Mission in Mark

Colleagues,

Our guest writer for the next three weeks is Pastor Paul Jaster of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Elyria, Ohio. If you keep up with Sabbatheology, the weekly text study series from Crossings, you'll recognize the name. Paul has been writing for us since 2004. Lately I've been hearing colleagues say that they read extra closely whenever his name pops up. I'm not surprised. I do that too. Paul feeds us well, and without fail. He also demonstrates that his local reputation as a model of the pastor at his or her scholarly best is richly deserved.

You'll see an even stronger demonstration of this in what you're about to read. Paul presented it last month at a meeting of the ECLA's Cleveland West Conference. It's a fast overview of Mark, the featured synoptic Gospel in this second year of the Revised Common Lectionary's triennial cycle. I got to hear the presentation and asked Paul to let us publish it. He graciously agreed, and sent it to us under the title "A Tour of Mark." We've changed that to "Mission in Mark," in part to keep you focused as you read on our Epiphany theme (see the intro to last week's post) but also because the mission of Jesus, the Son of God, is the very thing Mark writes about. We think you'll by intrigued by Paul's insights into what that mission was and continues to be.

Paul's copy, by the way, runs to 15 single-spaced pages. That's why you're getting it in three parts. Enjoy them!

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

The Year of Mark (2012)

In many ways we are in a position to capture Mark's message better than ever before because many of our issues now are like issues then: violent separation, political polarization, tribalism, imperialism. Even in the church. "Religion kills" a piece of graffiti on the bathroom wall says (Hall, 1).

Religious surveys in American Grace indicate the fast growing denomination is "None." Why? The authors think it's largely due to a politicized and polarized church both on the right and left. Churches have lost their spirituality.

Does the Gospel According to Saint Mark have "good news" for times like these? Absolutely. Mark is a theology of the cross, which has good news for both the vertical and horizontal—the spiritual and the sociological.

Spiritually, a theology of the cross says that it is precisely when Jesus is the farthest from God ("My God, my God why have you forsaken me") that God is the closest to us, where we are. Even in—especially in!—our forsakenness, faith perceives that God is close to us in Jesus.

And sociologically, a theology of the cross opens us into a life-enhancing unity with those who are so very different from ourselves (Hall, 6). That's good news, too! Because otherwise all too often religion kills. Especially monotheistic religion, some would say.

Mark 1:1-15

Mark 1:1: "The beginning (arche) of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God." The word "beginning" makes us think of Genesis 1. A new start, a new creation. Just as in John 1. Only where does this gospel begin? Not with Christmas as in John, but with

baptism.

And not only is baptism Genesis 1 all over again, it is also the exodus and entry all over again. Implicit in John's baptism is a critique of temple. The current custodians of the temple are so corrupt that this son of a priest, John the Dipper, says you have to go back to the beginning, to the Jordan River, and start all over again. Enter Israel again like Joshua did. Or like a gentile would into the Jewish faith via a ritual bath (mikvah). John is saying that we need someone stronger, not only than I, but also Herod Antipas (the temple's patron), Caiaphas & the current temple crew, or even the Roman emperor, whose agent, the Syrian legate, controlled the high priests during the days of Pontius Pilate. Like the great prophet Elijah before him, John the Dipper is not only a forerunner and announcer of God's coming but also "an agent of revolution against an oppressive regime" (Horsley, 140).

And no sooner does John say that "one more powerful than I is coming" than it is said that "Jesus of Nazareth came and was baptized by John." With this one line this Jesus of Nazareth is put into the place of sinners AND of God. In Isaiah's prophecy it was GOD who was to come. Lord equals Yahweh (adonai). And so this is amazing! What is said of God is said of Jesus. And yet Jesus is baptized in the place of sinners, too. Jesus stands in for both God and us.

And the heavens are "torn" (a violent word, schizomenous, schism). The very same verb that Mark will use at the end for the tearing of the temple curtain at the moment of Christ's death in Mark chapter 15.

And there is a voice. The only time God speaks (except for its loud echo in Mark 9:7 of course)., "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Not only is God declaring a unique

filial relationship with Jesus, but God is also indicating that Jesus, his unique son, speaks for him: that the paterfamilias has entrusted his adult son with power of attorney.

