

# ***Straight to the Point: Do You See Him Now?***

## **A Study of the Gospel of Mark**



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## INTRODUCTION

Not long ago a television advertisement for a national cell phone network depicted a customer of a rival network trying to maintain contact with a caller in a location where the signal was inconsistent. He would walk two steps and ask into the phone: “can you hear me now?” After another two steps the question was repeated: “can you hear me now?” As our customer wandered in circles every few steps the question came again trying to find the exact spot with the best signal. This was the image our design team had in mind as we considered the intention of the Gospel of Mark because Mark’s entire purpose in writing was to help people “see” Jesus.

We see Mark’s urgency to get across the point of God’s revelation in Jesus in the way he used language. Many sentences begin with the conjunction “and”, as though he were a young child relating a life-changing camp experience before he forgets the details or runs out of breath. 35 times he used the word “immediately” [another five times the same Greek word is translated “at once”]. While most English translations use the past tense, Mark’s Greek often employed what grammarians refer to as the historical present to convey the fact that the story is still powerfully fresh in his memory, as though it were part of his daily experience.<sup>1</sup>

Mark’s account is not a chronological retelling of Jesus’ earthly life, but an episodic account of his ministry and teaching. Again we note that he was less interested in the details of Jesus’ life than he was in its meaning. He conveyed the thought that behind Peter’s stories of what it was like to walk with Jesus was the purpose for which God became human.<sup>2</sup>

Eugene Peterson in his book *Subversive Spirituality* calls Mark “the basic text for Christian spirituality.”<sup>3</sup> It is basic because it is the 1<sup>st</sup> Gospel, on which at least Matthew and Luke in part depend, but beyond that, Peterson contends that Mark “created a whole new genre” [which] “turned out to be a form of writing that quickly became foundational and formative for the life of church and Christian.”<sup>4</sup>

In developing the study materials we started with the conviction that there is no substitute for reading and discussing the plain text of Scripture. Throughout this study we encourage students to engage the words of Scripture directly – the written narratives should be considered supplemental to the plain text of the selected biblical passages. There is much fruitful treasure to be mined in the text which nine lessons can only begin to address. It is good to give in to the temptation to linger over the discussion of particular words, phrases and verses, even if time runs out before the lesson is “done”. To make the best use of your

study time together the leader should announce the passage in advance. You may do this at the conclusion of every meeting except, of course, the first one. See the Suggestions for Leaders section in Lesson 1 for a way to handle this initial reading.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William, *The Gospel of Mark*, Revised Edition, in the *Daily Study Bible* series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, page 8.

<sup>2</sup> It is generally assumed that the author was the one named John Mark who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey and whose writing is a record of the recollections of the Apostle Peter.

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, Eugene, *Subversive Spirituality*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, page 4 [emphasis added].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 5.

## General Suggestions for Leaders

If your group rotates leadership, you may wish to provide this list of general suggestions to each person who will be leading a lesson, because they will not be repeated as the lessons progress.

Lesson leaders should use a good study Bible for the explanatory notes that will go beyond the lesson narrative. Two possible suggestions are *The Reformation Study Bible*, R. C. Sproul, ed., Ligonier Ministries, and *Study Bible for Women*, Catherine Clark Kroeger, ed., Baker Book House. There, of course, are others.

Providing all the background material that might enrich and inform the discussion would make each lesson far too long and unwieldy. So we have included some preparatory reading for leaders to use as it seems appropriate. Each leader may decide how much or how little to bring to the group.

Invite a different member of the group to read aloud each suggested segment of the text. In advance of the meeting, list the readings on index cards to be distributed at the beginning of your time together. You may wish to assign readings or let people choose a card from the pile at random as they enter.

We have scattered some suggested questions for discussion starters throughout each lesson. Use them only as needed, thinking through in advance which ones seem to fit with the

group's needs. Some groups may not need any prompting to engage in discussion on particular passages. Two general questions can fit every lesson:

- *What strikes you as significant in what we just read?*
- *What can you take with you from this lesson that will help you see Jesus in your daily walk?*

### **Mission Stories**

The members of the VOW board have long been committed to reclaiming the mission emphasis that has been at the heart of women's ministries for generations. To that end, each of us has written a brief story about a mission effort – either local or international – that is close to our own heart. You will find them in the **Suggestions for Leaders** section of each lesson in a way that is easily reproducible. You may wish to provide copies of the mission story for each person with holes punched in the edge along with a 20-inch piece of yarn. Thread the yarn through the holes so that the mission stories each month may be tied to the back cover of the Bible you use for prayer and study. It can also be hung in a prominent place to remind you to pray for these ministries.

The biblical witness is often expressed in the rich hymnody of generations of the Christian faith. We have included suggested hymns to complement each lesson for those groups who like to sing. Most are very familiar and can be sung *a capella* if necessary. We have cited page numbers for the two most commonly used PC (USA) hymnals, but they will be available from other sources as well. The group might suggest other favorite hymns that might fit the theme of the lesson. While the hymn suggestions are placed near the conclusion of the lesson structure, you may wish to introduce the lesson with the hymn or sing it as the part of the text it most references is studied.

### **Thanks**

Thanks are due to the original design team: the Rev. Aida Diego, the Rev. Kathleen Fox, and the Rev. Tracee Hackle. Our thanks also go to the members of the VOW Board, especially to Deacon Patsy DeGood, who entered into the Church Triumphant during the preparation of this study, and to whom our work is dedicated with love and thanksgiving. We also appreciate the diligence of those Bible study groups who graciously served as field testers.

The Rev. Terrye McAnally  
Sevierville, Tennessee

## Lesson 1

### Introducing Jesus

#### Theme

*Joy to the World! Mark declares the core of Jesus identity, from which everything else in his gospel will flow. Who Jesus is establishes the basis for what Jesus subsequently will do.*

Isaac Watts wrote the declarative announcement “Joy to the world! The Lord is come: Let earth receive her king.” The music that accompanies the words (Handel’s *Antioch*) explodes the word “joy” onto our tongues and into our ears as if to say, “Ta-da!” We often sing it on Christmas Day, rejoicing in our celebration of God’s incarnation in Jesus, even though it never mentions even the most basic features of the biblical birth stories. Like Watts, the Evangelist Mark comes straight to the point, beginning his portrait with Jesus’ bold initial declaration: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (vs. 15) While he doesn’t see the necessity to set Jesus in a genealogical context, Mark is eager to identify the incarnate Son of God (vs. 1) at the very outset of his story. He declares Jesus’ appearance as “good news” because Jesus says that the immanent presence of God’s kingdom *is* good news, because God has drawn near to us.

#### Read Mark 1:1-13

- *If you only had this passage to go on for a knowledge of Jesus, what could you know about him?*
- *What words or phrases attract you to Jesus from the beginning and make you want to know more about him?*

The opening 13 verses of the Gospel of Mark probably give us more ways to introduce Jesus to the world than the openings of the other gospels. Jesus was fully human, fully God; he was Messiah (Greek ‘Christ’) who would fulfill the anointed offices of prophet, priest and king (vs. 1); he is co-eternal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (vs. 10-12); John the Baptist considered him to be more powerful than himself and too holy to stand before or to touch (vs. 7), yet he was fully submissive to John’s leading in the act of baptism; he came from Nazareth (vs. 9); and he was tempted in every way we are (vs. 13, cf. Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15).

Instead of the traditional birth narratives, the Evangelist Mark uses the occasion of Jesus' baptism to tell us who he is. John, who is identified in Matthew, Luke and elsewhere in Mark as the Baptist (or baptizer), showed up one day in the wilds of Judea and started preaching and baptizing. While his location, his appearance and his diet make him seem somewhat quirky to our modern ideas, they nonetheless establish him as one who stands firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. Mark's use of the passage from the prophet Isaiah makes John the fulfillment of the promised preparatory messenger.

He began attracting a crowd, who obviously told their families and friends because the crowds kept coming – country folk and city folk alike – and John kept preaching and baptizing. From John on to the present, the act of baptism has been inextricably connected to the proclamation of the Word. Therefore, in Reformed worship, the sacrament of baptism logically follows the reading of the scripture and the sermon as a response to the Word proclaimed. Whatever earlier life events may have led to that moment, our true life in Christ begins at that point.

While all this is happening, Jesus appears one day on the bank of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Christian baptism as we know it began with this event, but a type of ritual purification had already existed in Jewish religious tradition for centuries, for which the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) had used a form of the word we use today. The word meant “to dip”, and the requirement was applied to Gentile converts to Judaism since they were considered to be “unclean” by the Mosaic law. John adapted the practice to be an unrepeatable act applied to the Jews themselves as a form of repentance of sin in preparation for the coming of the promised Messiah and as an initiation into the kingdom which the Messiah would establish. It did not include the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of those baptized, which only God himself in Christ could effect. (See also, I Peter 3:21-22)

On emerging from the water, Jesus is instantly identified as the beloved Son of God, the One on whom the Holy Spirit rests. This is the classic understanding of the man Jesus as the second person of the Trinity. He is both God and human. The words “trinity” and “triune” do not appear in the Bible. They are the way the Church has chosen throughout its history to explain the relationship of one God eternally existing in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The dove does not convey the Holy Spirit to the human being as an external reality; rather it marks the presence of God's Spirit residing in the person of this particular human being, who has simultaneously been proclaimed beloved Son by God's own voice. It sets the stage for every subsequent interaction Jesus will have with people and will become the continuing verbal formula by which Christian baptism is confirmed.

