

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

A Call to Radical Discipleship

Written around the year 70 CE during a turbulent time of persecution, the Gospel of Mark conveys a dramatic sense of urgency, challenging Christians to remain resolutely steadfast in their radical commitment to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Fortunately, as Christians living in modern America, we don't face the possibility of persecution or even execution, as did the Christians to whom Mark was writing. Nevertheless, we do live in a time when many social, political, economic, and religious forces are at work, subtly and gradually tempting us to ignore or even abandon our commitment to walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We hope this ten-session study encourages, emboldens, and energizes the people of West Texas to live even more faithfully into their baptismal identity as members of the household of God: confessing the faith of Christ crucified; proclaiming his resurrection; and sharing in his eternal priesthood (Book of Common Prayer, p. 308).

A Living Word

This study is especially designed to encourage conversation in a church class or small group that meets weekly. The material provided each week will create plenty of opportunities for the kind of small group discussion that leads to new insights into the living word of the biblical text and the living word embodied in the lives of faithful disciples of Jesus. The study can also be used easily by individuals. The study only requires access to a Bible, as well as a heart, mind, and will open to the revelations and movement of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Each week a new theme in the Gospel of Mark will be introduced by focusing on a few passages that illustrate that week's theme. The written material will follow the same format each week.

First, there will be a section entitled "**Some things to think about,**" which will offer a few brief insights into the social, political, and religious world of the first-century to help class members better understand the historical context of the passages selected.

Sometimes, in a specific biblical text, God whispers to us from the details and nuances that we occasionally overlook in our reading of the passage. So the next section, entitled "**Attending to the Word,**" provides some helpful hints to guide you through a closer reading of the passages. These hints will usually highlight a

particular word or phrase, or give you some simple strategies for how to follow the narrative storyline more closely.

A third section will follow entitled “**Making the Word your own,**” where discussion questions will open the door for your class or group to explore how the Word of the text comes alive as we embody that Word in all the daily contexts of our modern lives.

Throughout these three sections, you will find plenty of questions to stimulate conversation in your class or small group. Pick and choose from the variety of questions offered each week by determining which ones most energize your group.

Finally, there will be a **podcast** to download for each week’s study. In these recordings one of your sisters or brothers in the Diocese of West Texas will reflect on what one or more of the passages for that day mean to them. Through these podcasts you will not only be introduced to new friends from around the Diocese, but your own group’s discussion of the weekly theme and passages will be primed by the insights of someone who is not a regular member of your class or group.

Getting Started

Some things to think about...

The Gospel of Mark first appeared at least 10-20 years after Paul wrote various letters to his churches throughout the Mediterranean world. As a literary genre, the “gospel” was very different from the formal letters written by Paul, who followed patterns for letter-writing that were common in the Greco-Roman world. A written “gospel” was not a known genre, and there were no conventions for the writers of the Gospel of Mark to follow. A gospel does bear some resemblance to the ancient literary genre known as *bios*, a very distant cousin to what we might call “biography” in today’s world. But that analogy might be misleading. In the ancient world, there were virtually no written records kept concerning the lives of most ordinary people. So the stories about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus were handed down *orally* from one generation to the next. What was important to one Christian community might not seem as important to another, and, in particular, experiences of the risen Christ were specific and unique to each community. So stories about Jesus and about experiences of the risen Lord that circulated in one geographic region quite often differed from the stories that were told about him in other parts of the Mediterranean world.

The Gospel of Mark was almost certainly written to a community undergoing brutal persecution. One major theory about the Gospel’s origin suggests it was written in Rome during Nero’s scapegoating persecution of Christians for allegedly causing the great fire of Rome in the mid-60s CE. This theory coincides with the church’s tradition that Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome in the mid-60s. Another viable theory places the writing of Mark’s Gospel in

Palestine or Syria during the Jewish Revolt against Rome in 66-74 CE. This was a time when Jews (including the Jewish sect later called Christianity) were fleeing north from Jerusalem to avoid annihilation at the hands of the Roman army. These groups finally settled in Galilee, Syria and places even farther to the north in modern-day Turkey.

Because the followers of Jesus worshiped only the one God of the Jews, from time to time they were vulnerable to local persecutions for refusing to worship the Roman Emperor and the many other gods that were thought to keep a town prosperous and safe from calamity. For instance, when severe weather caused crops to fail, Christians were vulnerable to local persecution for their refusal to worship the gods that controlled rain or the harvest. Even family members and friends might turn in a Christian to the local authorities for failing to carry out the religious responsibilities of citizenship. We hear a similar concern surface in Mark's gospel, when the family of Jesus tries to restrain him because people are saying he has gone out of his mind (see Mark 3:19-21). In Mark's Gospel, Jesus even depicts his own family as "outsiders" to the movement that followed his teaching, as he claims that his real family consists of those who do the will of God (see Mark 3:31-35).

The community that lies behind the Gospel of Mark almost certainly included many Gentile followers of Jesus and probably even supported or maintained a mission to Gentiles. Given what we hear in Paul's letters, we know there was serious conflict in the first decades of the church between the Torah-observant Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem (led by James the brother of Jesus, Peter, John and others) and Gentile followers who were coming into the church without having to become Torah-observant Jews. Parts of Mark's Gospel may from time to time reflect this early conflict.

Mark employs a deliberate literary strategy that invites us as readers into the drama of the story of Jesus Christ. We will say more about this as our study unfolds in the coming weeks. At this early juncture it is enough to point you to the opening verse of the Gospel: "The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ..." From there, Mark proceeds to tell the story of Jesus, God's anointed one sent into the world to announce that the kingdom of God has drawn near. From that moment forward, things will never be the same.

Attending to the Word...

If the story of Jesus Christ is the "beginning of the good news," what does that say about the importance of our lives as followers of Christ? The "good news" (or, as the Greek word is often translated, the "gospel") of Jesus Christ *continues* to be told and embodied in the stories of our lives here in West Texas. In other words, the death and resurrection of Jesus are not the end of the story, but merely the beginning. We continue to tell and incarnate the same story of the good news of Christ in our own lives today. The gospel story we embody is informed and shaped by the story told by Mark and the other three evangelists. It is to that story as told by Mark that we now turn our attention in the coming weeks.

Making the Word your own...

Imagine trying to write the story of John F. Kennedy without access to any written records. How might the lack of written records impact your telling of the *sequence* of events in Kennedy's life? Do you think the story of Kennedy we would tell in Texas would be the same story told by people in his home state of Massachusetts? What factors might influence the stories we tell about Kennedy in Texas? What events in Kennedy's life that took place in Texas might shape our telling of his story? What stories about his life might be more important to people in Massachusetts than to people in Texas?

Following his baptism, Jesus went around the countryside proclaiming "the kingdom of God has come near." In your class or group, discuss the various ways that the governing Roman authorities might have heard and responded to this announcement that a new kingdom was emerging in Galilee and Judea.

In America we do not persecute Christians for their faith, but we do expect Christians also to be good citizens of the nation. Can you think of a time or an event when your commitments as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ conflicted with the expectations placed on you as a loyal citizen of the United States? How did you resolve the potential conflict?

Has your faith ever put you in conflict with a beloved member of your family? How did you resolve the conflict?