And the Spirit immediately "drove" Jesus out into the wilderness. In Greek, the word is ekballo! Another violent verb. Like driving a donkey with a stick. Or a bouncer throwing a bum out of the bar. God doesn't put a protective bubble around his beloved son. Jesus is driven out by the Spirit to be with us in the wilderness. Tempted by Satan. In our exile. In a place of danger and hostility. And yet, miraculously like the wilderness of Sinai, it is also a place of God's provision: "…the angels waited on him."

And then there comes his proclamation and theme sentence: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Two indicatives; two inviting imperatives. The gospel declares and the gospel forcefully invites. And how do I get in on this good news? By believing it and acting according to it. With the gospel comes imperatives! Not legal ones. Not new laws, but a new life driven forcefully by the Spirit.

<u>Mark 1:16-45: "Creation" of disciples and the first "new day" in the ministry of Jesus</u>

The first thing Jesus "creates" (the Greek verb poieo when used of God as in Gen 1:1 LXX) is fishers of people, common laborers to accompany him on his mission and engage in it as well. This story is just as much about the disciples as it is of Jesus. "There is no Christology apart from ecclesiology" (Boring, 57). Jesus is calling people to a new life and to participate in God's saving work by creating a new social entity among his followers and an alternative social practice. And like commercial fishing, journeying with Jesus is labor-intensive, strenuous, and persistent work, involving long hours, often

without success: “Human beings are a hard species of creature to catch” (Witherington, 85). Sound familiar? What better way to describe ministry! There is no parallel to this kind of call story in all of ancient literature.

God’s “new day” begins with an exorcism on the Sabbath. Only Mark chooses an encounter with the demonic as the opening scene of Jesus’ ministry (and the last positive miracle of his public ministry, if you treat the healing of blind Bartimaeus as a call story and the cursing of the fig tree as an enacted parable of judgment). In his teaching, Jesus invades and confronts the whole demonic world. “Have you come to destroy US?” the demon sibilantly hisses. There is an evil greater than ourselves. We are occupied territory (conquered and controlled), just like the Romans conquered, controlled, and occupied Jewish territory. And there is no better time to free those possessed and occupied than on the sabbath; for resting in God means true freedom. The standard verb in Mark for casting out demons is ekballo (13 times). The bouncer throwing the bum out of the bar by the neck of the collar. Only this bouncer is “the Holy One of God,” the very divine title Isaiah so often uses (30 times) for God.

The response to the exorcism is recognition of “a new teaching-with authority (exousia),” a word used 13 times in Mark always with reference to Jesus and conferred on the disciples. In Judaism, divine authority is mediated by Torah, which is interpreted through debate and voting by qualified scholars [sounds like the Jesus Seminar]; but for Mark, God’s authority is mediated by Jesus who simply pronounces. From day one Jesus appears as one who has unprecedented authority. Again nothing like it in all of ancient literature: the number of exorcisms and the detail of the narratives. No other ancient exorcist comes close. This is truly something new.

Then Peter’s house turns into a clinic. “House” has special

meaning for Mark. It is a place of ministry and private instruction for "insiders." It probably reflects the fact that for Mark's community "house churches" replaced the temple as the "house of prayer for all nations."

Jesus goes out to pray, comes back. And the disciples want to institutionalize it. "Let's build the Cleveland Clinic," the enterprising disciples suggest. And Jesus says, "Move on. My mission means more than that." That's what we always want to do—institutionalize, not move on to the greater mission.

Mark 2:1-12: The healing of the paralytic—a paradigmatic story of Jesus

Jesus does two things: heals him and forgives him. To Jesus which one is more important? Forgiveness, clearly. Jesus does it first and without being asked.

This passage is so important because it shows that Jesus is more than just a teacher/healer/preacher. He is the forgiving savior. We have an illness we don't even realize. A broken/distant relationship with God. And that's what needs mending first.

Which is easier—to forgive on behalf of God or to heal? Pastors forgive every Sunday. We forget what an "awesome" power this is. Do you shake? Do you tremble? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone? Pastors should be stoned for that! How dare you! We would never dare to do it had not we been authorized by Christ to do so.