- *What difference does it make to you that Jesus was baptized just like everyone else?*

The Holy Spirit has an instructive purpose in Mark's account as Jesus is driven into the wilderness. The word "drove" conveys a sense of unavoidable compulsion, but Jesus goes willingly. He is confronted by Satan, the Adversary of God who tempts him. Mark is not interested in the nature of the temptation or in the eventual outcome, but he does make a point of the Father's provision for the Son's care in the form of ministering angels. Commentators suggest that Mark is drawing a parallel between Jesus' experience and the Exodus story of the redeemed Israelites – Jesus' 40 days representing their 40 years.\* Unlike the ancient covenant people, however, Jesus as the bearer of the new covenant overcomes the tempter and remains sinless. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit given in baptism that the Christian is able to meet temptation and resist it.

- *How does his wilderness temptation experience become "good news" for you?*
- *Does it matter that Mark does not tell us what the particular temptations were as Matthew and Luke do?*

### **Read Mark 1:14-20, 35-39**

Jesus' public ministry began with his baptism, but it took its initial shape as a call to others. In fact, it was a series of calls. The first was a call to repentance and faith (vs. 15). Echoing the previous preaching of John for repentance (turning back to God), Jesus adds the dimension of faith (believing that the good news of the promised kingdom of God is fulfilled in his person). When we turn away from sin and back to God we become eager for his sovereign reign to come to realization in us. Jesus calls us to believe that what we long for is already present in him.

Next came the call to discipleship and evangelism, and four fishermen followed without missing a beat or knowing what fishing for people might entail (vs. 17-20). The four were ordinary people, with ordinary responsibilities for work and family in the regular routines of life. Yet, their lives wouldn't stay ordinary for long. We refer to these four and the others who came later as disciples – students – but at this point they were simply followers. That Jesus promised them a different future may have made them curious about his plans, but they were at the very least obedient. Discipleship begins with obedience to the call of God, is shaped by the observation of Jesus in action, and develops into leadership for others.

Finally, after ample evidence of Jesus' spiritual authority, the call came to join in his ministry and witness the fulfillment of his purpose (vs. 38). He came to preach. The four fishermen

would hear the consistent impact of his message in each town they entered until they knew it by heart and could claim it as their own. They would witness his power over evil transforming the lives of many.

When the church baptizes new believers it takes on an affirmative responsibility to call them to discipleship, nurture them by the proclamation of the Word and help them to find the particular “fish pond” in which to exercise their call to ministry.

- *How have you understood God’s call in your own life? Where has it led you?*

### **Read Mark 1:21-34**

*How do these verses help you to know more about why the advent of Jesus is “good news”?*

Once again we hear echoes of Mark’s declaration of Jesus’ identity and purpose in the third verse of Watt’s hymn.

*No more let sin and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found*

As he has bested the tempter in the wilderness, now he throws the full weight of his authority at the spiritual illnesses that the curse of sin can bring. In later lessons we will look more in depth at Jesus’ healing miracles, but the healing in this story is of a particular type and tells us something about the power of the Holy Spirit and how it relates to Jesus’ identity and the nature of the Trinity itself.

In the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus amazed the worshippers with the power of his teaching. Perhaps in response to the teaching, but certainly in response to Jesus authoritative presence, a man arrived whose physical, mental, emotional and spiritual life was infested by the thorny presence of an unclean spirit. The unclean spirit meets the Holy Spirit and begins its tirade with the question, “What have you to do with us?” (vs. 24) The unclean spirit does not want a confrontation with Jesus for control of the man it possesses. Since it already knows who Jesus is, this constitutes the total rejection of the Spirit of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, an implied renunciation of the authority of the Triune God. In another setting (3:28-30), Jesus will call this the only unpardonable sin.



In order to call the man to wholeness, Jesus called the unclean spirit out of him, making the man the battleground in a conflict Jesus has the authority to win.

- *Can you identify a time in which you knew that you (or somebody else) were serving as the battleground between Jesus and Satan? How did Jesus win?*

**Read a Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

- *How does the mission described help inform the Mark passage? What other missions might it call to mind for you or your group?*

**Closing Prayer** (unison)

Lord Jesus, we thank you that in our baptism you have claimed us for your own and have called us to be willing disciples. As we learn from you, may our ministry give honor to your holy name. Amen.

## **Suggestions for Leaders**

### **Lesson 1**

#### **Preparatory Reading**

Read the brief introduction to the study and be prepared to discuss with the group the overall theme of the book of Mark. You may wish to read the whole Gospel in one sitting to get a sense of what the design team had in mind.

#### **Materials and Suggested Activities**

Offer a prayer for illumination as you begin the study time. One suggestion for such a prayer is:

*O God, by your Holy Spirit may we be filled with a passion for understanding your word and knowing your way; through Jesus Christ, your Word in flesh. Amen.*

#### **Invitations**

For this lesson you might want to mail out special invitations to the participants in advance. “You are cordially invited to come meet Jesus on (date) at (time) in (location). Bring a friend and your Bible, reading Mark chapter 1 as you get ready.”

As you prepare the cards for readers, note that verses 14-20 and 35-39, though not sequential, should be taken together. They may be read by two different people, but they should both be read before the narrative segment is discussed.

Encourage those with different translations to contribute to the group’s understanding by comparing words or phrases that may spark other insights or emphases. For instance, in verse 1 most translations say that this is “the gospel *of* Jesus Christ”, suggesting that Jesus could be both the source of the gospel and the subject of the gospel. However, the *New International Version* (NIV) says that it is “the gospel *about* Jesus Christ”, implying that Jesus is only the subject of the gospel. Might that make a difference in the way we approach the whole topic of Jesus’ identity?

#### **Mission Story**

Invite a member of the group to read (or summarize if time is short) the VOW mission story. As the group discusses the mission story, invite them to write notes in the margins about

other ministries this calls to mind and a brief prayer for the “fishing expeditions” they may take in the month to come.

### **Hymnals**

At some point in the lesson invite the group to sing together “Joy to the World!” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #40; *The Hymnbook*, #161).

Discuss how studying Mark’s opening verses inform the way you have sung this hymn differently than you may have before?

### **Prayer**

Invite the group to pray together, either a prayer of your own choosing or the one at the end of the lesson.

### **Notes**

\* Williamson, Lamar, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983, page 36. Also see the note on verse 13 in the *Reformation Study Bible*, and William Barclay’s description of other uses of “40 days” in Old Testament literature in the *Daily Study Bible*, page 21.

### **A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

When we first met our friend he was a woodsman. Tall, with a bushy beard, his voice was so soft we could hardly make out his words. He was a member of the broken hippy generation and coming to Christ he became part of the Jesus movement. He learned to love and heal for the sake of Christ. Craig became a nurse and married Holly, also a nurse. The two went, as members of WEC (Worldwide Evangelization for Christ), to Thailand to be missionaries among the Karen. Yet, God had a wider vision; he gave them as healing gifts to all of Southeast Asia including China.

As they began ministering among the refugees, along the borders of Burma/Myanmar, his ministry grew and included many peoples, pastors and churches. He and Holly formed "All Nations." Today when we hear from them it may be about a church seminar or conference in Thailand. It may be about a team going into Laos or Myanmar to spread the Gospel. Once it was a call for prayer for a pastor who was in jail in China; once a call for prayer for women nurses to help with victims of the huge earthquake in Pakistan. The call that Jesus places on our lives is always greater than our own vision. And it is often full of surprises.

(Viola Larson is a VOW Board member from Sacramento, California)

## Lesson 2

### Authority to Do What?!

#### Theme

*Jesus displays his authority both over sin and over the law.*

#### Read Mark 2:1-12

The last time we met Jesus in Capernaum he so amazed those who heard his preaching and witnessed his encounter with the unclean spirits that they ascribed to him an authority unlike any they had ever seen before (1:27). Now after itinerating through other towns in Galilee (1:39) he returned to Capernaum, moving his home base from Nazareth to this larger and more centralized seaside town (2:1). In no time at all, his presence became known and people arrived at his doorstep eager for another encounter. They filled the one-room, single-story mud brick (or stone) house and spilled out the doorway onto the street.

In the course of the day, Jesus' reputation as a healer (1:31, 34, 41-42) drew five particular men to his home. Four friends carried the fifth – a paralyzed man on a pallet/ stretcher. Mark says nothing that would tell us about the cause or duration of the man's condition or what his life was like as a result. However, the context suggests that he and his friends had exhausted every other option. So desperate were they not to be dissuaded by the crowd outside the door that they carefully made their way up to the roof of Jesus' house.<sup>1</sup>

- *To what lengths might you be willing to go in order to help a friend get to Jesus?*

The flat roof, accessed by an outside staircase, likely would have been made of tree branches laid over wooden beams and covered with dried clay. This type of construction would have been easy to open quickly and to repair later. Like a patio, the roof was often used for guests, for prayer or for comfortable summer sleeping. Nevertheless, the commotion on the roof and the appearance of the man on the pallet descending into the center of the room most likely disrupted Jesus' words and caused consternation among his listeners.

