

# *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: The Power of Love Among Us*

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In the shadow of empire, the Gospel of Mark speaks of the powerful presence of God in bold and challenging ways. Known for its brevity and swift pace, Jesus' journey to the cross, and his abrupt absence from the tomb, Mark expects a great deal of its readers and hearers—but not without offering hope and comfort as well. Composed near the time of the Jewish-Roman war amid circumstances of great hardship and sustained trauma (66-70 CE), we hear good news proclaimed as a new kind of power let loose in the world. It is a power that is both tender and resolute in following its course; sometimes subtle yet always dynamic; seldom understood and often feared; sturdy and loving. While desolation is real, consolation is also felt through the compassionate words and deeds of Jesus Christ.

Mark's provocative and unsettling stories permeate the weeks following Pentecost in Year B of the lectionary. With the promise of Christ's comforter and guide among us, we make our way through this season keenly aware of ongoing political discord, COVID and its variants, race-related violence, climate crises, and economic hardship bearing down upon us. Conspiracy theories and fear mongering flood the internet. Relief packages come and go. Political parties rise and fall. Amid the chaos and grief, we need One who not only knows us but loves us, whose steadfast love and spirited presence guide us, whose wisdom and strength empower us. It is clear from the opening chapters of Mark that the reign of God comes through the ministry of Jesus Christ (1:14-15), and by the end of its pages, Christ's messengers are summoned to seek him time and again (16:6f).

Among the themes represented in the Markan texts designated for Proper 5-28, the most important for the church and wider world today include the *nature of divine power*, the *reign of God*, *ministries of exorcism and healing*, the *reality of suffering*, and running through all of these is the steadfast *love of God* calling us to serve one another.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, *power* is understood differently than what much of the world and society teach us. Stripped of economic security and political clout, Jesus does not pursue possessions, profit, or prestige. He does not vie with others for personal influence or social position but uses parables, divine wisdom, and healing touches to engage those around him. Jesus' acts of mercy also stir controversy and concern. Our first encounter with Mark in Proper 5 reveals the highly contentious nature of Jesus' power (3:20-25). Having witnessed his mighty acts of healing and exorcism, his family members suspect that Jesus is insane, while scribes accuse him of being possessed by the ruler of demons. In his response, Jesus warns of a house divided, and his words strike an ominous tone in our current U.S. political climate as we witness the disintegration of cherished norms of civility. Just as Jesus acknowledged the bitter reality of dissension at home, if we look past these verses to what follows, we hear the gravest warning of all: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an eternal sin. Denying Jesus' divine, life-giving power and the ongoing movement of God's

Spirit among us forecloses all hope of moving beyond our self-enclosed enclaves and entrenched systems of oppression.

In contrast to the power plays we regularly witness among politicians and local authorities and as anxious eyes seek solace in record-breaking stock prices, the power that Jesus exerts is not based on political maneuvering, big money, or transactional relationships. Largely discounted by his own townspeople (6:1-6, Proper 9), Jesus' ministry of compassion and that of his disciples nevertheless caught the attention of King Herod. The king's lustful pursuits and arrogant self-assertions resulted in one of the greatest abuses of power imaginable: the beheading of John the Baptist who dared question Herod's judgment and decry his abuses (6:14-29, Proper 10). Insecure and fearful of divine retribution, Herod imagined John revived in the person of Jesus who, like his deceased cousin, embodied entirely different standards of behavior than those of the selfish and violent king. Leadership meant something entirely different to Jesus who foretold the inevitability of his own suffering (8:31-33, Proper 19) and instructed his disciples to take up their cross and follow him (8:34-38). Urging humility, Jesus taught them that true greatness resides in those who do not seek the highest places of honor but the least places of notice and who act as servants of all (9:33-37, Proper 20).

