

Mission in Mark, Part 2

Colleagues,

This week's Thursday Theology features Part 2 of "Mission in Mark," the tour of Mark's gospel by Pastor Paul Jaster of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Elyria, Ohio. In it, Paul begins with a short discussion of Jesus' shift from the public ministry in Galilee to the private instruction of the disciples—a fitting follow-up for the day after the Fourth International Crossings Conference ("The Gospel-Given Life: Discipleship Revisited"). I had the pleasure of meeting Paul at that conference, and I expect that his words here will stir up fruitful reflections on the past few days in Belleville for those readers who were able to attend.

In what follows, Paul carries us from Mark 10 into the beginnings of Holy Week, offering yet more keen insights into what Mark has to say about the mission of Jesus. Along the way, he digs into the usage history and significance of words like "ransom" and "repentance," and he sheds intriguing light on the incident commonly known as the cleansing of the temple. We expect that you will find rich food for thought in today's excerpt, and we encourage you to look ahead to the third and final installment of "Mission in Mark" next week, which will carry us through the end of Holy Week and the conclusion of Mark's gospel.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Mark 8:27-11:33

In Mark 8:37 the narrative makes a decisive turn. Jesus plants his foot in Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost part of his

Galilean ministry, and he turns his eyes to the south. And he asks two questions: "Who do people say that I am?" "But who do you say that I am?" And then he began to teach his disciples that "the Son of man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Jesus shifts from public ministry to private instruction, discipling. If Discipleship 101 is "Jesus is the Christ," then Discipleship 102 is "there has to be a cross (crucifixion and resurrection)." Ultimately the authority of Jesus as the Christ cannot be asserted, challenged, and vindicated any other way.

Mark can be divided into three parts: Positive ministry in Galilee (1:1-8:21), a deliberate confrontation with powers in Jerusalem that leads to a violent rejection of Jesus (11:1-16:8), and, in between, this journey to the cross and instruction about "the way" (8:22-10:52).

Jesus predicts his passion three times, four if you add Mark 2, five if you add Mark 10, six if you add the foreshadowing death of John the Baptist, seven if you add the parable in Mark 12. And God himself affirms it the second time God speaks from the cloud on top of the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" That is, listen to him about what he is telling you about the cross.

The disciples don't come off well in Mark. They are stubborn, blind, and dull, and they misunderstand. Werner Kelber in The Story of Mark says they don't do one good thing. Eugene Boring goes much easier on them. They can't possibly understand before the cross. From a literary standpoint, this is good. This gives Jesus a chance to clarify and explain. Theologically, this is also good, because we aren't all that great at being disciples either. And Jesus still uses us anyhow. It's amazing.

Mark 10

The epitome of that misunderstanding is Mark 10 where James and John ask Jesus to sit at his right and at his left when he comes into his glory. And Jesus says, "You do not know what you are asking."

The others are jealous. Jesus says, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Again, this is an exodus theme. The "ransom/redeem" word group is frequently used in the Old Testament for "God's powerful, liberating act" without any thought of a price being paid. God ransomed Israel from Egypt with no payment being made to Pharaoh (Exodus 6:6). It is simply liberation language. Ransom liberates. And "many" is a Semitic way of saying "all." And so, this passage does not commit us to the Anselm/Mel Gibson/Latin view of atonement.

Jesus indicates that there are two kinds of authority: The kind that coercively dominates and "lords it over" you (the Gentile way, the Mosaic way, the law) and the kind that graciously serves and "lifts you up" (the Jesus way, the gospel). These two kinds of authority are spelled out in Ezekiel 34 (First Reading, Christ the King A). God says (pretty much to all earthly authorities past and present), "with force and harshness you have ruled them." And so God counters, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, watch over the strong and feed them all with justice." Right before the feeding of the 5,000 it is said, "and he (Jesus) had compassion

for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd [a good king]" (Mark 6:34).

"Every 500 years the church has a rummage sale," Phyllis Tickle says quoting Bishop Mark Dyer. And each time there is one question which must be answered, "Where now is our authority?" Mark 10 has an answer for that. And it is not only "where" is our authority, but also "of what kind" is our authority.

But we never get it, do we? We always want to call the shots. When I was in Michigan, Ford Motor country, I was one of three remaining pastors. The previous senior pastor had just left, and now the board of directors (note the name for a church council) wanted to make me "senior" pastor and the other two "assistant pastors." But the three of us said, "This is crazy. We were all of the same age, the same schooling, the same experience. There is only one ministry: Word and Sacrament. There is only one power or authority that we have, which is to proclaim the Gospel through Word and Sacrament and to forgive. And we all have that same authority, no more no less. Just call us 'pastors.'"

And the response was, "But who do we blame if something goes wrong?" Interesting way to think of parish leadership, isn't it? As someone to blame. And we said, "Jesus took the blame and we are free to serve others in love." And that was very hard for them to comprehend.