Already dumbfounded, the closest members of the crowd heard Jesus address the paralyzed man without further ado: "Son, your sins are forgiven."<sup>2</sup> This would seem to be an unusual detail in a story of healing. Yet the idea that sickness was a physical expression of sin was not

uncommon at the time. (See John 9:2) What was uncommon was that Jesus made the declaration of forgiveness without any hesitation or consultation.

- *What role did faith play in this event?*

Among the observers of this miraculous healing were some scribes, the interpreters of the Jewish law, who's teaching had been so distinctively compared to Jesus' authoritative message (1:22). They must have been early arrivals because they were seated near enough to hear Jesus' words rather than standing outside. Their internal questions reveal their consternation – is Jesus claiming for himself an exclusive prerogative of God? What will we do about it?

- *How do you think Jesus knew what the scribes were thinking?*

Jesus' response to the unuttered questions seems even more mystifying. Obviously, it is not possible for a paralyzed person to get up and walk away carrying a mat just on somebody's say-so. Or is it? Jesus' authority to forgive sin leads to physical healing as a demonstration of the power of *his* say-so. In responding this way, Jesus has also labeled himself the Son of Man. His hearers would not have missed this as a declaration that he is the One revealed in the prophetic vision of Daniel (chapter 7) to whom everlasting rule over all things has been given by God. Throughout the gospels Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man more than he acknowledges his identity as the Messiah, emphasizing his God-given authority over heaven and earth rather than the earthly political authority that had come to shape Messianic expectations of the time.

The healed man – for we can no longer refer to him simply as “the paralytic” – walked away, pallet under his arm, accompanied by a great chorus of praise to God for the miracle they had witnessed. True transformation changes one's identity in relation to the expectations of those around us. Sometimes the only available response to Jesus' saving work in our lives is praise.

**Read Mark 2:13-17**

- *Are there particular people you would find it hard to forgive? Why? What would you need to overcome to be able to serve along side them in Christ's new kingdom?*

As Jesus walked along the seaside, he observed a man in the tax booth whom he decided to call to follow him along with the four fishermen. People in every age and in every culture seem to have developed a natural animosity to tax collectors. The Roman practice of

contracting with local individuals made even neighbors avoid social contact with them. There seemed to be a tax on just about everything, so it is likely that the fishermen-disciples would have had the same opinion of Levi as everybody else. Yet Jesus called this particular tax collector to be a part of his “student body” and the other disciples did not object.

The scribes of the Pharisees, however, did object. Levi (the tax collector, later to be known as Matthew) had invited Jesus and the disciples to his home for dinner, and they accepted. He also invited some of his tax-collecting colleagues and friends whom the Pharisees would have lumped together as sinners because they were less observant of ceremonial law than the Pharisees themselves were. Trying not to confront Jesus directly, the scribes approached the four disciples to ask what Jesus thought he was doing. Their point was that if one ate with a “sinner” one *became* a “sinner” by association. Jesus heard them and responded.

Jesus uses medical imagery here to connect his actions among Levi’s dinner companions to the point he made at the previous healing event. The God-given authority to forgive sin is most effective among those who recognize their need. Those whose physical health is of no concern to them will not be likely to seek a physician’s care. Those whose spiritual health is of no concern to them will not be likely to seek the Savior’s care. In this conversation, as in the conversation with the first disciples (1:38), Jesus reveals another part of God’s purpose in the incarnation – to call sinners into the kingdom.

- *Do you see something new about Jesus’ ministry in the call of Levi? How might you see God’s call to you in an unexpected way?*

### **Read Mark 2:23-28**

At the start of her book on Sabbath-keeping, Marva Dawn begins the dedication “to all those people who need the Sabbath”, and concludes her categorical list with “those who want to be God’s instruments, enabled and empowered by the Spirit to be world changers and Sabbath healers.”<sup>3</sup> This may be a fitting interpretation of Jesus’ statement in vs. 27: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” By making this statement and reminding his critics of the biblical story of King David’s actions to protect his small army from hunger on the field (1 Samuel 21:1-6), Jesus both establishes his authority as Lord over the ultimate purpose of Sabbath-keeping and as one who stands in the Messianic tradition of David’s line.

Once again Jesus overrules those whose attention to the ceremonial aspects of the law had subverted the purpose of God’s law. By defining the concept of work so rigidly that not even a mouthful of growing grain was permitted, the Pharisees had precluded the life-sustaining

food Jesus and his disciples needed to maintain themselves in their ministry. Surely the Sabbath rest is intended to heal both body and soul. Mark has used this story to help us see Jesus as one with authority over sin and the law, over health and life.

- *Describe your usual approach to observing the Sabbath. Does that approach help or hinder the impact of the day as a healing time for you?*

**Sing:** "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven", (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #478; *The Hymnbook*, #31)

**Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

- *Does the medical mission described help suggest ways that your faith might facilitate someone else being "lowered to Jesus' feet"?*

**Pray Responsively:** from "Something about Jesus"<sup>4</sup>

They trusted Jesus – all these men and women.

*Teach us to trust you, too, Lord our God.*

They wanted to get well and they believed he wished them well and had the will and power to make them whole.

*Help us to see your power to forgive our sin, and strengthen our resolve to walk according to your way, Lord Jesus.*

While some had let them down others had opened doors – and roofs – and journeyed miles to make his healing touch – or word available.

*We seek your healing touch for ourselves and for those we love, Lord of our life.*

There must have been something about Jesus that destroyed their doubts and fired their faith.

*Help us to overcome our doubts and rest in your eternal grace, O Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath. Amen.*



## **Suggestions for Leaders**

### **Lesson 2**

#### **Preparatory Reading**

Read Daniel 7:9-14. Be prepared to draw the attention of the group to the relationship between Jesus and the “son of man” in this passage.

Read the following description of the sources of human authority and be prepared to introduce it as the group discusses the source and uses of Jesus’ authority.

“Students of organizational theory define ‘authority’ according to its source. A king, for instance, has ‘inherited authority’ by virtue of having been born into a royal line. The president of a corporation exercises ‘delegated authority’ which comes from the board of directors. A professor in a university has ‘achieved authority’ based upon years of academic preparation, research and experience. In each case, the source of the authority is outside the person who holds the power to rule a kingdom, run a business, or teach a class. . . . When [Jesus] taught in the synagogue, He referred to no source of authority beyond Himself. *He is the source of authority.* Without saying it, Jesus lays claim to be the Christ, the Son of God. No person on earth has had or will ever have the ‘inherent authority’ of Jesus. (emphasis in the original)<sup>5</sup>

#### **Opening Prayer** (or have a group member pray spontaneously)

*O God, pour out your Holy Spirit on us as we study your word together. May we hear what you would tell us, so that we may learn for ourselves and teach one another the richness of your grace; through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

#### **Before reading the first passage, open with these questions.**

1. Why do we seek out Jesus in times of need?
2. Read or summarize the third paragraph of the introduction which talks about Mark’s method of writing. If we take the approach that Mark’s account is not in chronological order then we have to ask his purpose in grouping these events.<sup>6</sup> As we read each section of this chapter try to pick out the common elements that serve Mark’s point. What is Mark’s point?

### **Concluding Prayer**

Divide the group in half and invite each half to read alternate parts of the prayer. One way to do this may be to give each person entering the study room a bookmark with one or two particular pictures that remind you of the lesson. Then, if you are printing the prayer separately, you could copy the corresponding picture at each line.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Some commentators suggest that Jesus may have returned to Simon Peter's home mentioned in 1:29 rather than taking up residence in a house of his own.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word *teknon* refers generically to a child of either sex, and is often used by an older person speaking to a younger one. In the present context, since the gender of the noun *paralytikos* is masculine all English translations except Barclay properly assume that "son" is the intended form of address used by Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> Dawn, Marva, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> This litany is adapted from a poem found in Carlisle, Thomas John, *Looking for Jesus*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993, pages 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> McKenna, David L., *The Communicator's Commentary: Mark*, Waco, Texas, Word Books, 1982, page 52.

<sup>6</sup> Introduction, note 1.

### **A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

The Women of Benton Heights Presbyterian Church in Monroe, North Carolina are very excited about being involved in a new outreach ministry with Joni and Friends (The Disability Ministry of Joni Eareckson Tada). We have been working with a wonderful man by the name of Byron Sellers over the last year to help with a project known as *Wheels for the World*. Byron is the Program Director of the Charlotte, NC Area Ministry and has been a quadriplegic since an automobile accident at the age of 18. *Wheels for the World* is just one of the outreaches of Joni and Friends. Its purpose is to meet the physical and spiritual needs of disabled people across the world. Wheelchairs that are donated here in the U.S. are taken to Third World countries where they are given to people with disabilities. In these areas the cost of one wheelchair can equal a year's wages. Bibles and Christian materials are also given to each person who receives a wheelchair.

2007 was the second summer that we have donated money to refurbish wheelchairs to send with Bryon and his wife Scarlet when they travel to Nairobi, Kenya. They distribute the wheelchairs to people who would not otherwise be able to have a wheelchair. They told us stories of people dragging themselves on the ground with flip-flops on their hands to get around. Byron is pointing thousands to Christ through this ministry and by allowing God's power to shine dramatically through his disability. "My message is to teach and preach the freedom we can have through our relationship with Him, regardless of our circumstances" says Byron. This message speaks volumes in a culture where the disabled are minimized and hidden. Last year the team distributed 100 wheelchairs and 59 walkers in Nairobi. (*Wheels for the World* has delivered over 25,000 wheelchairs to over 65 developing countries.) When Byron and Scarlet returned they came back to our church and shared a slide presentation of the people who received some of these chairs and the looks on their faces said it all! Our women especially enjoyed seeing how and where their contributions were being used and the joy it brought to others a world away! This is one of the most compassionate and encouraging ministries we have become involved with.

