

Mark 1: Introduction to the Series, Jesus Redefines

Luke Bushman, Mark 1:1-20 August 11th 2024

For the next age of time, Patty and I will each be preaching a different series on the Sundays that we are speaking. Patty will be working through her book “A Life Worth Living” and then the 7 shared convictions of Anabaptists, as a sort of churchwide catechism, and also to invite conversation about how we move forward as Anabaptists as we celebrate our 500th anniversary as a movement in 2025. I will be working through the Gospel of Mark. One of the books strongly recommended to me regarding Mark, was Ched Myer’s *Binding the Strongman. A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*. **SLIDE** This book is regarded not just by Patty, but by many scholars as influential for how we understand Mark’s Gospel. Ched Myers’ commentary has a bias that he acknowledges, and so to contrast a politically charged reading of Mark, I am also consulting Timothy Geddert’s commentary on the Gospel of Mark a lot. Hopefully this provides some balance.

As we embark on this journey into Mark’s Gospel, I encourage us all to see the parallels between the world of Jesus and our world. Even when that makes us uncomfortable, or finds us on the side opposing Jesus. We may find that idea distressing, but Ched Myers believes that the disciples are written the way they are to achieve that exact effect. For the first readers of Mark, Peter, James and John, were pillars in the church. They were looked up to, and trusted with guiding early Christians. Yet in Mark’s gospel, they are not always portrayed positively. Their mistakes are not hidden behind the text. Meyers, using a quote from R Tannehill sums up how the narrative can affect Christ followers. **SLIDE**

“We are encouraged in this identification by the positive portrait of the disciples early in the gospel, so that the negative turn in the disciple’s story would lead the readers to reexamine their own discipleship. Thus, the purpose of the author of Mark was not merely to present certain ideas about Jesus or to warn his readers against some group distinct from themselves but to lead his readers through a particular story in which they could discover themselves and thereby change”. (Myers, quoting Tannehill pg. 106).

May we look at this gospel not as an objective book we are far removed from, but may we see ourselves in the story. See our world in Jesus’ world. May we feel seen in the struggle of the disciples, humbled by the mistakes of the Pharisees, and inspired by Jesus’ subversion of power structures. With that background information and introduction, let’s get into the opening verses of Mark.

The first twenty verses in the book of Mark set the pace for the rest of the story. Everything moves tremendously quickly in Mark’s writing. Shifting rapidly from scene to scene, with little explanation and minimal dialogue. In just twenty verses John the Baptist is introduced, Jesus’ mission is stated, Jesus is baptized, Jesus is tempted, Jesus preaches in Galilee and Jesus calls his first followers to him.

Despite the lack of dialogue, and rapidly changing scenes, these opening verses are full of political and theological symbolism. For example, Mark identifies his story of Jesus as “good news” or “gospel”. For us, we immediately think of our faith when hearing this title. For those under Roman rule however, gospel meant something different. Meyers notes that the term usually referred to military victories, and such news was used as propaganda to endorse the idea that the Caesar was somehow “a god-man” (Myers, 123). **SLIDE**

“From the very first line, Mark’s literary strategy is revealed as subversive. Gospel is not an inappropriate title for this story, for Mark will indeed narrate a battle. But the “good news” of Mark does not herald yet another victory by Rome’s armies; it is a declaration of war upon the political culture of the empire” (Myers, 124).

The opening words of Mark do not just subvert the culture of the oppressive Romans. Mark’s writings also redefine what Messiah and kingdom mean. Mark clearly uses symbolism from the prophets by quoting Malachi and Isaiah, and by placing John the Baptist in the wilderness (the same symbolic location of prophets like Elijah) (Myers 125-126). Unlike the prophets however, Mark’s gospel does not focus on Jerusalem as the center of the universe. Jerusalem as a physical place is not the site of salvation. **SLIDE**

“According to the dominant nationalist ideology of salvation history, Jerusalem was considered the hub of the world to which all nations would one day come...Mark turns this ‘circulation’ on its head: far from embarking on triumphal pilgrimage to Zion the crowds flee to the margins, for purposes of repentance” (Myers, 126).

While the expectation was that a Messiah would reclaim the glory days of Jerusalem, Jesus was in the wilderness with those on the edges of society. Mark tells the truth of Jesus in a way that redefines empire and religion. That is why this good news can be impactful for anyone. It addresses Jesus’ reaction to both church and state, which helps us see how Jesus might respond to our institutions of church and state.

Therefore, in these opening pages of Mark’s gospel, Jesus is set up to forge his own path. Mark is giving us a preview of what is to come in the story of Jesus. Jesus will redefine what it means to be a Messiah. Jesus will upset the established order, and stand in opposition to a hierarchal way of thinking. After setting the scene with all of these symbolic, spiritual, sometimes difficult to understand events, the action in the book of Mark begins. The events of Jesus’ life are still retold in ways that connect his life to various concepts and prophecies. But as said before, Mark’s Gospel moves pretty quick. I think it was the great theologian Ferris Bueller that said “The Gospel of Mark moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you might miss it”.

Or something like that. So let's stop and look around at one small part in this opening chapter of Mark. Jesus calling his first disciples. **SLIDE**

The text is on the screen, and you can see it is very brief since it all fits on the one slide. This brevity is strategically used here to highlight the radical response to follow Jesus (Geddert, 46). In the other gospels, the disciples witness a miracle, or are followers of John the Baptist before eventually following Jesus. These details are excluded here, and the disciples hear the authoritative call of Jesus and leave "everything" (Geddert, 57).