Nearly every chapter of Mark and several of the lectionary readings for this season continue the theme of power upended. In 4:35-41 (Proper 7), Jesus rebukes the wind during a storm at sea, demonstrating his power over natural forces. In chapter 5, he overcomes demonic forces (5:1-20), illness, and even death itself (5:21-43, Proper 8; see below). As Jesus and his disciples are about to enter Jerusalem, James and John want to sit at his right and left hands in glory, but Jesus insists that they do not know what they seek (10:35-40, Proper 24). After they enter the city, Jesus warns his followers against religious attention-seekers adorned in ornate clothing and performing lengthy prayers, none of which count as anything in the divine economy compared to the widow's copper coins (12:38-44, Proper 27). Even the great stones of the Temple itself will be overturned just as the monuments and structures of our own greatest achievements are forever subject to divine judgment and recall (13:1-8, Proper 28). All of this points to a radically different understanding and embodiment of power, both divine and human. Jesus teaches that leadership and discipleship are acts of servanthood grounded in humility. There is no place for counterfeits or pretenders—which is good news indeed for emerging generations and others in the church who long for religious and spiritual integrity among our leaders and members. Calls for authenticity and the careful consideration of how our words match our deeds and how our minds follow our hearts resonate deeply with Jesus' teaching that we are not defiled by what appears on the surface of things but what lies deep within our hearts and intentions (7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23, Proper 17). The corruption of relationships, churches, and communities comes from the poison we carry within. It is not enough to accept platitudes or propositions of faith far removed from the concerns of this aching and ailing world: we must partner with God who is the source of life-giving power and whose Spirit breathes within our hearts, urging us to love and care for all creation and its creatures. God knows that we cannot address the needs of this blessed and broken world without partnering with our surest source of life-giving, loving power already moving in our midst, the Spirit of Christ.

The various teachings that challenge the powers that be are first prefaced by Jesus'

opening announcement of *God's reign* (1:14-15). In the fullness of time, Jesus has come to proclaim God's intentions and inaugurate the kingdom of God in sure and surprising ways. The good news that he heralds is as near as his breath, as sure as his stride. But his upsetting message calls for rhetorical strategies that fit the kingdom's subversive and sometimes enigmatic nature. Thus, Jesus preaches with parables to those who have ears to hear. Like seeds scattered on the ground that mysteriously sprout and grow and the tiniest of mustard seeds that produce the largest of bushes, Jesus' words and deeds will bear fruit and multiply, confounding those who refuse to notice the impending harvest (4:26-32, Proper 6). The very few parables recorded in Mark provide us with more than metaphors for unveiling the hidden meaning of God's reign: Jesus' parabolic teachings about the kingdom are a necessary means of accessing its elusive nature since part of their power is to reveal our own resistance to divine rule. Our need for further explanation (from Jesus as well as today's preachers) testifies to our ongoing participation in its fullness and dissemination among us (3:33-34, Proper 5).

For those who have become inured to visions of economic prosperity, religious purity, and social or political prestige, as well as those who find themselves on the outside of such standards, Jesus' proclamation of God's reign and new manifestations of divine power exercised through servanthood and acts of loving kindness are good news indeed. The reign of God that Jesus Christ proclaims not only challenges the powers that be but offers hope to everyone hounded by hopelessness, fear, and/or despair. It is a call to respond to divine love and mercy by following Christ's standards of outreach and care for others. God's will and ways on earth are grounded in compassion not only for those who follow (6:30-34, Proper 11) but for all who suffer and need divine aid (6:53-56, Proper 11).