(Sandy Huneycutt is a VOW Board member from Monroe, North Carolina.  
At the time she wrote this story, she was moderator of her local PW.)

(Note: The lesson outline places this story near the end between the hymn and the concluding litany, but it could also be effectively read after the group has discussed the first section of the scripture text.)

## Lesson 3

### A Parable of Parables

#### Theme

*The Parable of the Sower represents teachings on the word of God by the Word of God. Discipleship is about learning Jesus' style as well as his content.*

#### Read Mark 4:10-13, 33-34

Jesus had called twelve disciples from various life and work experiences – four fishermen, a tax collector and seven others whose backgrounds Mark does not record – and had appointed them to be apostles. As apostles they were to be sent out to bear Jesus' own message and authority over demons to the world (3:13-19). In discussing the story he had used to teach the gathered crowds, Jesus showed his students a teaching style that would help them convey the message to those whose hearts were prepared to understand it. He taught them in parables.

A parable is a comparison, usually made in the form of a story drawn from the natural world or from common experiences, which conveys a theological truth. The original Greek noun *parabole* means comparison or illustration, conveying the thought that one thing is placed beside another to make only one particular point. In Jesus' case the point to be made always revealed something important about God. Those who had a personal relationship with Jesus would grasp the underlying meaning, whereas those who were alienated from him were often confused or offended. Jesus' parables are often expansions of what the Old Testament writers called proverbs.

- *How easy is it for you to take the lessons of everyday life and find parallels in Scripture?*

The purpose of teaching in parables was to provide a riddle that only those who knew “the secret of the kingdom of God” (vs. 11) which had “been given” to them as a part of their call to discipleship would be able to see the point Jesus wanted to convey. This is reflected in Jesus' quote of God's parabolic message through Isaiah (compare 4:12 with Isaiah 6:9-10). As God the Father had called Isaiah and had sent him to prophesy in Jerusalem centuries before, so Jesus the Living Word of God had called his disciples and would send them out knowing that their message would harden the hearts of many. Parabolic language could

protect them from those who just couldn't get the point of the analogies and attract those who would understand the point.

After Jesus discussed the meaning of this particular parable privately with the disciples, he told them they would always be able to understand the meaning of his parables even if those outside the group could not. Jesus himself stood ready to explain to them what they would need to know to make effective use of the teaching. Not only is this the first major parable (see note in Suggestions for Leaders), it is the one which sets the context for all other teachings.

- *What are some modern parables that can be drawn from life in your congregation?*

#### **Read Mark 4:1-9, 14-20**

Jesus began his teaching with an agricultural story. Broadcasting seed was the common way of planting, so all the hearers would have a mental picture of the action and intention of the sower. To get a large crop one would be generous in spreading the seed knowing that not all of it would take root and produce the desired result – a marketable crop. The sower of the story takes no responsibility for noticing where the seed falls or for placing it precisely where it will have the best opportunities to grow. The task is only to put the seed out and let the ground do the rest.

- *What is the point of Jesus' comparison? What "crop" does he desire? How does the quality of the receiving soil affect the result?*

If we are to understand the application of any parable it helps to be able to identify one feature of the comparison in order to see ourselves reflected in it. So Jesus identifies the "seed" as the word, the *logos*. The opening of John's Gospel will rest heavily on the theme of the *logos* to represent the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. In Mark, the theological weight of the word (*the Word*) is laid out in this parable.

- *How is God acting in the story; in my life? How am I responding?*

The parable carries with it the requirement to hear (vs. 9), or to listen carefully. Eugene Peterson has written:

If the divine word is primary then human hearing is essential: *that* we hear is required; the *way* we hear is significant. The parable, with its metaphor of soil for ears, provides an ingenious tool for a self-administered hearing test: What is the quality of my hearing? Are my ears thick with calluses, impenetrable like a heavily trafficked path? Are my ears

only superficially attentive like rocky ground in which everything germinates but nothing takes root? Are my ears like an indiscriminate weed patch in which the noisy and repetitive take up all the space without regard for truth, quality, beauty or fruitfulness? Or are my ears good soil which readily receives God's word, well-tilled to welcome deep roots, to discriminately choose God's word and reject the lies of the world, to accept high responsibility for protecting and practicing the gift of hearing in silence, reverence, and attentiveness so that God's word will be heard, understood, and believed?<sup>1</sup>

- *How would you answer Peterson's questions?*

If the interpretation of this parable is not fairly self-explanatory, then even the disciples will have difficulty with understanding Jesus' on-going teaching process. No matter how good their later teaching to others may be, no matter how faithful to Jesus' own words their proclamation, no matter how startling their demonstrations of authority over evil, only those who are prepared by God to benefit from it will actually come to know Jesus as the Word of God in human form.

- *List some other parables you recall from Scripture. How does this parable set the groundwork for understanding all the others?*

#### **Read Mark 4:26-32**

- *Without reference to the two specific "seed images" in the passage, how might you describe the kingdom of God to someone who had never heard about it?*

Two more parables related to seeds expand Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. The first picks up elements of the previous image. Again we find the sower scattering the seed, but this time the location is of no consequence. Every farmer knows that there is more to growing a good crop than simply putting the right kind of seed in the right place. The cycles of life are ultimately out of his control, but proceed as God, who created both plants and humans, wills in an orderly fashion, deciding both the timing and the substance of the harvest. So without his doing anything beyond going about his daily routines, the seed he planted develops into maturity. The kingdom of God develops according to his plan, but we are to be ready to participate as the disciples of old in scattering the seed-word. This is perhaps what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he told the Corinthian Church that regardless of what he and Apollos had done for them as preachers, their growth was purely at God's discretion (I Corinthians 3:6).

In the second image the kingdom is compared to a particular kind of seed. The apparent size of the seed does not give any indication of its abundant potential for growth. Anyone who understands botany knows that the plant grown from the seed produces not only stems and leaves but more seed in a self-perpetuating cycle. The seed itself was attractive as nourishment to all the birds. The seed-word at the heart of God's kingdom attracts those "able to hear it" (vs. 33) and nourishes them in faith as the kingdom expands.

In both these parables Jesus uses language and imagery from the Old Testament prophets Joel, Isaiah and Ezekiel to make the point that the present reign of God's promised Messiah is not anything like what people had expected. When we remember that Jesus' overall purpose was to preach the presence of the kingdom of God, and that his immediate task was preparing the twelve disciples to carry that message into the world we see him using biblical images that would have made ready connections for his listeners. The harvest would bring judgment, and the kingdom would be greater than any empire in history, providing the call to put aside pre-conceived ideas of substituting one human control for another.

#### **Read Mark 4:21-25**

- *How do these new images from the passage relate to one another? How might they relate to the other parables in this chapter?*

William Barclay makes the point that the four brief parables in this passage are scattered through Matthew's Gospel, each applied to a different context.<sup>2</sup> Following Mark's episodic approach to Jesus' life and ministry, we need then to think about what his point is in grouping these sayings of Jesus and placing the group in the midst of seed-word images. One explanation might be to form a bridge from what the disciples had been taught to the mission they were being called to engage.

In school it is common for teachers to test students, providing opportunities to apply what has been taught in a given unit before going on to the next bit of learning. Mark seems to be using these sayings as both a test of how the apostles-in-training were able to apply the example of the sower to the reality of the present kingdom and as further instruction in the purpose of Jesus' teaching style. Did *they* have ears to hear?

Why bother lighting a lamp if you don't intend to use it to light your room? Light is not to be hidden. Take what you now know and use it to clarify people's understanding of God's word (Word). Secrets which may have been somewhat useful once have a way of being made known eventually. Use the parable style to help you discern who is ready for the manifestation of the reality of the immanent kingdom.

Pay attention to what you hear. Don't let the word go in one ear and out the other. Apply yourself to the knowledge that Jesus provides, for what you put into living out your calling will have a direct bearing on what you will get out of it – measure for measure and then some! Compare the measures of grain yield in vs. 8 and the fruit yield in vs. 20 with the “results” images in verses 29 and 32.

- *What conclusions might we draw from Jesus' parables for our own life of discipleship?*

#### **Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

- *What mission seeds might you find to be a kind of living parable in your own congregation?*
- *Discuss the way the mission emphasis helps put the parable in perspective.*

**Sing:** “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come” ((*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #551; *The Hymnbook*, #525)

#### **Pray**

*Gracious God, the more we come to know your Word made known to us in Jesus, the more we are drawn to learn your word written. The more we know of your kingdom, the more we are anxious to share that knowledge with others. Grant that we may go forward into our daily lives as both students and teachers of your word. Give us ears to hear and voices to proclaim Christ; in his name and for is sake. Amen.*

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Peterson, Eugene, *Reversed Thunder*, Harper & Row, p. 48-49, emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, William, *The Gospel of Mark*, Westminster Press, p. 98.



## Suggestions for Leaders

### Lesson 3

#### Preparatory reading

While 2:18-22 are in fact parables in form, and Mark 3:23-27 is a parable in response to a specific incident, this is the first major generalized teaching parable so designated in Mark.