One of the most difficult things I struggle with when reading the Bible is trying to be realistic, while also not watering the text down. It can be a fine line to walk. My natural impulse when I hear of the disciples immediately setting everything aside for Jesus, is to just push this idea into the spiritual sense. I tell myself it's the idea of wholehearted devotion to Jesus. It is just a concept, not a literal application. The reason I am compelled to do this is that it doesn't feel realistic to quit my job and ditch my family for the sake of following Jesus. I then worry, "Am I watering down the call of discipleship?" This tension can be tiring to hold onto. I appreciated Timothy Geddert pointing out in his commentary that even though Peter leaves it all behind, a week later they are all visiting his mother in law (1:29-31) (Geddert, 57). I have often wondered how they always had boats to ride in during the gospels. It sometimes sounds like there is a Sea of Galilee Uber that they keep using. Geddert's discussion of the call, suggests that these fishermen kept ownership of their boats and were what they used to get around throughout Jesus' ministry (Geddert, 57). Which makes a lot of sense but I never thought of. When I think about the call of discipleship, I have to try not to get sucked into either interpretation. This is not just a spiritual concept- the disciples made very real sacrifices, and allowed their priorities to shift drastically. But this also does not take place in an alternate reality, where the disciples existed without any responsibility or contact with their previous lives. Obeying the call to discipleship cannot be reduced to a spiritual platitude, but it also cannot remove us from reality.

This nuance is evident in the fact that the disciples all leave things behind to follow Jesus, but for different disciples the primary thing they leave is different. The first brothers leave their nets, and the second set of brothers leave their father. "This wording may well suggest what seems like the greatest cost to each of these sets of brothers" (Geddert, 57).

When Jesus calls the disciples, he says the famous line "I will make you fishers of people". I have always understood this to be a message of evangelism. The disciples are to go around catching people so they are lured in to follow Jesus. Which is a funny image when you think about it. This is generally how most people interpret Jesus' call. Others have noticed that Jesus may be referencing prophetic imagery with this call. The following verses from various prophetic texts use similar imagery of fishhooks, but not to talk about evangelism, but to discuss the Lord's coming judgement on the rich, and God's reclamation of Israel (Meyers, 132).

SLIDE But “As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.” For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors. I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them, and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill and out of the clefts of the rocks. Jeremiah 16:15-16

SLIDE Hear this word, you cows of Bashan
 who are on Mount Samaria,
 who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
 who say to their husbands, “Bring something to drink!”
 The Lord God has sworn by his holiness:
 The time is surely coming upon you
 when they shall take you away with hooks,
 even the last of you with fishhooks.

Amos 4:2

SLIDE I am against you,
 Pharaoh king of Egypt,
 the great dragon sprawling
 in the midst of its channels,
 saying, “My Nile is my own;
 I made it for myself.”
 I will put hooks in your jaws
 and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales.
 I will draw you up from your channels,
 with all the fish of your channels
 sticking to your scales.

Ezekiel 29:3-4

Because of this similar imagery, some people do not interpret Jesus call as one regarding evangelism. **SLIDE** “Taking this mandate for his own, Jesus is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and

privilege” (Myers, 132). Obviously there is not a consensus about how to understand Jesus’ call to be fisher’s of people, so take that as you wish.

Thanks for bearing with me, as I attempted to give background information, and also preach a sermon, and also explore a unique interpretation of the Bible. So before I wrap up I would like to see what can we take away from this collage of interpretations and background information? Here are a few summary points of what has been talked about this morning. **SLIDE**

Jesus Redefined and Upset the Established Order

Jesus brought a good news and peace, unlike that of the Romans. The gospel of Rome was based on violence, and ordered hierarchies. Jesus was nonviolent, and chose to interact with the poor and others on the fringes of society. He did not attack other lands to gain prosperity, but attacked the very concept of Empire. He redefined what it meant to be a Messiah. He was not focused on reestablishing a physical kingdom centered in Jerusalem. He was focused on establishing a new kingdom through repentant hearts, starting in the wilderness. I think it is important to acknowledge how radically different Jesus was, because we often make Jesus look how we want him to look. Not just in terms of how prevalent white Jesus paintings are, but for his character as well. I struggle with a more radical Jesus, because I prefer to think of a kind, timid, gentle Jesus. I am missing out on a whole lot of who Jesus is if I don’t recognize how radical he is. In an opposite way, I am reading Jesus and John Wayne, which discusses how some Christians have turned Jesus into an American Patriot- a ruggedly masculine, and at times, violent person. Neither of these pictures fit.

Discipleship is Difficult in Concept and Practice

Discipleship is something difficult. Whether we are called to evangelize, or participate in “overturning the existing order of power and privilege” that is a difficult task. Whether we are supposed to leave everything, or take a step back from things that interfere with discipleship, that is hard to do. How are we to understand not only what we are called to, but also how we are called to it? That is something we will learn more about as we venture into Mark, which brings me to our final summary point.

We are Invited Into God’s Story

The Gospel writers chose to write their accounts of Jesus in a creative, and narrative way. They did not choose to write like a history book. The opening line isn’t “Year 0: The Birth of Jesus”. The opening line references the creation account “The beginning of the good news of Jesus”, before referencing prophetic literature. This is not a list of facts, but a creative retelling of Jesus’ ministry. It brings in all the elements of story- references, character development, tension. The disciples are shown simultaneously as brave and cowardly. Intuitive and dense. Loyal and fleeting. Just like real people. Just like us. We are invited to see ourselves in the story. We may see ourselves in the

Pharisees, the disciples, or the crowds, which will inevitably, give us a chance to see Jesus up close and personal.

Works Cited

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