Remarkably, Jesus teaches that the reign of God belongs to those who embrace it like a child (10:14, Proper 22). They do not belong to the kingdom, but the kingdom belongs to them. This much-overlooked reorientation to the reign of God confounds those who believe that we become its citizens by proving our worth or paying our dues. God does not look for outward signs of success but a heart filled with love and a willingness to live as vulnerably as children who daily realize their dependence on others. Immediately after Jesus embraces children, Mark tells us of another who seeks his guidance and a place in God's realm. A wealthy man kneels before Jesus to ask the Good Teacher what he must do to inherit eternal life (10:17-22, Proper 23). Jesus rebukes the title and reminds him of the last six commandments of the Decalogue, all of which focus on right behaviors (cf. the first four commandments honor God's sovereignty). After the man confesses that he has fulfilled all of these teachings since the time of his youth, Jesus evidently senses the man's sincerity as he looks at him and loves him (10:21). It is the only occasion in Mark's Gospel when we are told of Jesus' love for a particular person. No doubt because of this love, Jesus further teaches the man that he lacks one thing: with five imperatives he challenges him to go, sell, and give away his wealth to the poor, then come and follow him. His insistent tone commands our attention as Jesus challenges the man to reach beyond the Decalogue to reorient his life anew. Eternal life (or, as Jesus calls it in 10:23, "the kingdom of God") is not inherited but freely given by God just as we, too, are called to freely give all of ourselves to others.

If all of this seems too costly or difficult to do, we are not the only ones to think

so. As the man walked sadly away, Jesus declared that it is indeed difficult for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God (10:23-26). When his disciples asked who can possibly hope to be saved, Jesus proffered one of the gospel's greatest promises: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible"<sup>1</sup> (10:27). It is God alone who assures our well-being. There is no earthly sign of success that guarantees our salvation, no accomplishment that proves our worth. In fact, whatever goods we possess—whether material, social, intellectual, or spiritual—may come to possess us unless they are freely given in service to God and others.

Among the surest signs of Jesus' divine sovereignty are his acts of *exorcism and healing*. As expressions of care and compassion, they permeate Mark's account which includes three summaries of his healing power (1:32-34; 3:7-12; 6:56, Proper 11). Throughout the Gospel, several events bear witness to God's rule by overcoming the forces of chaos (4:35-41, Proper 7), Satanic possession (5:1-20; 9:14-29), illness (1:40-45), and death (5:35-43, Proper 8). Among the readings scheduled for Year B, the story of raising Jairus's daughter from her deathbed is interrupted by that of the woman healed of her twelve-year hemorrhage (5:21-43, Proper 8). Power winds its ways through both healing events concurrently, each in its own way. Whereas Jairus is named, the suffering woman is not; while he is a respected leader of the synagogue, she holds no title or official status; Jairus confronts Jesus face to face, but the woman approaches him surreptitiously from behind; he is a man of considerable means and social capital, but the woman lost whatever she possessed in pursuit of healthcare and has no one to advocate on her behalf; Jairus speaks freely, but the woman holds her tongue until Jesus calls on her.<sup>2</sup> Most intriguing of all, while both characters seek Jesus' aid, the hemorrhaging woman risks crossing boundaries of many kinds to touch his cloak. In doing so, we realize that Jesus is not contaminated by her (as social and religious conventions would have assumed) but is a means of divine healing and transformative power as she is restored to health and speaks "the whole truth" of what she has suffered from fraudulent medical practitioners.

The brief delay en route to Jairus's home may at first seem to have had disastrous consequences for the young girl who lies on her deathbed. But there is no shortage of divine power as Jesus moves from healing the hemorrhaging woman to taking the girl by her hand and urging her to rise. What little is recorded of their responses to Jesus suggests that both the girl and woman were divinely blessed in their longing for life. Amid the passion and suffering they endured, a sacred eros moved through them: their love for life was met by divine touch, and both girl and woman embody the gospel of divine mercy as it encounters human suffering. "The charge of energy that moves through Jesus and the woman with the chronic blood disease and the intimate connection he makes with the young girl who has died embody the power of divine eros through these generative encounters."<sup>3</sup> Their stories are not only about healing but compassion and love as well.

Two other healing stories appear side by side in the lectionary, one of exorcism and the other of physical healing (7:24-37; Proper 17). As the Gospel reports Jesus moving among Gentiles, the first story recounts his being confronted by a Syrophoenician woman who pleads on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. When Jesus announces that food belonging to the children of Israel should not be thrown to Gentile "dogs," the woman is undeterred by his cruel rebuff. She accepts the priority of his mission to the people of Israel but is not satisfied with his vision. She proposes

instead an alternative, more expansive vision of ministry that includes her daughter and other Gentiles as well. Helping Jesus to see beyond the confines of what he has assumed to be his mission, the woman's understanding of divine rule exceeds that of even Jesus himself. She helps him to see what he has resisted and to extend the range of divine love to those outside the house of Israel. Her words have a powerful effect: Jesus commends the woman for speaking to him; he not only frees her daughter from demon possession but continues in ministry to other Gentiles as well.

