

Mission in Mark, Part 3

Colleagues,

This week's Thursday Theology brings the third and final installment of "Mission in Mark" by Pastor Paul Jaster (Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Elyria, Ohio). In it, Paul walks us through the rest of Holy Week in Mark's gospel, from the "riddles" and parables of Holy Tuesday through terror and amazement of the women at the tomb on Easter morning, and finally to the recognition that the story of Mark's gospel is not over, because we keep writing it every day through our own acts of ministry. Paul continues to shed interesting light on the role of mission in Mark—for example, highlighting the gospel's call to continue Jesus' mission out in the villages of Syria and Galilee, rather than staying walled up in the separatist confines of the temple in Jerusalem. We hope and pray that Paul's writing will help focus your own thinking on our theme of mission during this Epiphany season.

Speaking of mission, you may recall that, some months ago in this space, Ed Schroeder published a review of *Through Their Eyes*, a book by Dean Lueking about Lutherans around the world ([ThTheol #688](#)). Dean wrote to us recently to offer Thursday Theology readers a special discount on his book: \$20/copy, shipping included (list price: \$25), with an even lower cost of \$15/copy for orders of 12 by pastors wanting to share the book with their congregations. Interested readers should write to deanATdeanluekingDOTcom.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Holy Tuesday:

Last day in the temple. Longest discourse. Six aggressive “royal riddles.” Royal because they strongly hint at Jesus’ rightful kingship/lordship/sonship. Riddles because they do not say it 100% explicitly.

Riddle #1: For chief priests, the scribes and elders. The baptism of John the Baptist—did it come from heaven or was it of human origin? The right answer: The baptism of John the Baptist comes from heaven and so does Jesus.

Riddle #2: Parable of the Wicked Tenants. And “they realized that he told the parable against them!” Roman occupation led to new farm techniques and new debt laws. Small ancestral farms were becoming large estates in Judea and Galilee. Many became tenants on their own land to absentee landlords—some of whom were the wealthy priestly families in Jerusalem cooperating with the Romans and managing the temple. Twice Josephus tells of slaves of the high priests (thugs similar to those who will arrest Jesus) coming and forcibly removing tithes from the threshing floor which then causes poorer village priests to starve (Ant. XX, viii, 8; ix,2). And so it is no accident that, during the revolt in ad 66, the first act of the rebels once they seized control of the upper city was to burn the public archives in the temple where the records of debt were kept. High priestly families were major owners of that debt. One Dead Sea scroll speaks of the aristocratic “priests of Jerusalem who will amass for themselves wealth and gain by plundering people” (1QpHab 2:8). And lower priests allied with the Zealot party to seize control of the temple and its cult from the high priestly families collaborating with Rome.

This parable captured the social situation to a tee. Aristocratic priestly families were also literally “violent robbers” (lestes) hiding in their “safe house” (the temple), because they (a) robbed and exploited the poor by their tithes,

(b) sent thugs to enforce the payments of tithes to the point of letting poor, rural priests starve, (c) preyed upon debt and confiscated ancestral farms in violation of the Torah's mandate to loan to fellow Jews when needed and not charge interest, (d) created an oppressive situation by their collaboration with the Romans that caused zealous "freedom fighters" in response to use the temple as a place and platform to plot their revolts, especially during the festival of Passover, e.g. Barabbas, (e) devoured the homes of widows, while at the same time showing off with prayers and seeking places of privilege, and (f) coercively took advantage of the very ones they were sent to serve. As a consequence, as the prophets said, the temple would be destroyed and given to another. Jesus warns that the stone/son [a Hebrew wordplay] that the builders rejected would become the cornerstone. The crucified Jesus, God's son (ben), replaces the temple, made of huge and magnificent stones (eben), as the center of the true worship of God, the place where God manifests his presence.

Riddle #3: A trap set by the Pharisees and Herodians. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Jesus' famous answer is "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." But what does Jesus mean by that? This one sentence can be taken at least four different ways!