As Ched Myers points out, the concern of Mark's Jesus "is not only liberation from the specific structures of oppression embedded in the dominant social order of Roman Palestine; it also includes the spirit and practice of domination ultimately embedded in the human personality and corporately in human history as a whole" (Myers, 103).

Mark 11-15: Holy Week.

Most of Mark 11-15 is NOT in our lectionary and what little is

placed in the lectionary is not positioned in its original context of holy week. This is most unfortunate, for this is the longest narrative in Mark's gospel (about 40% of the entire gospel!). It is tightly and meticulously woven. And, like the robe of Jesus, it needs to be seen as a seamless whole.

Palm Sunday:

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt, goes up to the temple, looks around, checks his watch, sees it's late and goes out of the city. Before the night of his arrest Jesus doesn't even spend one night there! Normally, pilgrims were expected to walk into the holy city at Passover. For Jesus to ride in on a colt is a claim of royal authority, not humility. Jesus enters on a colt like David and Solomon did. When the old and ailing David wanted to identify Solomon as his true successor, he sent Solomon in Jerusalem riding on his mule (1 Kings 1:28f.). Jesus is the Davidic king, the proper owner of the temple. In fact, Jesus is more than that (greater than David). Jesus is God returning to the temple after years of exile just as Malachi 3:1 promised, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."

Holy Monday:

Jesus curses the fig tree (the most fruitful of all trees and often used to produce the firstfruits brought to the temple). It is an enacted parable expressing God's judgment on the temple and its current guardians. Jesus causes a disturbance, drives out (ekballo) those buying and selling, and interrupts the sacrifices by not allowing the carrying of the sacred vessels necessary for the rituals. And then Jesus gives an interpretive word: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a den of ____?"

A den of what? NOT robbers as we think of robbers (shoplifters and corporate raiders). The Greek word is lestes, not kleptos. A much better translation would be "freedom fighters" or

“terrorists” (depending on which side you’re on). Or, maybe “violent separatists,” which covers both. Lestes is the word used to describe Barabbas, who was not your run-of-the-mill thief, a kleptomaniac. Barabbas was an insurrectionist, a freedom fighter. He committed murder during the insurrection, Mark tells us. He wasn’t a shoplifter. Lestes is used by Josephus to refer to a whole range of persons: the rural social bandits mainly from Galilee but also from Judea, the urban terrorist group called the Sicarii (scribal dagger-men who did carefully targeted assassinations of native aristocratic priests who cooperated with Rome), and the Zealot party (which was comprised of dissident peasants from Judea and lower priests in Jerusalem).

There are three very different strands of tradition in the Hebrew scriptures. One strand said to separate yourself from those who are unclean. We see it in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalm 1. The ultimate example in the Old Testament is Phinehas in Numbers 25, a priest, the grandson of Aaron, who takes up the spear and kills a Moabite woman and the Jew who is having sex with her. Phinehas is the classic model of one who is truly “zealous” for the Lord (so devoted to God and Torah that one is willing to use armed resistance and force, if necessary, to kill collaborators and drive out foreign oppressors). And for displaying this zeal, Phinehas is given “the covenant of everlasting priesthood” according to 1 Maccabees 2:54.

Phinehas is a model for the Maccabees, the Hasidim, the Pharisees (“separatists”), the Essenes, and ultimately, in Mark’s day, the various groups of pious zealots who holed up in the temple (one candidate for the “desolating sacrilege” of Mark 13) and resisted the Roman army until Titus came in, tore those walls down and entered the temple himself (another candidate for the “desolating sacrilege” of Mark 13). It is much like the Taliban (“students” or “seminarians”) who are zealous, armed

resistors.

A second strand said to accommodate and acculturate to the culture of the kingdoms around you. It happened when Israel clamored for a king (1 Samuel 8), when Solomon entered into a whole host of foreign alliances through his 700 hundred wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11), and when King Ahab married Jezebel and merged the worship of YHWH and Baal (1 Kings 16). The position of cooperation and accommodation was taken by the Herodians, who eagerly allied themselves with Rome, served as clients of the Emperor, and promoted Roman ways, and by the Sadducees (named after Zadok, the original high priest under David), who reluctantly but pragmatically cooperated with Rome in order to maintain their wealth and highly privileged status as aristocratic priests. The Sadducees are the managers of the temple and the highest local authority in Judea in absence of a king. Often the first and second strand battle violently with each other.