It is NOT that God is unforgiving. And it is NOT that a human being can't mediate that forgiveness. Grace is NOT the issue. Some of the greatest songs of grace are Dead Sea Scroll hymns authored by the strictest of the Jewish sects. Rather, HOW that grace is mediated—that's the issue.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day already had a system for

conveying God's forgiveness: repentance, making amends, temple, sacrifice, Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the scape goat, and the high priest going through the curtain into the holy of holies, encountering God, and then throwing a great party of thanksgiving with his friends when he came out alive.

Here Jesus is offering forgiveness on God's behalf without temple, without the proper ritual, without repentance first and the making of amends. N.T. Wright: It's like a private individual approaching you on the street and offering to issue you a passport.

For the urban Judean aristocratic priests, the Temple worked well as a system of mediating God's forgiveness (it also gave them economic control over the people and made them one of the chief tax collectors via the tithe). But the temple state favored Judeans over Galileans, Jews over gentiles, men over women, rich over poor. The temple floor plan is a "social map" of who is close to God and who is farther away (in descending order: high priest, priests, Jewish men, Jewish women, gentiles) and the urban rich had more time, education, resources, and leisure to engage in all the rituals and be obedient to Torah than the rural poor and those on subsistence living. Here Jesus is offering an alternative way to closeness with God to anyone, anywhere, at any time regardless of their wealth or status.

This helps to explain what got Jesus killed—which is perhaps THE key historical and theological question to any understanding of Jesus. Jesus' forgiving of sins in the name of God is blasphemy! If Jesus is just a healer and a teacher, why kill him? Wouldn't you want to clone him? By challenging the temple system Jesus is challenging the heart of Jewish theology/ritual and the entire religious, political, social, and economic map.

Now here's the kicker: Where did that temple system come from?

God. Ultimately, it came from God, revealed to Moses and preserved in Torah. And so, there is this tension: one word of God vs. another word of God. One authority against another authority. Which one is the ultimate word? Which one has the last word?

Mark 2 & 3: Conflict stories

Jesus' new teaching with authority challenges the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees in a series of conflict stories in which Jesus breaks through some of the very key boundary markers and national symbols for which many Torah-observant Jews had died: including, table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, fasting, sabbath, ritual washings, and dietary laws.

Jesus and the Pharisees are directly at odds because the Pharisees believe they can hasten the day of the Lord by encouraging the strict observance of Torah and its boundary markers, while Jesus is asserting that the kingdom of God draws near in his own person and ministry and that one of its most prominent features is the breaking of these very boundaries that separate observant Jews from non–Torah-observant Jews and gentiles. Agents of the existing authorities gather evidence and give Jesus the required warnings in preparation for a formal change.

Mark 4: Purpose of Parables

The parable about the seed(s) and soils explains the various responses to Jesus' challenges in chapters 2 and 3. Parables become a particularly effective medium for speaking truth to power as the proclamation of Jesus challenges those in authority. R. T. France: a parable functions much like a political cartoon. Its meaning and effect depends upon the amount of awareness that the listener/viewer brings to it as the parable/cartoon challenges its audience and proposes a radically new way of life and action. It is a message that some will

accept and others oppose, while still others will fail to see any point in it at all (France, 183-184). The hidden, yet challenging, nature of parables is demonstrated the most clearly in the one exception to the rule, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, through which the custodians of the temple finally realize that Jesus "told this parable against them," which leads immediately to their determination to arrest Jesus (Mark 12:12).

Mark 4:1–8:22: The Positive Ministry of Jesus Christ in Galilee

Galilee is the place of the positive ministry of Jesus as Jesus exercises his authority over wind and water, demonic possession, illness, and even death itself. Nothing positive happens in Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus doesn't even spend one single night there until the night of his arrest. This is not like John (three trips, signs, discourses). Everything positive happens in and around Galilee. Jerusalem is a place of confrontation and rejection. In fact, at the end, after Jesus rises, the angelic messenger tells the disciples to go to Galilee, "there you will see him." The risen Jesus doesn't even appear in Jerusalem. He goes back to the Galilean ministry. There (!) he will meet them.

This Galilean ministry revolves around the Sea of Galilee. It is THIS ministry around the lake and NOT the temple that is God's real social map. The travels of Jesus takes him N (Caesarea Philippi), E (east bank), S (Decapolis), W (Tyre-Sidon).