The second story immediately following is that of a deaf man with a speech impediment whom Jesus encounters in the region of the Decapolis. When his friends plead on his behalf, Jesus takes the man "aside, in private, away from the crowd." The intimacy of their encounter is further underscored by the immediacy of his touch. Following ancient healing practices, Jesus puts his fingers into the man's ears, spits and touches the man's tongue, then insists that they "be opened" by divine command. No sooner does the man speak than Jesus orders him to be silent. But like others who are told to hold their tongues, the man shares the good news widely (e.g., 1:44f; 3:11f).<sup>4</sup>

Following Jesus' predictions of his suffering and his teachings about discipleship and servanthood (8:22-10:52, spanning Proper 19-24), the final healing event in Mark's Gospel is the story of blind Bartimaeus. Here it is evident that the blind man can see what the disciples cannot: that Jesus is the long-awaited Son of David whose mission is to bring mercy to God's people (10:47f). When Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:51), he repeats the same question that he asked of James and John in the preceding story (10:36). But unlike the brothers of Zebedee who sought positions of privilege, Bartimaeus seeks the restoration of his sight. And unlike the rich man who sought to inherit eternal life while clinging to his possessions (10:17-22), Bartimaeus gives up his beggar's cloak and whatever coins are scattered upon it to receive Christ's gift and follow him. In their brief and powerful exchange, Bartimaeus identifies the source of his hope as the Son of David, the Messiah, and in response to his healing, he eagerly follows Christ whose mercy and love are intended for others as well.

Throughout his encounters with all who are possessed, ailing, despised, and hungry, we learn that Jesus perceives the *suffering* of those around him. Whether gazing intently (e.g., 8:25; 10:21) or listening carefully (e.g., 10:49), he does not turn away from those in need. This is perhaps one of the most important and least appreciated dimensions of his ministry: Jesus does not overlook others. He looks in our eyes and listens to our hearts. In today's culture with nearly unlimited access to different entertainment streams and ceaseless distractions, we would be wise to remember that none of Jesus' acts of kindness, healing, and exorcism would have been possible had he not simply been available to look and listen to others.

Jesus' readiness to respond and his attunement to suffering were not simply innate, but chosen: time and again, he could have turned away but leaned in closer instead (e.g., 3:1-6; 6:34-44). For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the reality of suffering is always close at hand. Little wonder, then, that mercy, pity, and compassion are often spoken of by Mark: Jesus describes the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac as an act of divine mercy (5:19); a father pleads desperately for pity on his possessed son (9:22); Bartimaeus calls out for divine mercy (10:47); and in feeding the multitudes, Jesus speaks of having compassion for the crowds (6:34; 8:2).

Just as disturbing as the pervasive presence of suffering is its inevitability. After Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins teaching his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and death before rising again (8:31-32, Proper 19). He offers two other predictions of his suffering as well (9:30-40, Proper 20; 10:32-45, Proper 24), and in all three instances, his disciples either rebuke or resist his words. Neither do they and the crowds understand what it means to take up their crosses and lose their lives for his sake and the sake of the gospel (8:34-38, Proper 19). These are painful words to hear, and they raise many troubling questions: What kind of God would require the violent death of his beloved son as the means of our salvation? How does our own suffering relate to that of Jesus'? It is only in light of the entire gospel that such questions can be addressed: it is only in light of Jesus' powerful acts of ministry and his teachings about the surprising nature of God's reign that we begin to grasp the inevitability of his suffering at the hands of religious and political power-holders and our own suffering as we follow him.