Read Mark 3:13-19 and be prepared to establish the context for this teaching moment in the intended mission activities of the disciples. What might they anticipate encountering for which this parable would prepare them?

It may be of interest that the verb from which the noun is taken, *paraballo*, carries several images that may help to spark discussion about Jesus purpose in this and other parables. *Paraballo* variously is defined as to throw beside as fodder for horses, hold out as bait, expose oneself to danger, to deposit or entrust [Lidell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 520].

A good discussion of the nature and purpose of parables can be found in the opening chapter of *Interpreting the Parables* by Archibald M. Hunter, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

#### Activities and Materials

Opening Prayer – encourage spontaneous prayer or use something like this one.

*Lord Jesus, prepare our hearts to be fertile soil for the seeds you intend to plant in us as we study your word today. As your truth grows in us, may we learn from you how to spread your love to others. Amen.*

Newsprint and marker for listing parables

Hymnals

For groups who meet monthly beginning in September this lesson will fall during November making the suggested hymn a logical choice for Thanksgiving. If it is studied at another time, some other possible hymns might be: O Word of God Incarnate (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #327; *The Hymnbook*, #251) or Tell me the Old, Old Story (*The Hymnbook*, #407). If there is time looking at the three different hymns side by side might lead to a discussion of how they relate to Mark's point in the telling of the parable.

**A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW: Sowing Seeds of Healing – “The Miracle Tree”**

During the 2006 Advent season, the Presbyterian Women of Woods (PWOW), along with the Local and World Ministry of Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church in Severna Park, Maryland, offered an “Alternative Gift” idea for the holiday season. In support of the PC(USA) Medical Benevolence Foundation’s “Moringa Seed Project,” PWOW created and sold gift cards. Each colored card included a packet of Moringa seeds, planting instructions and information for the recipient as to how the proceeds from the purchase of the cards would be used. Suggestions were to present the card and seed packet as a Christmas gift or to use it as a tree ornament. After the holidays, the seeds could be planted and, with proper care, would grow into Moringa trees.

This project supports the purchase of seedlings, as well as the harvesting and distribution of these highly nutritious seeds, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In areas where 60% of the children are malnourished, it supports nutrition and feeding centers where children are nursed back to health and where their parents receive basic nutritional information. The African natives have found ways to utilize virtually every part of the Moringa tree – leaves, bark, wood, roots and seeds.

On its website, the PC(USA) Medical Benevolence Foundation offers the following additional information about these “miracle trees”:

“The Moringa Tree, known also as the Horseradish Tree and the Drumstick Tree, is native to northwestern India. Moringa is also widely grown in other parts of the tropics, including tropical Asia, many regions of Africa, Indonesia, Haiti and South and Central America.

“Moringa Leaves are full of essential disease-preventing nutrients:

- Vitamin A, which acts as a shield against eye disease, skin disease, heart ailments, diarrhea, and many other diseases.
- Vitamin C, fighting a host of illnesses including colds and flu.
- Calcium, which builds strong bones and teeth, and helps prevent osteoporosis.
- Potassium, essential for the functioning of the brain and nerves.
- Proteins, the basic building blocks of all our body cells.
- “Moringa may also have potential as an annual vegetable in the North (trees started in a greenhouse grew to 8 feet in Wisconsin).”

(Marcia Slentz-Whalen is a VOW Board member living in Edgewater, Maryland. At the time of this writing, she was Resources Coordinator for her local PW.)

## **Lesson 4**

### **Demons, Sickness and Death! Oh, My!**

#### **Theme**

*Having explored the nature and exercise of Jesus' authority, Mark now examines the nature and exercise of Jesus' power in an enacted parable.*

#### **Read Mark 5:1-20**

- *As an observer on the scene, what strikes you about the condition of the man who accosted Jesus?*

The man in this encounter could well be the living example of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, not because his behavior was so reprehensible, but because without Jesus, he was totally incapable of extricating himself from ultimate degradation and the despair it causes. In Mark's economy of words, we are left to wonder what his behavior had cost him in terms of relationships, or how long the circumstance had prevailed, but it was certainly long enough that he had been exiled to the cemetery on the outskirts of the town. Townsfolk had given up on him, and he had given up on them.

To get from the lakeshore into the nearby town Jesus and the disciples had to pass by the tombs. Before they could even reach the tombs, the man with an unclean spirit came out to meet them. Mark gives us a bit of background about the man: his condition had made him stronger and more uncontrollably violent than most people. He was considered to be a physically powerful man whose frightful personality had terrified the neighborhood. He had the power to survive cut off from social support. Mark doesn't say how he fed himself, but clearly he was not wasting away from hunger. He had the power to break through the iron chains and shackles intended to restrain him. He had the power to survive self-inflicted wounds that might have killed a weaker man. What he had no power to do was get rid of the demon that plagued him. In fact, he did not even have the power to answer for himself when Jesus asked his name.

Mark tells us that this encounter had to be the ultimate in religious jeopardy for Rabbi Jesus and his friends. Everything about it was "unclean", not just the spirit that had taken over the man's life. Because they held the rotting corpses and decaying bones of the dead, the cave-like tombs were unclean. So every time the man went into one for shelter he defiled himself all over again. If the "bruises" of vs. 5 were actually open, bloody wounds the man himself

was constantly unclean until the wounds were healed, but there was no one willing or able to treat them. Finally, the pigs were unclean animals which Jews were forbidden to be near.

When the man saw Jesus, he came running and fell down at Jesus' feet. Across the variety of English translations available to us this simple gesture is most often portrayed as an act of worship. This made the demon scream that Jesus should leave the man alone because, perceiving the man's obvious need, Jesus was already acting to expel the source of his despair. As we saw in chapter 1, Jesus' very presence and the man's gesture of recognition and submission started a new battle in the ongoing war between the power of God and the power of evil. When Jesus acts the satanic forces re-act.

Jesus asserted his power by asking the demon its name. Identifying our slavery to sin is a step toward overcoming it. Asking the question to which he already knew the answer made the man confront the fact that there were many evils that controlled him, so many that they were called by the name Legion to make a comparison to the six thousand strong warriors that made up the common Roman legion, more than any one man could handle. Any man, of course, except Jesus, Son of the Most High God!

- *Have you found that confronting your sins by name in prayer makes them easier to overcome?*

What a contrast we see in the reaction of townsfolk with the reaction of the now cleansed man at the outcome of this display of Jesus power. Having heard from the pig herders what had happened first to the demoniac and then to their herd, the townsfolk begged Jesus to go away, just as the demon Legion had begged Jesus not to be completely destroyed. They wanted nothing to do with him. On the other hand, the man who was cleansed begged to be allowed to follow Jesus. Surely, we are most able to see Christ's power working in us and for us when we are most aware of our need.

- *How might you react to a startling transformation in somebody's life?*

Jesus' response becomes Mark's instruction to us all: "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." (vs. 19) While this might have seemed like another rejection to the newly saved man, he did not take it that way. Rather, he heard it as Christ's call to evangelize. Our best witness is always personal. What has the Lord done for us? Furthermore, the man took his new ministry to the Decapolis, the ten towns in an ethnic Greek area, launching a new outreach to the Gentiles.

- *Do you find it easier to witness to what the Lord has done for you, than to try to tell someone about who Jesus is in the abstract?*

**Sing:** “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #345; *The Hymnbook*, #416)

**Read Mark 5:21-24**

The next scene in the chapter sets up a contrast between worldly understandings of power and God’s understanding. Jairus was a man with power in his community. As ruler of the local synagogue he was used to people doing whatever he wanted, possibly expecting at least a nod of deference from those who passed him on the road. He had a social position to uphold as well as religious responsibilities, which made ritual purity an important part of his life. It is likely that he would have viewed contact with Jesus to be a liability rather than an asset. Jesus was accompanied by a large crowd, which had greeted him as he came ashore following his trip to the Gerasene cemetery, so there would be a substantial audience to witness Jairus’ actions.

Mark tells us that Jairus fell at Jesus’ feet to beg for the life of his daughter. We might think that this was an act of worship just like the demoniac (vs. 6), but Mark uses different words to describe Jairus’ actions (vs. 22). While the demoniac had nothing to lose in the public mind, Jairus had everything to lose – the ability to perform his synagogue duties, the respect of other community leaders, his social status. Nevertheless, he was willing to sacrifice all of this by publicly begging for this somewhat suspect Teacher to use his reputed healing power on a little girl. Only his posture would make this seem like a request instead of an order.

It is significant that Jairus begs this miracle for his child because she is his *daughter*, not his son. In the ancient world the role of women and girls was one of limited influence. Their life was centered in the home, and as such they were exempt from the religious duties that were required of boys and men. While they attended synagogue worship, they did not take part. They had no role in public life and were prohibited from being educated. Generally this was to protect them from the sins of immorality. Most conversation with men in public was forbidden, and when men were invited into the home, women were generally excluded from the gathering.<sup>1</sup> At the age of 12 (vs. 42) Jairus’ daughter was considered to be almost a woman of marriageable age.

- *For what reasons would you be willing to humble yourself before the Lord like Jairus? What would you be sacrificing?*

Note also the contrast in the way Mark expresses the expectations of Jesus' healing power in vs.7-8 where his compassion for the raging man prompted words of command, which set up a conflict with demon Legion in which he would be victorious. In vs.23, Jairus speaks as if he assumed Jesus' power resided in his touch in some sort of magical way.