(1) It can mean "Pay the tax; God rules through the Caesar." A Herodian would say that, and the Sadducees. Paul. Josephus. Luke. Luther. (2) Or, it can mean "The money is idolatrous (a graven image and unclean); pay it and get that damn stuff out of here!" Some Pharisees would say that. Maybe some Essenes too. (3) Or is Jesus quoting Mattathias, the one who starts the Maccabean revolt, whose last dying words are "Pay back the gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law" (1 Macc. 2:68)? In other words, "Give to Caesar Caesar's—namely, a

sword.” Like a zealot or the zealous would say. (4) Or, is Jesus really messing with their heads and saying, “Everything is God’s, including Caesar, too. Caesar, the great Roman emperor, is only a tenant, who must one day also give account to God.” Bottom line: Jesus says something to which everyone could agree AND by which everyone could equally be offended.

Riddle #4: For Sadducees, “who say there is no resurrection,” and so they create an absurd scenario with a woman who had seven husbands and ask, “In the resurrection whose wife will she be?” Answer: No one’s, for there isn’t any marriage in the resurrection. And this only goes to show that “you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God,” for God “is God not of the dead, but of the living,” as the book of Moses clearly implies (and as the resurrection of Jesus will soon prove).

Riddle #5: A sympathetic scribe: “Which commandment is the first of all?” Answer: The Shema, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Except, Jesus redefines “who” the neighbor is. Not just the tribe or clan, but everyone.

Implicit in Jesus’ response is a criticism: When Israel engages in violent separatism, Israel violates its own most basic confession—that God is one. If God is one, then we all are God’s children—equally. We are all of the same tribe.

Just think what it would mean if the three great monotheistic religions took the words of Jesus to heart. We violate our own most basic creed, when we fight with one another. More wars have probably been caused by monotheism than by anything else. Religion kills. And yet religious wars are the most fundamental violation of our very faith. God is one.

Riddle #6: For the crowd. “How can the scribes say that the

Messiah is the son of David” when “David himself, by the Holy Spirit,...calls him Lord?” Answer: Jesus, son of David, is also Jesus, Son of God and son of man (a heavenly figure, à la Daniel 7), and therefore David’s superior. Jesus’ opposition to the violent abuses of a state-run, aristocratic temple is the very reason Mark’s Jesus downplays Jesus as the Davidic messiah (one who forcefully centralizes his power via the temple) and in its place uses the superior and nonviolent son-of-man figure of Daniel 7, the Human One (a truly humane ruler rather than a “beastly” one) who has a superior authority (Myers, 63). It also explains the “Messianic Secret” in Mark. Jesus is not saying to his disciples, “You have it right, but keep it a secret,” but rather “You have it wrong, so shut up!” (Crossan).

The riddles end with Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes who want places of high honor and yet devour the houses of widows—widows like the poor widow who was conned by the temple rhetoric to put into the offering the very last two pennies that she had.

Mark 13 is often called the “Little Apocalypse.” From the Mount of Olives “opposite the temple” (both physically and polemically), Jesus predicts in apocalyptic terms what will happen if the violent separatists continue on the path they are on and try to revolt against Rome. And yet, this passage is actually “anti-apocalyptic.” For Jesus is insisting that the destruction of the temple is NOT the end of the world nor the loss of God’s presence or existence. Rather it is only the end of a corrupt, imperial state temple system that has brought divine judgment upon itself by its neglect of social justice.

And it doesn’t take a divine prophet to foresee the destruction. As a boy Jesus saw what happened at Sepphoris [SEF-uh-ris, Zipori] just three miles from Nazareth, when Judas the Galilean led a tax revolt against Rome in 4 bc, the year of King Herod’s death. The Roman legate in Syria marched in with a legion,

burned down the town, and marched out with slaves. Don't we also often sense we are headed to disaster of apocalyptic proportions due to the mistaken actions of the zealous right or left? And yet, the good news of advent, the Son of Man comes with great power and glory. And so, learn the lesson of the fig tree and know that he is near.

