Christ are indeed his main interests. Far from the idea that there are no post-resurrection appearances in Mark, it is now clear that every single story in Mark’s Gospel is a post-resurrection appearance. What God was doing on the vast cosmic level through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, namely defeating the old serpent of evil and death, we can now see God was also doing on the local level as Jesus proclaimed the gospel, rebuked the sea, cleansed the leper, and raised the little girl.

This brings us to the following story in Mark, one that appears in the lectionary in the long march through Markan lections in the Sundays post-Pentecost:

Mark 7:31-37

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

A domesticated view of Mark’s Gospel will pound down this incident into a morality play. It becomes an example story of how the sage Jesus handles an ethical dilemma that people in all societies face every day, namely, how to respond to the presence of a person with a disability, as represented by the man who was deaf and mute. In contrast to the way this unfortunate man’s own society treated him, pushing him to the margins, Jesus separates the man from that environment in order to focus

his full attention upon him and to provide for him compassionate healing. A sermon on this text can spend some time at the beginning speaking with insight and conviction about the barriers our society constructs for people with disabilities and then issue a call for our own compassion and redress, modeled after Jesus' own action.

To approach the sermon this way might make for a good sermon, but, for all the attention to justice issues, still a timid sermon, and not one faithful to the Markan text. In Mark, the man who is deaf and mute is not a symbol for those marginalized by society. He is instead a symbol of every human being when humanity is seen from an apocalyptic perspective. What he cannot hear and what he, therefore, cannot speak, is the gospel, and the reason he cannot hear and speak the gospel is not that he is blocked by some mere social barrier that needs dismantling. That may well be a good goal, but it will come way down the road. What he needs now is not bland chirping about inclusivity; what he needs is an exorcism. He needs to be liberated from the power of death.

A domesticated reading of this text washes out all the strange bits—the spitting, the tongue touching, the placing of fingers in ears, and the command “Ephphatha” shouted into the chaos—as sediment left over from the obsolete first-century mythological cosmos. But from a Markan point of view, these strange elements are at the heart of the story. They are signs that Jesus is not just doing a good deed for the man but instead making apocalyptic warfare on the reign of death that holds sway over him and over us all. For Mark, all humanity is caught up in something like the “Stockholm Syndrome,” named after the hostages in a Stockholm bank robbery who, after their release, defended their captors, identified with them, and showed affection for them. We human beings, in Mark's view, are not simply captive to sin and death but enthralled by our captors, ready to identify with them and to defend them. Therefore, any notion that we can be made whole through education or self-enlightenment is hopeless. The powers that hold us under their sway must be defeated.

Thus, preaching Mark in our culture is, as they say, a tough putt. How to make sense in a secularized, individualistic, optimistic culture of the reality that we are actually prisoners of war, utterly in need of God's liberating force in Christ? I confess that the task seems immensely daunting, but I must also confess that it also seems urgently necessary. The sermon below is my stammering attempt to preach a Markan text faithful to this apocalyptic perspective. The fact that the text appears in the lectionary in 2015 on Labor Day weekend seems to me to offer an additional possibility: namely the prospect of making it clear that in this story it is God's labor that takes the fore, not ours.

The Sermon

Forty years ago, what has turned out to be one of the most celebrated jazz recordings of all time was made. Involving just two musicians, the incomparable Duke Ellington on piano and the virtuoso Ray Brown on the upright bass, the original vinyl disc has become a rare and prized collector's item for jazz enthusiasts. The reason for this is not simply the excellence of the musicians and the sublime music, impressive as those are, but the unusual way the album was recorded. The studio was set up like a living room to encourage an informal, impromptu mood. Brown stood with his bass next to Ellington's piano, and the microphones were placed close to the musicians, in fact very close, so close that if you listen carefully you can hear...well, *everything*.

As one jazz fan put it, “Ray Brown is right there across the living room fighting with the bass to get out every note. You hear grunts and fret board buzz. You can hear Duke moving around in his chair and even breathing.”³ In other words, what makes this recording remarkable is not only that you hear the music but also that you hear the music being *made*.