- *How might Jesus express his power over sickness in our lives today?*

#### **Read Mark 5:25-34**

It should be noted that some commentators have suggested the woman's story was not part of the original event, which it seems to interrupt. They presume that it was added sometime later, citing Mark's episodic character as part of their rationale. However, since all three of the synoptics (i.e. Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell the story in the same way, we will assume for the sake of this lesson that the events happened just as Mark has recorded them, making Jairus a witness to what happened between Jesus and the bleeding woman.

- *Would it matter to your understanding of these events if the two encounters with Jesus were not connected in time?*

As Jesus' reputation spread the crowds grew until he and Jairus scarcely had room to walk. From the crowd a woman comes to break into the forward progress toward the response we expect of Jesus – get to the home of this important person and heal his child. However, Jairus is unexpectedly silent throughout the interchange – no protest, no asserting of his privilege – only further witness of his hope in Jesus' power to save his daughter from death.

Hemorrhaging for twelve years left the woman weak, poor and desperate. In addition to the normal restrictions placed on women, the defilement of her bloody state made her even more outcast.<sup>2</sup> On the verge of giving up she heard about Jesus. Without a plan she joined the crowd. How could she have made her way from the edge of the crowd to a spot right behind Jesus without being noticed and thwarted? This, too, seems a part of the miracle we are about to witness. Her faith in Jesus' power to heal extended even to his clothing, and she was not disappointed.

Here the story takes an unexpected turn. The woman had tried to sneak into the presence of Jesus unnoticed, but he had noticed the surge of spiritual power that had left him at her surreptitious touch. Again knowing the answer before he asks the question, Jesus calls out to the crowd: "Who touched my garments?" Bystanders and disciples alike were confused, but Jesus wanted it known what had taken place with the woman. That meant she had to expose herself to the gathered crowd. Here are echoes of Jesus' comment on the parable in

chapter four: “For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.” (4:22)

- *A common joke among dieters is that what you eat when nobody is looking doesn't count in the calorie total. Do we also behave as though what God doesn't see won't matter? What is the mistake of that thinking?*

Caught contaminating the Rabbi with her own uncleanness, the woman throws herself at Jesus' feet, expecting punishment but hoping for mercy. While the English Bible makes the actions of the demoniac (vs. 6), Jairus (vs. 22), and the woman (vs.33) all sound the same, the original Greek is different in each case. The demon-possessed man was driven to worship; Jairus was led to humiliation; the woman was moved to repentance.

### **Read Mark 5:35-43**

Before they could move on toward the home of Jairus, someone comes to tell them of the child's death. Indeed, the mourners have already been summoned. In the Near East, even in modern times, the customs surrounding death and grief are a communal event. In ancient times they were quite elaborate. At the moment of death mourners set up a loud wailing to make the neighborhood aware of the grieving household. It was not uncommon to hire professional mourners to add to the noise. Flute players were an expected touch, even among the poor. Because burial was expected to take place right away, the mourners begged the deceased to wake up and respond to their wailing. The grieving family members tore their hair and their clothes, leaving them that way for a month, and went barefoot. They were forbidden to work for a period and limited in their accustomed religious observances.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus takes only three of his twelve disciples, apparently leaving the other nine to deal with the assembled crowd. Clearly he has a point to make as the minimal entourage is contrasted with the cacophony of the mourners. What he is about to do is not a circus act; no audience is needed. Yet it will be important for these three disciples to tell about it later.

Jesus comforted Jarius with the words “only believe”. *Only* believe? It sounds so simple doesn't it? Surely Jesus knows how much he is expecting of Jairus; what he expects of us. We have been given a portrait of a man on an emotional rollercoaster. Surely Jairus wanted to believe. After all, he had risked much to humble himself before this “iconoclast” from Nazareth in the hope of healing for is dying daughter. Did his belief falter when Jesus stopped along the way to talk to a nameless, suffering woman with whom Jairus himself would have avoided contact? Surely, his belief must have been strengthened when he saw

that the woman had been healed by the touch of Jesus' garment, only to have been undermined again when he realized that the One he had asked to touch his child had now been made unclean by the woman's touch. Finally, the moment of ultimate despair came when his daughter's death was announced. *Only believe?*

- *Name some barriers to simple belief. Are Jesus' words a comfort or a challenge?*

We make a mistake, perhaps, if we take this to be a command. It is a gift. Jesus surely knows that our faith will be sometimes strong and sometimes weak in the face of the world's evils and calamities. He also knows that because faith is a gift from God it is not to be measured by the world's yardstick. Jesus, God in human flesh, knows precisely the quantity and quality of the faith he has given us. He only invites us to use the gift we have been given as a resource in our times of struggle.

Finally, Jesus came to the moment for which Jairus had been waiting. Were they too late? Telling the mourners and neighbors that their presence was no longer needed or welcome, Jesus takes the child by the hand and speaks gently to her in words she will understand. Like a parent to a sleeping child, he encourages her to get up off her bed, which she promptly does. Jesus' instruction to give her something to eat confirms that she is a living person with all her bodily functions intact, rather than some apparition.

Mark seemed to think it was important to retain the familiar Aramaic words of Jesus' colloquial speech, "*Talitha cumi*". Yet he also translated the words into Greek, illuminating the meaning for those readers who would not have understood. While the Old Testament was written dominantly in Hebrew and the New Testament dominantly in Greek, the common language of Jesus and his contemporaries was Aramaic. Aramaic is another Semitic language much akin to Hebrew, but distinct from it, that was the primary language of Palestine in general for eight to twelve centuries before Christ. At the time of the political division of Israel into the Northern and Southern kingdoms, Hebrew was used in official religious and governmental circles of Jerusalem, while Aramaic became the language used in the Northern Kingdom of which Galilee was a part. Some commentators have suggested that this little touch gives credence to the assumption that Mark received his information directly from eye-witness Peter.

- *Several common themes link these encounters with Jesus together: desperation, begging Jesus' mercy, fear, faith, amazement, and Jesus' power. What about these ideas and the events of this chapter strengthen your faith and give you hope?*

**Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**



- *How does the example given help us understand the passages you discussed? What parallels do you find in your own area?*

### **Pray**

*As the group prays silently, various members may intercede aloud for the needs those they know. After an adequate time for all to pray who wish to do so, the leader may close: "in Jesus' holy name, let the people of God say Amen."*

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion of women's roles in first century Judaism, see the second chapter of Aida Spencer's thoughtful book, *Beyond the Curse*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1985, pages 46-57.

<sup>2</sup> See the commentary on menstruating women and the impact of the hemorrhage on pages 84-85 of the *Study Bible for Women*, edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger, Baker Books, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of ancient mourning practices, see Barclay, William, *The Gospel of Mark*, Westminster Press, 1975, pages 133-136.

## Suggestions for Leaders

### Lesson 4

#### Preparatory reading

The narrative for this lesson is somewhat long. Each of these events could be a lesson by itself, so if you are not bound to nine gatherings over all, you may want to consider spreading this over two meetings.

Consider using these two paragraphs to set the stage for thinking about the meaning of the events in this lesson:

At the conclusion of chapter 4, Mark tells the story of Jesus rebuking the wind and the waves to the amazement of the frightened disciples. The episode ends with the question: "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" The answer is immediately apparent as soon as the boat reaches land. This is the One with great power! More important than simply *having* power is how Jesus exercised that power.

Here is the One who uses his power to address the life concerns for which human effort is inadequate. This is power exercised with compassion when human desperation drives us to the Savior. This power doesn't waste time in meeting needs. It is interesting to note that a full 10% of the occurrences of the Greek word for "immediately" appear in this chapter. (See the discussion in the introduction of the study about the impact of the use of immediately on Mark's style and message.)

#### Activities and Materials

Opening Prayer – encourage spontaneous prayer or use something like this one.

*Holy God, as we approach our time with your word, may we be always aware of our need for your grace and of your power to overcome our weaknesses. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Hymnals

An alternate hymn for Advent use might be *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent* (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #5; *The Hymnbook*, #148). If this is used the leader may want to move the hymn to the end of the lesson.

### **Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW: Blessed Beginnings**

A group of mothers in Mt. View Presbyterian Church in Loveland, Colorado has made it their mission to minister, in the name of Jesus, to the newborns of their town. Their ministry is called Blessed Beginnings and seeks to serve babies born into families of need.

Each week a crib, mattress, layette, sheets, a handmade quilt, a blanket, some clothing and a toy are delivered to mothers and newborns who otherwise would not have such necessities. Written on each crib box are the words "Given in Christian Love". The church's address and phone number is included as well. These cribs go to a 14 year old ready to give birth any minute; grandparents raising grandchildren because of 'meth moms' or dads; a father whose wife died in childbirth; parents who have lost their jobs..... There are many stories. Here is one, in the words of a participant.

"One December day, another Mom and I were feverishly packing the van for several deliveries. I must admit that neither of us was into 'doing this mission' on this particular day! We had shopping to do, dinners to plan, Christmas cards to write, besides, it was snowy and cold. SO! We grumbled our way through a couple of deliveries and the people were appreciative. But we were not lifted past our own important tasks!