This chapter gives clues to Mark's community: A community directly affected by the Jew revolt in Palestine (ad 66-70). The impending (or recently accomplished) destruction of the temple does not mean the end of the age and Christ's return, as some surmised. Followers of Jesus should pray and flee from the temple, rather than to it as a place of refuge, like the freedom fighters did. They should be suspicious of prophets who deliver new messages in the name of the risen Lord. The gospel may be written for Christian house churches in Galilee or Syria who are distancing themselves from the disciples headquartered in Jerusalem. Their role in the great revolt is not to hole up in the temple and fight like the zealots did, but rather to continue the compassionate and inclusive mission of Jesus in the villages of Syria or Galilee.

Mark deliberately departs from the traditional apocalyptic form in order to correct the twin errors of his contemporaries. Mark's focus on the cross set him against those who used apocalyptic symbols to legitimate a "holy war" against their enemies. And by anchoring his story of discipleship in the lived world of his audience, he stood against those who used heavenly visions to legitimate withdrawal from political struggle into gnostic communities (Myers, 104).

Holy Wednesday:

Jesus is lavishly drenched by an unnamed woman in oil and thereby anointed for burial. In Mark's gospel, besides the angels in the wilderness, it is only women (not the male

disciples) who “serve” Jesus and who follow Jesus all the way to the cross.

Maundy Thursday:

Passover continues the exodus themes. The lamb sacrificed for Passover was not for the forgiveness of sins, but was food for a journey out of bondage into freedom.

At the Mount of Olives, Jesus says, “You will all become deserters; for it is written I [God] will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (Mark 14:27-28). God is the one who ultimately allows or causes Jesus to die, but will also raise him; Galilee, not Jerusalem is the place of post-resurrection mission. “What takes place is both foretold in Scripture and accepted in obedience by Jesus” (Hooker, 344).

Jesus to the temple guard, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit [lestes, terrorist, violent separatist]?” (Mark 14:46). They are the ones acting like and for bandits, and here they come out after Jesus like he is one.

“The allusions to Zechariah 9-14 in Mark 14:22-28, then, may well be read by Mark and his audience in such a way that they provide a contrast to the interpretation of those passages circulating in Jewish revolutionary circles known to them. Instead of seeing the arrival of the kingdom of God in the appearance of a triumphant Messiah figure on the Mount of Olives, a miraculous deliverance from Jerusalem from the Gentile armies that surround it, and a resanctification of the Temple through its cleansing from pagan influence, Mark would see the arrival of the kingdom of God, paradoxically, in the deliverance of Jesus to his Jewish enemies on the Mount of Olives, his humiliating death at the hands of Gentiles in Jerusalem, and the

proleptic act of Temple destruction that accompanies that death" (Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, 161).

Good Friday:

The charge against Jesus is based on his threat against the temple. Jesus is asked point blank, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" No riddles now. And Jesus says, "I am," and identifies himself as the son of man of Daniel 7, who acts on earth with the full authority of God. Jesus claims a status even higher (!) than the high priest asked about. Jesus identifies himself as the "Son of Man" of Daniel 7, a "heavenly figure" and final judge, which includes being judge over the very high priest and temple authorities who are judging him.

As a result the charge is "blasphemy," the verdict "guilty" and the sentence "death" (which should be by stoning). And justly! The priestly council is acting on good authority—God's own. This is God's word against God's word again. Jesus' claim "I am the Son of God" vs. the Torah's insistence that to take God's name in vain is blasphemy. It is religion that is killing Jesus. God's word of law. A law that says that sinners must die. Religion kills.

But, of course, the Romans are in charge, and the temple leadership needs to cooperate and collaborate with the Romans. The charge is changed from blasphemy to treason, that is, Jesus' royal claims. However, even in the temple action, Jesus is a threat to Rome because the Romans took the sanctity of all temples seriously, not least because sacrifices for the emperor were offered in them. To the Roman, desecration of a temple was seen as a capital offense (Witherington, 314). So, Jesus is put to death by crucifixion, the most violent separation of them all—by both the highest religious and the highest civil God-given authorities of the time—IF you are talking about the law, that "lording it over" kind of authority.

