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Mark 1:1-14
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“Read the Gospel of Mark Naked”

This Lenten season I have decided to piggyback on the Presbyterian Women’s Bible Study entitled, “Who is Jesus? What a Difference a Lens Makes.”

Each Sunday I will present Jesus through the lens of a different Gospel writer, then Paul, then finally Judaism and Islam.

I hope you will get as much out of it as I am in preparing it.

This first Sunday we will start with the Gospel of Mark.

Even though it is presented as the second book of the New Testament, it was written earliest. It is also the shortest, at 16 chapters.

If you’ve read Mark’s Gospel, you’ll notice it has a completely different atmosphere from the Gospel of Matthew.

If you go on to read Luke and John, you will see that they are still different from Matthew and Mark.

Now, Matthew, Mark and Luke are more similar to each other than any of these three are to the Gospel of John.

That is why they are commonly known as the Synoptic Gospels. Nevertheless, they are all different.

There is a reason for this. First, you need to know that the four Gospels are NOT four biographies of Jesus.

Actually, they are not biographies at all, they are character sketches, intended to be different, intended for four different audiences.

Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily for the Jews, and it is filled with references and quotations from the Old Testament.

There you have the fulfillment of the sacrificial feast with which the Jews were so familiar.

But Mark writes his Gospel for the Roman mind. This is the Gospel that has the most Latin words in it -- the Gospel of haste and action, characteristics of Rome.

Luke writes for the Greek mind, the philosophical mind. Here you have our Lord's table talk, as he sat with his disciples in intimate fellowship -- the Greeks loved this.

His discourses are here, his philosophical utterances, the representation of his thoughts and wisdom as a man.

But John writes for a decidedly Christian community, and therefore, the Gospel of John is precious to Christian hearts. Here you have the deity of Christ emphasized.

Because they are writing to four distinct communities or audiences, there are four distinct purposes and four distinct views of Jesus and his work.

The Gospel of Matthew therefore is written to present Christ as the King.

The Gospel of Mark presents his character as a servant.

The Gospel of Luke presents him as the Son of Man – emphasizing his humanity.

And the Gospel of John presents him as the Son of God, that is, his deity, and it is in this Gospel that you find the greatest claims for his deity.

Now, knowing these things about the Gospels, it explains certain questions that are sometimes asked.

For instance, why is there no account of the struggle of our Lord in Gethsemane in the Gospel of John?

You find the record of Gethsemane's agony in Matthew and Mark, but no mention of it is in John.

It is because in the garden he cried out and questioned the Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," (Matthew 26:39 RSV, Mark 14:34-35).

Now, the Son of God would not question the Father, but as a man, he could, and therefore the account of the garden is found primarily in the Gospel of Luke.

There, where he is presented as man, we have the fullest detail of his human struggle, but in John, where he is presented as the Son of God, the account is left out.

This is also why, in Matthew, the wise men are recorded as coming to offer their gifts, while in Luke it is the coming of the shepherds that is recorded.

Now, both of them came, but Matthew is the Gospel of the King, and the wise men brought gifts fit for a king.

But common, ordinary shepherds came to see the perfect man, the One who came to be one of us. And this was Luke's emphasis.

Why is there no account of the ascension of our Lord in Matthew?

Well, because as King, he came to rule on earth. Matthew's emphasis is on the kingdom on earth. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

The ascension is not mentioned in John, because Jesus is the Son of God, and God is everywhere.

God is omnipresent and does not go from earth to heaven or heaven to earth; therefore, there is no account of the ascension in John.

Then, have you ever wondered why there is no genealogy of our Lord in Mark and in John?

There is a genealogy in both Matthew and Luke, but none in Mark nor John.

Well, kings require genealogies; you have to know their descent in the royal line. Also, a man is interested in his ancestry; thus the genealogy in Luke.

But no one cares about the ancestry of a servant, and God has no ancestry, therefore, there is no genealogy in Mark and John.

And because they offer such different aspects of Jesus, I thought it would be interesting over the next six weeks to explore these different lens that help us understand who Jesus really is.

And this morning we explore the Gospel of Mark. I read somewhere that you should read this gospel naked.

That's right. Strip. Get nude. Then you'll be ready.

Wait! Don't worry.

I'm not talking about stripping off your clothes—just your expectations.