"One more to go! We were still grumbling. We couldn't find the address we'd been given. We circled the block again and again. Finally, we parked and went on foot through the snow and cold to try to find this place. This definitely was not our plan for the day. At last we found it. It was an 'apartment' behind a row of converted shops. As the two of us pulled the crib box from the van, we realized that no one had broken a path through the snow to the door. We made our way to the door with the correct number. As the door opened, we were absolutely dismayed and shamed. This 'apartment' consisted of one room and had once been a chicken coop. The young mother broke into tears as we put down the crib, mattress and layette for her recently born child.

"VERY sheepishly we wished the mother well and left. We were silent as we returned to the church. We shared with the other moms what we had experienced in the converted chicken coop. We all became silent for a time and we were changed a bit that day. God indeed had seen the need of the young mother and her newborn child. He had also seen our need of humility and gratitude."

P.S. In June, 2007 as I had just finished writing this story, the following note was received:

“Dear Blessed Beginnings...angels on earth,

Long ago I ran from God. After your gifts and reading the brochure you sent, I have returned to church and to Jesus. Thank you so much for loving me and my family even without knowing us. Our twin boys came to us later in life and a surprise. I was told I'd never have children. God had other plans for me and my husband. I had to quit my job and go on bed rest for the health of our babies and my husband is unemployed. We didn't know where our precious ones would sleep until you blessed us with a crib. I am grateful. Thank you so much.....In Jesus name.

(Kathryn Churchill is a Vow Board member living in Berthoud, Colorado. She helps facilitate the Mom-and-Me program from which this ministry grew.)

## Lesson 5

### All in a Day's Work

#### Theme

*Jesus' identity becomes both a source of his powerful ministry and a barrier to those who won't receive it.*

#### Read Mark 6:1-12

Following the successes among people for whom Jesus' reputation was essentially positive, Jesus went home to Nazareth, taking the twelve disciples with him. On the Sabbath they went to worship. It was an ordinary act until Jesus took on the role of teacher. As a visitor, it might have been customary for him to be invited by the local synagogue leader to read the Torah portion for the day, but expounding its meaning was not in the job description for one with no religious credentials. So the people began to whisper among themselves. "Who does he think he is?" This is, after all, a hometown boy from common ancestry, whose parentage has been the subject of town gossip since before he was born. Surely, there is nothing *he* should be teaching his elders and betters! Furthermore, he was without any religious credentials. Jesus' answering quotations demonstrated his realistic understanding of their attitude: "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house." (vs. 4)

- *How are our expectations of a person's competence affected by how well we know them or their kin? Have you ever been subject to higher or lower expectations because of your personal history? What did you do about it?*

Yet, clearly the local gossip included stories of the "deeds of power" (NRSV) or "mighty works" (RSV, ESV) being "done at his hands", for the grumbling worshippers mentioned them. This would seem to be one final lesson about human nature that the Twelve needed to learn before they were sent out on their first evangelistic mission. Even Jesus' power seemed to be somehow limited by the lack of faith of those who should know him best. Only a few in Nazareth would be able to benefit from the power of his healing touch. Nevertheless, his teaching ministry continued with full force.

To those going out in his authority and power four instructions will guide their ministry:

1. Go in pairs because everybody knows that Scripture teaches that truth is confirmed by the testimony of two witnesses.
2. We often believe it is easier to approach family and friends with the claims of the Gospel, but it is not always the case.
3. Depend solely on God to provide for your needs so that all you have to do is proclaim repentance and heal as you are confronted with need.
4. Expect neither to be received nor rejected, but linger with those who receive you hospitably and treat those who reject the Gospel like the pagans they are. (Jewish custom dictated that even the dust of foreign lands should not enter Israel, so the more orthodox made a practice of shaking the dust from their shoes at the border so they would not taint their homes with pagan dirt.)

- *How might these principles help us become effective evangelists today?*

Finally, even King Herod heard of Jesus' reputation and was confused by the speculation to the point of being haunted by the possibility that John the Baptist had returned from the dead. Herod's own history of sin had obscured the truth of Jesus. Mark goes into some detail about the incident between Herod and John as though he thought his readers might not have enough background to explain Herod's fearful response. We will not investigate that background here, but we do want to note that this discussion sets the stage for Jesus' "big question" to Peter in 8:29.

- *Because we know the whole biblical account of Jesus, we may be asking ourselves why the people around Jesus can't see him yet, but what obscures our own understanding of his "deeds of power"?*

#### **Read Mark 6:30-44**

- *Have you ever thought you were so busy serving God that you were drained of your capacity to interact with Jesus on a meaningful level? What restores you at those times?*

When the apostles returned to report on their missions, Jesus invited them to join him on a retreat to renew their strength and their connection with him. Very often Christian leaders get so busy doing the work of ministry that they lose touch with the One in whose name they serve. Jesus' words in vs. 31 can make a good opening worship text for a leadership retreat

as we are invited to come be in his restoring presence apart from everything that gets in the way of our communion with him.

Nevertheless, the rest period doesn't last long, for the people find them at their not-so-secluded retreat spot. The condition of the crowd that continues to gather is as desolate as the place, and Jesus expresses his compassion for their hungering souls with an impromptu lesson on God's providential care. Mark doesn't record the content of Jesus' lengthy teaching to the crowd, but in his actions we find echoes of Moses' care of the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai and of God's promise to the exiles in Ezekiel 34.

Jesus was perhaps pleased that the disciples had compassion for the crowd, but he needed to teach them that they were as capable of solving the problem as he was when they followed his instructions and depended upon God's grace. Surely the disciples were overwhelmed by what they viewed to be the enormity of the need and by the poverty of their resources. It sounds a bit like what contemporary commentators would call "compassion fatigue" – the feeling that we can't help everyone or solve every problem that presents itself, so we will just *wish* it away. By dividing the responsibility among them and helping them to assess the resources already available, Jesus demonstrated an approach to ministry that still can still guide the church in mission.

- *What was the most significant action Jesus took as he fed the people?*

Jesus began with a prayer of blessing. Mark tells us he lifted his gaze to heaven, pointing the crowd's attention to God who sent manna from heaven to their wandering ancestors in the wilderness. Many common Jewish table prayers begin with the words "blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe . . .". Even those at the far edge of the crowd and unable to hear Jesus' voice would have recognized the prayer that glorified God for his provision in a remote location. Unlike their grumbling ancestors, those in the crowd were satisfied with Jesus' demonstration of the glory of God in their midst. Later, Jesus would confront the disciples about what they should have learned from this experience asking, "Do you still not understand?" (8:21, NIV)

### **Read Mark 6:45-52**

Mark next tells us that Jesus sent the disciples on ahead to Bethsaida and stayed behind to pray privately. We recall (1:35) that Jesus often went off alone to pray after an important event or before taking on his next work. This was now the second occasion on which the

disciples were caught in the middle of the lake when an unexpected wind storm had come up and threatened their safety. (4:35-40) In the first instance, the disciples had accused Jesus of not caring about their security, and he had calmed the wind with the Aramaic equivalent of “pipe down”.

This time Jesus was not even in the boat when the wind began to strengthen against it. He watched the scene from the shore for a time and then decided to follow it. Following the principle that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, Jesus set out to cross the lake on foot and arrived in time to greet the disciples when they landed on the far side. The disciples were already fearful of the storm, so they thought the very worst of what they saw as Jesus passed their boat.

- *How does your fear affect your understanding of events around you? Can you think of a time when fear prevented you from recognizing God’s hand in the circumstance?*

Jesus’ word of reassurance echo God’s word to Moses: “I am” – “it is I”. As he stepped into the boat he was truly Emmanuel – God with us – and the wind stopped blowing in response to his presence. The disciples, still not understanding that they were in the presence of the Lord of glory, were surprised beyond words.

- *Why do you think Mark connected this event to the previous demonstration of power the disciples had witnessed with Jesus and the loaves?*

### **Read Mark 6:53-56**

Back on land, it took no time at all for people to recognize Jesus. Perhaps they had seen his previous mighty work (vs. 5-6) or had heard through the local grapevine that the teacher/healer was in town. His healing ministry was now established in such a way that friends brought friends to lay at his feet as in 2:1-12 and the very fringe of his prayer shawl conveyed health to those who believed as in 5:27-28. The power, of course, was not in the fringe, but in the faith of those who having heard the message believed in Jesus. Even though the Twelve may yet not have been ready to “get it”, many people were ready to accept Jesus.



**Read a Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

- *How does this example of mission help us understand the passage? What do you learn about what is important for effective mission?*

**Sing:** "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #562; *The Hymnbook*, #521)

**Pray**

Psalm 63:1-8 would make a fine closing prayer for this lesson, or invite someone to pray recognizing the mighty works of Jesus the group has identified.

## **Suggestions for Leaders**

### **Lesson 5**

#### **Preparatory reading**

Read Exodus 16 for the discussion of God's provision of manna in the wilderness and 18 for the description of how Jethro's advice to Moses is paralleled in Jesus' instructions to the Twelve about the 5,000.

Become familiar with Ezekiel 34 and the circumstances of exile to which it responds.

For a good discussion of how Jesus reveals the glory of God, see the *Reformation Study Bible*, page 1148.