Jesus does not propose escapism, fatalism, or a superior vindication of those who take up their cross and follow him. The cross has not only been misunderstood, but diminished: more than denying oneself chocolate during Lent or a religious icon fashioned into jewelry, the cross was a form of public execution that is closer to losing one's living, being abandoned by loved ones, or going to prison. Jesus clarifies the costliness of our choices and describes what is at stake when we follow his way and live according to God's reign: "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (8:35b-36). While cancer, earthquakes, and economic disasters may threaten us, Jesus knows that other kinds of suffering will come as the result of our weighing what is central to our lives and living in accordance with his kingdom priorities. Just as God's love for all people was freely and fully given through Jesus Christ, so will those who follow him experience his suffering as well.

But if the cross is inevitable for followers of Christ's way, so is the resurrection. The tomb stands forever empty, and its quiet hallelujah echoes through the ages. Suffering is not all that we find in God's heart, for at the heart of the gospel is the good news of God's life-giving intentions for all. No doubt that is why Jesus was careful to warn us against hardness of heart.<sup>5</sup> In 3:5, he grieves over the people's hardness of heart as they complain about his healing a man on the Sabbath; in 6:52 the disciples seem not to recognize Jesus as he walks towards them across a stormy sea because their hearts are hardened; when religious leaders question his standards of cleanliness and those of his disciples in 7:1-7, Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy and quotes Isaiah's warning against distancing our hearts from God; and in 8:17 Jesus attributes the disciples' inability to see and understand the miracle of multiplying the loaves to their hardness of heart.

Jesus is most explicit in teaching about love when a scribe approaches to ask him "Which is the first commandment of all?" In this momentous exchange, Jesus enters into dialogue with one who, in distinction from Matthew and Luke's accounts, does not seek to entrap him but instead seeks his counsel regarding a question that is central to religious faith. Jesus' reply is direct and succinct: he first quotes Deut. 6:4-5 and then a second command from Lev. 19:18. Unlike the parallel versions in Matthew and Luke, Mark includes the opening verse of the Shema announcing that "God is one." Jesus gives an holistic account of what is required of us: to love the one

God with the fullness of our lives, including heart, soul, mind, and strength.<sup>6</sup> Without invitation or interruption, Jesus continues to say that the second commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” is part of God’s foremost call as well. He posits the two commands as one concern. “Together they comprise the heart of faithfulness, so that religion is a matter of divine and human relationships, of personal devotion and public consequence.”<sup>7</sup>

The love that God commands and Jesus embodies is the power that permeates God’s reign, enables ministry, and transforms our suffering into newness of life. The powerful love of God is on the loose in the world, awaiting our proclamation in word and deed.

### Notes

1 This and all other biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

2 Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 93-101.

3 Ibid., 98.

4 Both silence and disclosure are key to understanding Mark’s narrative. At the beginning of the twentieth century, William Wrede drew attention to the “messianic secret” as a motif running throughout the Gospel of Mark. More recently, biblical scholar Joan L. Mitchell argues that when several unnamed and lesser-known characters speak freely and publicly of Jesus and his ministry in Mark, these instances of gospel proclamation by marginal characters contribute to the reversal of expectation that occurs when Jesus’ closest disciples fail to speak of him when they should have (e.g., 14:66-72; 16:8). Joan L. Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 80.

5 To be sure, ancient understandings of the human heart and Jewish calls to love God with all one’s heart were not touched by romantic notions of love’s sentiments and feelings but instead focused on what we today would call the “will” or determination to direct one’s life according to God and God’s teachings. Thus, to love with all one’s heart is a call to center one’s attention and intentions on God. But neither does it contradict this understanding: to give one’s heart is not only an act of will but of compassion and affection, as demonstrated by Jesus’ own ministries of mercy and love.

6 According to the Gospel of Mark, the call to love with one’s mind is added by Jesus to the call of Deut. 6:5 (which speaks of loving with heart, soul, and strength/possessions), perhaps in accordance with Hellenistic values.

7 Ottoni Wilhelm, op.cit., 213.