And Jesus keeps going back and forth across this lake from the Jewish (Galilean) side to the gentile (Decapolis) side. And every time he goes from the Jewish side to the gentile side there is resistance—a storm and fearful disciples. And yet, every time Jesus persistently pushes them through. And what Jesus does in Jewish territory, Jesus also does in gentile territory. The first miracle on the Jewish side is an exorcism and the first miracle on the gentile side is an exorcism. Jesus multiplies loaves on the Jewish side with 12 basketsful left

over and Jesus multiples loves on the gentile side with 7 baskets left over. Jesus heals a woman in Jewish territory and heals a woman in the Gentile territory.

Jesus is bridging the gap, breaking down the barriers, pushing through the resistance to build a new community, a new social map that revolves around this lake. God "rending" the heavens and empowering Jesus to be his POA, the one who speaks for him, now bridges the gap between the most fundamental of all divisions (to a Jew, at least)—the tribal one, Jew and Gentile. We always like to divide the world in two. Us and them. Jesus wants to pull us together. This map is very different from the temple map. "Mark wants to stress that the Gentile mission was a direct and legitimate consequence of Jesus' own mission" (Witherington, 178).

Mark 5: The first miracle on the gentile side

The first miracle on the gentile side is an exorcism in the country of the Gerasenes. What is your name? "My name is Legion." Demons dive into 2,000 pigs (an animal associated with Roman worship and the insignia of the Roman legion stationed in Palestine) and they rush into the sea. This is the very thing that many Jews wanted to do to the Romans by violent force (religious force with God's aid)—push them right back to the very sea from which they came [the sea (Yamm) being an opponent to God and that ancient source of chaotic monsters].

And yet, it is not the Romans Jesus pushes out into the sea but demons! Is Jesus saying that Rome may be the physical embodiment of evil (just as Jesus is the physical embodiment of the goodness and graciousness of God); and yet, those strong and intimidating Romans are also possessed by powers larger than they know and need to be liberated, too? They, too, are occupied territory. They should be targets of God's compassion and liberation and NOT the targets of Israel's violent revolt and

resistance. Is Jesus saying, “Hey, they are in the same ‘boat’ as us” (another image for the house church)?

Rome may be the enemy we can see, but Satan is the greater enemy. There is a legion of demons in us all. And it takes a “stronger one” from outside of this world and into ours to free us from them. It takes Jesus, the Son of the Most Holy God, whom the demonic forces themselves name before any human does. By this act, Israel is no longer exclusively the holy land, and Jesus makes all lands clean and holy.

And what a way to look at people different from ourselves! Not as the enemy, but as those who share a common humanity and a common struggle that afflict us all. Which is of course the real meaning of the word “jihad”—not “holy war,” but rather spiritual struggle. Right here in this story, Christians and Muslims should have one tremendous bridge over the great ocean that divides us.

Mark 7: Corban

What is a sacrifice? We often think of it narrowly as offering up something costly to atone for a sin. But the Jewish people had many different kinds of sacrifices for different purposes with different names for them all.

What, however, is the generic Hebrew word for “sacrifice”? Corban. And what does “corban” mean? “To draw near.” All sacrifices were so that God would draw near. Which is why sacrifices were offered for the people in the morning and evening every day. Not so much to atone for the sins of the people (Yom Kippur did that), but to keep the temple pure from the sins of the people so God would draw near.

In fact, there were some who felt God had left and that they were still in exile. Sure, they were back from Babylon, but foreign rulers were still in charge. When exile was truly over

(1) God would return to the temple, (2) a true Davidic king would return, (3) the people would be forgiven and (4) the exile will be reversed and (5) the foreign nations will come and worship God in Jerusalem. These are the very events that will happen in the last third of Mark's gospel, but very differently than anyone expected.

Mark 8:22-26 & Mark 10:46-52

The two major sections of the Galilean mission each end with a blind man seeing. Blind men see, while seeing men are blind. The question is will you and I see after the last section, the death & resurrection of Jesus. Remember what the angel said: "Go to Galilee, there you will see him" in that mission around the lake.

Resources for Mark

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

January 26 and February 2: Parts 2 and 3 of Rev. Paul Jaster's "Mission in Mark"

February 9: A wrap-up report on the Fourth International Crossings Conference