A surprising and imaginative third strand, however, provided yet another way: one that was inclusive of foreigners without being either separatistic or conforming to the dominant imperial culture. This strand said God welcomes all who are willing to worship and trust God. This strand is epitomized by Isaiah 56:1-8 where Isaiah says "maintain justice and do what is right." And what is justice and what is right? "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people;' and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house [the temple] and within my walls [Jerusalem] a name and a monument [in Hebrew, Yad Veshem!] better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

And what name is that? What name could possibly be better than a son or daughter of God? Answer: Priests. Or, as the text puts it, "servants" who "minister to him [the Lord]" (Isaiah 56:6). By the time of Isaiah 56, ministers = priests; as is also the case in the Priestly source and Deuteronomy (Blenkinsopp, 140). This is an amazing claim. Foreign eunuchs will become ordained clergy (!) who don't just bring sacrifices to the temple for the Jewish priests to offer. They themselves will be priests who offer these offerings and they will be accepted at my altar, says the Lord, for "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." This prophecy is literally fulfilled when Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 and the eunuch becomes a member of the priesthood of all believers.

Isaiah takes the most excluded person he can think of—an enslaved, sexually mutated foreign male—and says he will be a priest, an ordained minister. [Later in t. Megillah 2:7, the rabbis rank persons according to their purity with the priests first and the eunuchs, those with damaged testicles, and those without a penis last.] It's like saying a married prostitute from New Jersey will be the next pope. The foreign eunuch doesn't have to be circumcised. Doesn't have to eat kosher. Doesn't have to get a new set of gonads and corrective surgery to reverse the mutilation. Just has to keep the Sabbath and worship God in a God-pleasing way (which ultimately means repenting of one's violent separatistic ways or one's self-aggrandizing accommodating ways and believing the good news of the closeness of God and the nearness of the kingdom in the person and ministry of Jesus, God's beloved Son).

This is the very passage Jesus quotes to interpret the act that is the proximate cause of his death and gets him killed.

And notice the reversal! Foreign, sexually mutilated males who think they are "just a dry tree" become a Yad Veshem, "a name

and a monument better than sons and daughters.” They are promised the very “everlasting priesthood” that the Maccabeans claimed that Phinehas had (Isaiah 56:5 in contrast to 1 Maccabee 2:54). And the current accommodating priestly keepers of the temple and the separatistic zealous Jews using the temple as a place to plot the violent overthrow of Rome literally become a cursed and withered fig tree and are terminated and cut off from the temple.

Jewish people call their holocaust museum Yad Veshem. Isaiah uses what has become the most sacred of names to refer to foreign, sexually mutilated males becoming ordained priests. And Jesus quotes him at the most significant moment of his life.

Jesus is not “cleansing the temple.” Jesus is using carefully staged prophetic theater to indicate the temple’s proper use and purpose, which is to be a “house of prayer for all people,” for all who worship God. And Jesus is warning against the social and political agendas that were leading the people into a ruinous war with Rome, which could only end in disaster. The temple was intended to symbolize God’s dwelling with Israel for the sake of the world (“light to those in darkness,” as Paul says in Romans 2:19), but in the hands of its current occupants and custodians it had come to symbolize God’s exclusion of the world by violent separatists and the robbery of the poor, especially small farmers and widows, by the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem (as will soon be described in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants).

In Mark 3:22, Jesus was accused of being in league with Beelzebul, a name that possibly means “Lord of the house.” If that is the case, then this action of Jesus very well may be saying that Jesus, as God’s ultimate earthly agent, is the true “Lord of the house” (temple) and that the demonic political and religious powers (which form an incestuous relationship of governmental, military, and commercial interest) are being “cast

out” (ekballo). The temple is so corrupt that it must be destroyed and/or replaced (Myers).

This is the “Return of the King” from Lord of the Rings part 3—Aragorn, the rightful king returning to take command and possession of his temple. When Jesus comes to Jerusalem, this is God coming to Jerusalem. This is God’s return. People forgiven. Exile over. Gentiles coming. Spirit given. This is what is meant by “the time [of promise] is fulfilled, the kingdom of God at hand.” And we get in on it by believing it and acting accordingly. And “repent” means above all “abandoning one’s violent, separatistic ways,” which is precisely the way that the word group “repentance” (metanoia) is used by Josephus as he urges his fellow Jews to lay down their arms and abandon their violent resistance at the time of the revolt against Rome (at the very time and in the same context as Mark was written).

The custodians of the temple do not believe it, they do not want to surrender custody of the temple to its true owner (Jesus/God) and so they seek to kill Jesus, God’s son and the holder of God’s power of attorney. However, they are fearful of the popular support that Jesus has, which indicates how estranged they are from the very people they seek to serve.

A Partial List of Resources for Mark

- Blenkinsopp, Joseph. Isaiah 56-66. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- Boring, M. Eugene. Mark: A Commentary. (The New Testament Library) Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- Kelber, Werner. Mark’s Story of Jesus. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979.
- Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.

In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

February 2: Part 3 of Rev. Paul Jaster's "Mission in Mark"

February 9: Steve Albertin responds to John Roth's "How to Disagree Well"

February 16: A wrap-up report on the Fourth International Crossings Conference