Everything that comes to mind when anyone utters words like Jesus, Mary, Peter, Christianity, gospels, Christian—take it *all* off.

Only in the buff will we be ready to recognize how utterly different Mark's world was from ours.

For starters, Christianity was not a major religion as it is today. Nope, it was just a little group in a big Roman Empire.

Christianity was also a very *weird* religion, making an astoundingly ridiculous claim.

We're supposed to believe that some guy named Jesus, from a village of rednecks, in the hick-state of Galilee, is the Messiah who's going to repair the whole of this stupid, little, mean world.

And get this ... Jesus is executed by the Roman government for criminal activity.

These would be among the dumbest things most Romans, Greeks, and Jews had ever heard.

A savior allowing himself to be killed? What kind of God is that???

So Mark's first *big challenge* is to tell the story of Jesus in a way that convinces people that a crucified Messiah is worth something to them.

But, that's not all. Mark also lived in a world that was not always hospitable to Christians.

These people had it rough in the early years of the movement, and Mark wrote right in the midst of all of this.

So, that means his second *big challenge was* to tell the story of Jesus in a way that would address the fact that life as his follower was pretty darn difficult.

The Gospel of Mark begins very straightforward. We read in Mark 1:1 "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

This is the start of a new era, a new age, the inauguration of a new period of Good News.

And this Gospel, this introduction of this God, is somehow centered in and revealed by a man called Jesus Christ. That's Mark's story.

But who was Mark and why should we listen to him? Well, Mark's gospel is actually anonymous.

Four early sources from the 2nd century, though, tell us that the name of the author is Mark, a leader in the early church and close companion and confidante of Peter – Jesus' leading apostle.

Mark writes from sometime in the 60's, probably just after Peter was crucified during Nero's persecution in Rome.

Now, some of you might be wondering about the 30 year gap between Jesus life and anything in writing.

How can we trust Mark with such a huge gap there? Well, it's not like this gap was a total vacuum of information.

First, don't minimize the ability of the ancient mind in a pre-printing press, pre-internet, pre-library age to commit large quantities of information to memory.

We moderns don't have to exercise those memory muscles but ancient folks had to and they did.

Second, there might have been proto gospels written BEFORE Mark, which Mark used as sources.

It's been suggested that there were source documents that circulated just Jesus' stories, and another just his sayings.

Also, many scholars suggest that the stories about Jesus circulated orally and were not written down because so many in that day held an apocalyptic worldview.

They thought the world as they knew it would soon come to an end and, thus it was urgent to share the good news of what God had done through Jesus. No need to write it down.

As time passed, however, the first generation of Jesus' followers were dying out and the world did NOT end.

And so it became important to write down the stories about Jesus so the next generation would know what Jesus had said and taught.

In Mark's gospel, we skip all preliminaries – we first meet Jesus as a full grown man, ready to start his public ministry.

And so Mark wastes no time in getting down to business – after a single sentence introduction, he doesn't get off on any tangent from beginning to end.

We go breathlessly from episode to episode which Mark connects with the word, "IMMEDIATELY" – a word he uses 41 times!

It's like it's so good, he's in a hurry to get it all out.

In just the first 14 verses of chapter one we learn that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, Son of God. *Immediately* (there's that word), we are introduced to Jesus who has come to be baptized by John in the Jordan.

Once baptized, he is sent by the Spirit into the wilderness and, once through that experience, his ministry begins.

And we are only at the fourteenth verse of Chapter 1! (it takes the authors of Matthew and Luke four chapters to get this far.)

Mark's gospel portrays Jesus as constantly on the move. He is giving a sense that Jesus's time on earth was short and that there was much to accomplish in His few years of ministry. There was no time to waste.

As we continue to read Mark's Gospel, we see that, in spite of Jesus' ability to draw followers and meet a variety of needs, he is misunderstood by many.

His family and others think he is possessed, and not in a good way (Mk. 3:20-21).

The religious authorities are upset by what they perceive as his transgressions of Jewish laws (Mk. 2:16,24: 3:2, 22), so upset that by chapter three, they begin to plot to destroy him (Mk. 3:6).

Perhaps most surprising, his followers, the disciples, misunderstand him. In the first half of Mark's Gospel, they are by his side as he heals, teaches, and performs miracles.

Yet, in spite of being with him almost all of the time, they simply don't understand him.