In an interesting way, so it is with the Gospel of Mark. It is as if the writer of Mark is recording the music of the gospel as performed by Jesus, and he puts the microphones close to the action, perhaps too close for some dainty tastes. If you listen carefully you can hear...well, *everything*. In Mark, we don’t get a tidy Jesus. We get a sweaty, embodied, guttural Jesus. We hear the brute physicality of the gospel being performed. We hear him groan and grunt as he works. When he confronts his opponents, we don’t merely read his words; we hear the anger rise in his throat. He doesn’t just dialog with the Pharisees; he sighs deeply as he speaks. When he prays at Gethsemane, beneath the prayer we can hear the unmistakable rustling of distress and agitation, and on the cross Jesus does not go quietly, but with a loud cry and a violent expelling of breath.

In Mark, we don’t just hear the gospel; we hear the gospel being *made*. The reason for this, I think, is that Mark does not think of Jesus as a debonair sage, rolling around the hills of Galilee uttering witticisms and sweet spiritual truths. In Mark, Jesus does not beckon us to better living through inclusivity, niceness, commitment to diversity, or any of the other virtues we self-righteously believe we already possess. He comes instead to do battle with those forces of death that still hold us in thrall, still hold us helplessly and hopelessly captive. In Mark, Jesus has come to do combat, combat with the evil that tyrannizes the whole creation, battle with the old snake that has coiled itself around humanity. The Jesus of Mark doesn’t come to give us wise advice for happiness, as if we could and would follow wise advice if it were only offered to us; he comes as a liberator to storm the prison walls of hell, to break us loose from the shackles that bind us, and to set us free.

It would be fair to say, I think, that almost every story in the Gospel of Mark is both an exorcism story and a resurrection story. Even when Jesus is teaching and healing and feeding and telling parables, he is taking on the demonic forces, wrestling them to the ground, casting them out of creation. This is hard, sweaty work, and in Mark’s Gospel we not only hear the gospel, we hear the grunts and groans of Jesus *making* the gospel.

Here’s a case in point: when Jesus and the disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee and a violent storm whips up threatening to swamp the boat, Jesus doesn’t merely “still the storm,” as we sometimes describe it. This is not a Weather Channel special; this is not merely a meteorological disturbance; this is a *theological* disturbance. This storm is the unruly, random, and malicious chaos in creation whipped to an evil fury. So, Jesus screams into the howling winds, rebuking it—that’s the word Mark uses—rebuking it, “Shalom!” In other words he is not calming the storm; he’s casting the demonic out of it—to be literal, he is denouncing the hell out of it.

Or again, when Peter misunderstands what Jesus has to say about the cross, Jesus does not gently touch his cheek and say, “Well, Peter, the cross is hard to understand, I know. But you will...maybe another year of seminary, and you’ll get it.” No, Jesus sees where Peter’s resistance is coming from, sees the old snake coiled around him, and once again we can hear the sound of rebuke—that word again, *rebuke*—rising in

Jesus' throat, "You get out of my way, Satan. You're not on God's side here." You can hear the sound of gospel being made here.

Jesus is about out there doing God's work, breaking the power of death and liberating creation, and this is very hard work. We can hear Jesus grunt and groan as he strains to break loose the stubbornly rusted bolt of a captive creation. Sometimes in Mark the work almost seems too much, even for Jesus. Mark says he went to Nazareth and ran into a wall of hostility and unbelief, and Mark goes on to say, "He could do no deed of power there." At least for that day, the rust was too thick, the bolt too clenched, and Jesus planted his legs, put his back into it, groaned in exertion, but the bolt would not give.

Which brings us to the story of the healing of the deaf man with a speech impediment. Now, one way for us to receive this story is as a typical story of healing. We have a man who has a disability; Jesus heals the disability; the community is overjoyed by this, a joy that exceeds all bounds. To receive the story this way would allow us to feel sorry for the man (he has a disability), to feel good for the man (he gets healed), to feel joy over Jesus' deep compassion, and maybe even to be inspired to do works of compassion ourselves. If *that* were the way we received this story, it wouldn't be terrible—but it wouldn't be *Mark*. Because in Mark the stakes are higher.

