

The Beginning of the Good News
A Study of the Gospel of Mark
The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
Fall 2015

Radical Offering: Mark 12:41-14:9

Some things to think about...

The Temple and Its People

As long as the temple stood in Jerusalem, it was the center of Jewish religious life. Here, sacrifices were offered daily, as well as on feast days and for particular occasions of thanksgiving or reconciliation. Those who served there, the priests and Levites as well as Torah experts like the scribes, were honored in Jewish society. Jesus, however, was quite critical of these leaders. In his view, they were cooperating with the norms of Roman social structures, in opposition to God's desire to see justice and well-being among all God's people. In Mark 12, Jesus is particularly critical of the scribes (literate Torah experts and governmental workers) for their ill treatment of the most vulnerable members of society, such as widows ("They devour widows' houses") and their focus on others' affirmation rather than God ("for the sake of appearances say long prayers").

The Jewish War

Tensions between Rome and the Jewish people escalated throughout the time of Jesus, and continued through mid-century to the all-out revolt by the Jews in 66. To counter the revolt, the Romans sealed off Jerusalem and observed the months-long gradual starvation of the people from the Mount of Olives opposite the temple mount. As if that were not enough, they then stormed the city, brutally killing anyone who remained alive, and setting the city, including the temple, on fire until "not one stone remained upon another." The poignant details of Mark 13 ("the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat...") probably derive from the eyewitness accounts of people who were able to flee north. The community whose traditions of Jesus are preserved in the Gospel of Mark possibly fled north to Galilee or southern Syria just before or in the early days of the revolt. Their experiences bring stark realism to Jesus' prediction of increasing conflict.

Proclaiming the Messiah

Against the dark background of the future Jewish War and the impending crucifixion of Jesus, the actions of two women shine out: the destitute widow at the end of Mark 12 and the anointing woman in Mark 14. They stand sentinel at the beginning and the end of the poignant and difficult revelations of chapter 13. Although we know from Jesus' criticism of the scribes and other temple leaders that the money that flowed into the temple was not all used in ways that would please God, this fact does not tarnish the

widow's wholehearted generosity to God when she drops her two coins into the treasury. She offers everything, literally "her whole life" (12:44, literal translation from the Greek) for God's purposes. The woman with the flask of oil proclaims Jesus as Messiah (Hebrew for "anointed one") with her silent gesture of anointing his head with fragrant, costly oil. When Jesus says that she has anointed him for his burial, she does not protest. Her extravagant gesture gathers up within it both glory and suffering, kingship and crucifixion. That fragrant oil will remain in Jesus' hair and beard throughout his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, reminding him all the while that he is God's anointed. These two women, who pour out all that they have in honor of God, show forth the singleness of heart that will be required in the trials to come, as described in Mark 13.

Attending to the Word...

Pay attention to the interplay between Jesus and the disciples in Mark 13. What do the disciples need to know, in order to feel secure? Does Jesus tell them what they want to know? From having observed them thus far in the Gospel of Mark, do you think that they are prepared for what is to come? Why or why not?

Mark 13 stresses the necessity for disciples of Jesus to "keep awake." What concrete practices help disciples to stay awake in the way that the passage intends? How do the widow and the anointing woman each model what it means to keep awake?

How would you describe the mood of the passages assigned for today? Imagine that you were one of Jesus' first disciples. How would you have reacted to these events? Imagine that you are in Mark's community, who witnessed the beginnings of the Jewish War; how would you understand these stories in that context? Now think about the world we live in now; how do these stories relate to the context of the world in our time? How do they help to develop disciples of Jesus in any given context?

Making the Word your own...

The widow in Mark 12 was probably invisible to most people, but Jesus notices her profound faithfulness. Think over the people you know well. Does anyone stand out to you as being a model of quiet, but extraordinary faithfulness?

Jesus' statement in Mark 14:7 ("you always have the poor with you") is probably ironic, as the people at the dinner have not shown much concern for the poor until they feel shown up by the woman's extravagant generosity. Are you more like the anointing woman in Mark 14:1-9, or more like the others at the dinner? What values lie behind each of these different ways of thinking? Have you ever made a dramatic self-offering that didn't make sense to everyone around you?

Mark 13:20-27 speaks of the glorious coming of the Son of Man, but early Christian communities also recognized the ways in which Christ came among them daily. Think over the last week. Can you tell a story about a time when you felt that Christ came into the midst of you and others? How did you sense the presence of Christ? How does his presence change you and others?

The anointing woman's gesture brings together both the Messiahship of Jesus and his impending suffering and death. This combination of glory and suffering is what the disciples in Mark have so much trouble putting together. What does it mean *today* for followers of Jesus to live into both his power *and* his suffering?