Jesus is mocked as king, and the public inscription of the charge against him is "The King of the Jews," which is ironic because Jesus IS the king of the Jews and our king too. Jesus lets out a loud cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Our cry so often. This is the very wonder of the cross. At this moment that Jesus is the farthest from God, God is the closest to us, where we are. We cannot explain it, only proclaim it.

Jesus gives out a loud cry and breathes his last (which Fred Danker insists is one last great cry of exorcism). The temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom: schizomenous again. The barrier between God and sinners is removed and it foreshadows the temple's destruction in ad 70. The Roman centurion in charge of the execution squad observes the way Jesus dies and is the first human to identify Jesus correctly: "Truly this man was God's Son," thus foreshadowing the faith of the gentiles who respond to the gospel of the crucified Christ.

Mark 16: Easter

There is the Sabbath (Saturday). And then very early on the first day of the week (the eighth day, the first day of new creation) when the sun/son had risen, the women go to the tomb and are greeted by a young man, dressed in white (a heavenly figure) who says, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. But go, tell his disciples AND Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee [the place of positive ministry]); there you will see him, just as he told you." This is the last spoken word in Mark. God's last word. The final verdict of the Ultimate Judge on Jesus and those whom Jesus befriends and who follow the risen Christ to where he is—active in ministry/service.

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to no one [a double negative!], for they were amazed."

And of course, as you know, the best manuscripts stop here at verse 8. And the other verses are obviously scribal attempts to correct the problem.

Two Final Observations – Observation One

John Dominic Crossan has a marvelous quote: “To say that a dead man rises says something about our mortality. But to say that a crucified man rises from the dead says something about the system that put him to death.”

By that Crossan means the imperial system. The resurrection of Jesus is a challenge to empire. And clearly, Crossan has America’s own empire-building in his scope. America is the greatest post-industrial empire, he claims, just as Rome was the greatest pre-industrial empire. Only America is an empire of bases rather than one of nations.

But, Luther’s great insight (shared and echoed by Crossan) is that that the system that puts Jesus to death is also God’s system, witnessed to in the Scriptures. And so ultimately it is one word of God vs. another word of God. One kind of authority against another kind of authority. Law vs. Gospel. And those are two very different, contradictory words. Two very different kinds of authority, both from God. And it is very critical which one of those two words has the last word: the ultimate say. Because one way the blame falls on us and anyone who challenges the system. The other way the blame falls on Christ (the Servant–God’s ransom–God’s freeing event) and away from those whom Christ befriends and reclaims. For that is what ransoms do, they free people.

Law and Gospel are based on two very different authorities that are oppositional to one another. One is a “lording over” which always leads to tyranny and oppression even when done in the best of circumstances in the name of God. Religion kills. The

other is a “lifting up” which always leads to love. And when tied into God’s love for us in Christ, it is more powerful than anything else. It makes us alive together with all others. And it gives us that name which is greater than son or daughter: the name of servant/minister.

Observation Two – This story has no ending

This story has no ending, because it is still ongoing. The end has not been written yet. Every reader is challenged to continue the story in his or her own time. And so the questions are–

Will we see?

Will we hear the message of good news?

Will we believe Jesus is who Jesus says he is and live accordingly?

Will we engage in positive ministry? That ministry around the lake? Bridging violent, antagonistic cultures? Despite the resistance?

Will we see that God is one and that if we do not recognize all as our neighbors (part of the same tribe) then it violates our most fundamental creed?

Are we alert to apocalyptic disasters that our violent actions to rule over others bring upon ourselves as part of God’s own righteous judgment?

Will we resist the temptation to institutionalize and instead move on? Always move on?

Will we speak up? Or will we say nothing to no one because we are afraid?

The story doesn’t end because it is continuing to be written in our own time. So, blessings as you continue to write the story in your own preaching this year. The year of Mark.

A Partial List of Resources for Mark

- Crossan, John Dominic. God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now. HarperOne, 2007.
 - Hooker, Morna. The Gospel According to Mark. Hendrickson, 1991.
 - Marcus, Joel. Way of the Lord. New York: T&T Clark, 2004.
 - Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.
 - Witherington, Ben. The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
-

In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

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