In Mark, this man does not have a disability that sets him apart from the rest of us who don't happen to have that disability. In Mark, this man is deaf in the same way that all of us are deaf. He doesn't have a "disability"; he has the human condition. Because, theologically, what he can't hear is not the sound of his wife's voice or his children playing or the psalms being chanted in the synagogue. Theologically, what he cannot hear is the one thing that Mark wants us all to hear from the mouth of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14). He can't hear the gospel, and because he can't hear the gospel, he can't speak the gospel.

He's deaf and mute in the ways we are all deaf and mute. Take me, for example. I know what the gospel has to say about consumerism. I know that the gospel tells us that consumerism is not just about shopping or possessions, but that it is idolatry, a power that holds us in its thrall and grip, and defeats us with lies about meaning and hope and joy. I know what the gospel says about consumerism. But when I am in *Best Buy*, there is a moment when that 84-inch, ultra high-def TV speaks to my heart, saying, "I believe I can give you some joy and make your life full." I know what the gospel says about consumerism—I just can't hear it.

I also know what the gospel says about trouble. It says, when the winds are strong and the waves are high, fear not. The embodied, incarnate *shalom* of God is right here with us. I know what the gospel says about trouble. But when I see my neighbors upside down in their mortgages and losing their houses, when I worry that the economy will collapse again and even more painfully, when I see my beloved church being battered apart by the winds of suspicion and the waves of hate, something wells up in me that cries out, "Lord don't you care that we are perishing?" I *know* what the gospel says about trouble. I just can't *hear* it.

And I know what the gospel says about hope. I know that Jesus stood outside the tomb, having conquered sin and death and said, "Do not be afraid." But when I look into the face of my aging father, or I look into the mirror, or I think about my wife and children and grandchildren, I know that all of my loving relationships are

so vulnerable, something deep inside me trembles, and I am afraid. I *know* what the gospel says about hope. I just can't *hear* it.

And I also know what it would take for me to hear the gospel. I know what it would take...; it would take a miracle. And so, when they brought to Jesus the man who couldn't hear the gospel, Jesus sighed inside. This was hard work. Jesus did not touch him gently. He thrust his fingers into his ears, spat, touched his tongue, and shouted into the raging chaos, "*Ephphatha!*" —*Be opened!*" It would take a miracle, a mighty act of God, for me to hear the gospel, for any of us to hear the gospel. That is what it would take, and this is what we get.

For many people, perhaps the least favorite hymn in the book is C. Austin Miles' nineteenth-century pious classic "In the Garden." Personally, I share their antipathy. This hymn has saccharine, sentimental lyrics and is usually sung to a banal la-la-la tune. Other than that it's all right, I suppose. I have sung it many times, of course, but I've just never been able to hear much gospel in it. This is partly because of liturgical taste and partly because my ears are stopped up.

I realized the stopped up part when I read what liturgical scholar Tex Sample wrote about it:

I remember once in class I was making fun of the song "In the Garden." Not only did I parody its lyrics as hopelessly individualistic, privatistic, and full of escapist spirituality, but I launched into singing it in a nasal voice with affront forethought. I was on a roll until after the class when a thirty-five-year-old woman approached me and told this story: "Tex, my father started screwing me when I was eleven and he kept it up until I was sixteen and found the strength somehow to stop it. After every one of those ordeals I would go outside and sing that song to myself: I go to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and he walks with me and talks with me and he tells me that I am his own. Without that song I don't know how I could have survived. Tex, don't you ever ever make fun of that song in my presence again."⁴

"I come to the garden alone...and the voice I hear falling on my ear...tells me I am His own." How is it possible that a girl being molested by her father could hear the gospel that she belongs body and soul to Jesus Christ her Lord and that she is treasured by God? It would take a miracle.

Holding on to faith and hope in this kind of world is hard work. But the one who is working hardest of all is the risen Christ, who stands among us every day and shouts into the chaos, "Be opened!"—opening our ears so that we can hear the gospel and touching our tongues so that we can speak that truth.

Notes

1. See, for example, Robin R. Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 85.
2. One of the best and clearest presentations of the "re-reading" view of Mark is Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Echoes and Foreshadowings in Mark 4-8 : Reading and Rereading," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 112/2 (Summer, 1993), 211-230.
3. See Thomas G. Long, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, 126/17 (August 25/2009), 21.
4. Tex Sample, *Ministry in an Oral Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 78-79.