When Jesus tries to explain the parables to them (Mk. 4:10-13), they don't understand.

When he stills the storm (Mk. 4:38-41) they don't understand.

When he feeds the multitudes and walks on the water (Mk. 6:45-52), they don't understand.

They don't even understand who he is, not really.

And so, finally, in Mark 8:27-33 (our second reading), Jesus comes right out and asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

Their answers vary. Finally, Peter steps up and, apparently, saves the day. "You are the Messiah," he states.

Finally, someone gets it. We want to stand up and cheer our hero when we read this.

Good for you, Peter! We knew you would come through for the Lord!

Our excitement is short-lived, however, for in the very next section, as Jesus explains what that means (Mk.8:31-33), we see that the disciples, even Peter, still don't understand.

These verses are Jesus' first attempt in Mark to explain to the disciples just what it means to be Messiah, as he lays out for them what this ministry entails.

Scholars call these attempts passion predictions because they point to what is to come.

Jesus says in chapter 8, "It is necessary that the Son of Man proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty, be killed, and after three days rise up alive."

One chapter later he says it again:

Mark 9:31 "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed..."

One chapter later, he says it again:

Mark 10:33 "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be condemned to death. Men will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him."

Now, the only remaining friends he has, his apostles, start having a crisis of confidence.

Peter is one of the first. He pulls Jesus aside Mark says, and rebukes him. Gets in his face, and says, "No, you can't suffer, you can't die!"

Okay, so why did he say that? Because his image of Messiah was God's super hero and heroes don't die, they live and they always win.

But Jesus is saying that disciples are supposed to risk their lives, choose last place, and compete over who can best serve the other.

The disciples don't get this counterintuitive stuff *at all*. Peter, James, and John are expecting Jesus to become king like the Messiah is supposed to.

This is where a lot of people turned away from Jesus. They wanted a super hero who is lauded and praised – who performs miracles.

They didn't want a Teacher who suffers – because students when they are fully taught will be LIKE their teacher.

Yet, to bless the world, he HAD to suffer. To do God's will he had to reach down and humble himself and serve us. Even unto death.

So where does this leave us? What is the take away here?

I think that in many ways the author of the Gospel of Mark is challenging us to re-evaluate the terms under which we offer our allegiance to Jesus and, of course, God.

Why are we devoted? Why are we loyal? Is it because we want something from God?

Are we like children, saying in our hearts, "I will love you God... if you do this for me."

Does our relationship with Jesus come with conditions? What if God asks something from us that we do not wish to give to God?

Believe me, we are all guilty of this. I, myself, struggle with really letting go, with really allowing God to show me what God wants of me.

My worldly will keeps getting in the way, tripping me up.

Like a little child shopping with their parent, I keep showing God some shiny, new toy (wonderful as it may be) and saying:

“What about this, God? Wouldn’t it be great if I could have/ do/ be... this?”

Maybe, it would be. Maybe that shiny new toy is absolutely good in and of itself. But, is it what God wants? That should be the question.

As Mark tells his story, the twelve disciples persistently, even increasingly, fail to understand Jesus.

Ultimately, two of them betray him, the rest abandon him, and at the end he is crucified alone until two of his bravest disciples, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, return and find his tomb empty.

The Gospel of Mark is brutal on the disciples.

Some scholars suggest that Mark is trying to express his theme that when one follows Christ, one must be prepared for the experiences of misunderstanding and even persecution.

Mark's model of discipleship includes the experiences of failure and doubt as part of the process of coming to understand the full meaning of Jesus.

For Mark, discipleship means debating, questioning, stumbling, and learning.

It involves suffering, service to others, poverty, and faithfulness despite persecution.

So, who is Jesus according to Mark? He is the suffering Son of God, and he will meet you in your suffering.

For an audience undergoing persecution, for a group of Jesus' followers in the late first century, this must have been good news indeed.

Through the lens of this first-century Gospel writer, we begin to see a redefinition of messiah.

To the Jews, Jesus may not have been the expected one. He did not fit the preconceptions or descriptions of "messiah," but Mark assures his readers and us that Jesus is indeed God's Son.

He is one who came and lived as we do, endured suffering and betrayal, doubt and fear, and meets us in our humanity.

He is the one we turn to in times of trouble and sorrow. He has experienced human suffering and can help us through our own.

Not a bad lens, huh?

Amen!