#### **Opening Prayer** (or have a member of the group offer a spontaneous prayer)

*Lord God, whose providential care knows no boundaries, as we open your word together we pray that you will open each of us – heart, mind and will – to receive it, finding in it the blessing you have prepared for us in Christ Jesus our Savior. Amen.*

**A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW:** Family Mission trip to Juarez, Mexico, June, 2007  
Trinity Presbyterian Church, San Carlos, CA

I went on a mission trip to Juarez, Mexico with my Daddy, my brother Aidan and my friends from church. We went to help the people build a house; they were so happy that we came. We went to Vacation Bible School, and to church. I made a friend named Ophelia. She spoke Spanish; we could play together but not talk. I liked their church. My brother liked the guitar and drums. When we prayed together my brother thanked God for the wood to help build the houses.

It was really hot in Mexico. We slept in little houses. God tells us to help people. I had fun.

(By Sydney Rowley, age 6: Daughter, Granddaughter, Great Granddaughter, Great-Great Granddaughter of Presbyterian Women who have worked for the Mission of the Church for over 100 years. Sydney's grandmother is Ann Combs, a member of the VOW Board, living in Loveland, Colorado.)

## Lesson 6

### Who Is This Guy?

#### Theme

*The middle of the eighth chapter marks the turning point of Mark's Gospel. It is the point where the disciples "see" Jesus for who he is and the point where the path to the cross begins.*

*Chapter 7 and the first part of chapter 8 continue Jesus' ministry of teaching, of healing and of feeding bodies and souls. They are no less important than the part of the story we have already discussed, but because they repeat previous points made in different contexts we will skip over them in favor of discussing how Jesus' identity leads to the fulfillment of his redemptive purpose.*

#### Read Mark 8:22-26

The urgency with which Jesus longed for the Twelve to see him for who he is was reflected in his questions of Mark 8:18 and 21 – “Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?” “Do you not yet understand?” The next interaction with the hurting and needful world is his reaction to their spiritual blindness. In healing the blind man, Jesus both elicits a confession of faith and prepares the way for the disciples to understand the inevitability of cross.

- *What do you notice about Jesus' encounter with the blind man?*

People (presumably friends) brought a blind man to Jesus for healing; he did not come on his own initiative. Quite likely, they were expecting some sort of action in Jesus' touch based on his reputation. Interestingly, the word Mark uses for *touch* in verse 22 can also be translated to *affect* and to *grasp with the senses* or to *perceive*.

- *In light of these possible translations, what relationship might the people be expecting between Jesus' touch and the blind man's ability to perceive who Jesus is?*

Jesus led the man out of village away from those who had brought him. What began as a public plea concluded in a private miracle. Experience has shown that the restoration of impaired human senses can be profoundly disorienting because there is too much sensory

input to take in all at once. So Jesus created a climate for healing that would have the least jarring affect on the one to be healed.

Blind people rely on touch and sound to compensate for the mechanics of eyesight. It is the brain that makes the necessary connection to perception. Often, the newly-sighted person can detect movement that helps connect a two-dimensional object in a flat plain against a static background to the mental perception required to understand a multi-dimensional world.

Blind people also perceive new experiences by way of analogy with the familiar. Remember the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant? Each one, touching a different part, described the elephant on the basis of something else he had already touched and knew how to discuss. Thus, the man who was brought to Jesus knew that men walked and trees didn't, but that they were of the same vertical posture and relatively the same dimensions.

- *What is your first instinct when you cut or burn your finger? Have you ever kissed a bruise to "make it well"? Why?*

Spit – the Greek *ptuo* is an onomatopoeia, a word that conveys its sound – was common treatment for wounds and diseases, because it was thought to have healing properties. The blind man would have heard the sound and felt the moisture on his eye and recognized Jesus' intention. Here however, it was the Living Water who anoints eyes, enables sight. ("He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" John 7:38)

Finally, Jesus completed the healing by adding clarity to perception. Any one who has had an eye exam knows what a difference clarity can make to the level of an eye chart that is readable. Jesus has heretofore revealed himself bit by bit to folks who had only a partial understanding of his identity and purpose. Now, at last, he was ready to add clarity to their perception of who the Christ is and what the Christ is to do.

Because Jesus was not yet ready to expose himself to the dangers that the inevitable misunderstandings would bring, he told the man not to go where folks would ask too many questions. In fact, he was not even to set foot in the village at all. Instead, he was to go home by some other route.

Would you be able to keep quiet about such a miracle? How might our sight need clearing before we can tell what Jesus has meant to us?

**Read Mark 8:27-33**

Finally comes the moment Mark has anticipated all along. Recalling Herod's confusion in 6:14-15 we hear Jesus ask the question that every person must ultimately answer: "But who do you say that I am?" (vs.29) It doesn't matter what others think, it matters what you, my chosen disciples, have come to know. The word "you" is plural in this case, perhaps anticipating that they would talk among themselves and come up with one answer – the church's answer.

- *Given the variety of opinions, then and now, how would you answer Jesus' question?*

Peter, speaking for all the disciples, finally "gets it" and blurts out what the collective answer of the church has been for 2000 years: "You are the Christ." [Note that Matthew adds "the Son of the living God" to Peter's response. (Matthew 16:16)] Yet it will become clear shortly that Peter may not have understood all that his answer would mean. One Presbyterian elder has commented on Peter's character this way: "he says what he thinks before he thinks what he says."

Without engaging them in discussion any further, Jesus seemed to know that Peter's understanding of what it meant to call him Christ was limited. Like the formerly blind man before him, Peter would need a little more clarity before he was ready to be the announcer of Messiah's arrival. As there were a variety of thoughts abroad in the culture on who the human Jesus was, there were also a variety of thoughts on what the divine Christ would do, even among the Twelve. So Jesus cautioned them not to tell anyone.

- *You may wish to read Matthew 16:13-23 and compare Jesus' response to Peter with his response in this passage. What do you think is most important to Mark's purpose in such an economical telling of the event?*

**Read Mark 8:34-9:1**

The season of Lent reminds us that Jesus' immediate future included suffering, rejection, murder and resurrection. He tried to describe that future to Peter and the other disciples and met with serious opposition from Peter. He took Jesus aside and objected to his view of

the future. Peter had just called him the Christ, and the sort of calamity that Jesus was anticipating didn't match the standard view of what God's anointed would do. Peter was certainly as spiritually and biblically blind as the previous man had been before Jesus got hold of him.

- *What do your instincts motivate you to do when someone you love is facing pain or harm? Can you identify with Peter's frustration?*

Peter's rebuke was private, but Jesus' response was more open for the benefit of the other disciples. Calling Peter Satan may have been hurtful and startling, but Jesus needed to make clear that anyone who opposed his fulfillment of his purpose was an adversary of God. The antidote to standing in an adversarial position with God is to put our minds on those things that are compatible with his purposes. Human definitions of God's will are always self-serving.

- *Where do we set our minds most often? What will help us keep our minds on the things of God?*

Jesus moves from a one-on-one interchange with Peter to a broader conversation with the other disciples to the larger "crowd" – working from a smaller to a larger audience – to make the crucial point. True discipleship is costly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has famously written that "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."\* Those who will persevere with Jesus to his earthly end will continue with him to his ultimate victory. Those who are ashamed of such an end can have no part of the victory. It is every disciple's choice. Define the Christ your own way or be defined according to Christ's way.

The Lenten custom of giving up something to represent penitence and fasting is modeled on the call to self-denial, but Jesus is speaking of self more than just giving up things. Our discipleship takes the form of his own subsequent prayer, "not my will, but Thy will be done." (Luke 22:42)

This is why the Apostle Paul would later write: For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." (Romans 1:16-17)

**Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

- *What is your congregation doing toward strengthening mission? How might these insights help?*

**Sing:** “Be Thou My Vision” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #339; *The Hymnbook*, #303)

**Pray**

*Lord Jesus, help us to see your redemptive love as you prepare us to count the cost of our discipleship.*

**Notes**

\* Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, page 99.



## **Suggestions for Leaders**

### **Lesson 6**

#### **Preparatory reading**

An interesting article posted on CNN.com in August of 2003 discusses the relationship of the eye and the brain in processing “sight”. Follow this link <http://www.psychology.siu.edu/courses/301/news/Restored%20sight%20CNN.html> to find the article titled **“Man's restored sight offers new view of vision.”**

Watch the newspaper cartoons for examples of characters spitting where the thought or speech bubbles read “ptoey”. Cut them out and bring them along to the study for a light-hearted moment.

#### **Activities and Materials**

A brief role play of vs. 32 ff. could dramatize Peter’s attitude and Jesus’ rebuke as the study participants understand them.

Alternative suggested hymns might be “Open My Eyes That I May See” or “It Is Well With My Soul”.

#### **Opening Prayer**

*O Lord, open thou our eyes, that we may behold wondrous things out of thy law; for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Word in flesh. Amen. (Adapted from Psalm 119:18)*

**A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW: A Vision for Fruitful Mission**

For more than a decade, I've had the privilege of serving on a truly dynamic mission committee here at Mountain View Presbyterian Church. The following is a list of circumstances and actions which have contributed to the effectiveness of this committee.

- A. Our pastor has been most supportive and encouraging. Members of the committee tend to the workload, but his support undergirds our efforts.
- B. Individual members have firsthand knowledge and/or connections to all supported missions. As an example, several members have participated in "hands on" projects in Malawi, Africa.
- C. We are intentional in choosing to allocate more than just a token amount to each mission.
- D. Our mission choices are threefold: international, national, and local. This gives our congregation a global connection, a national connection to PCUSA ministries, and a very important connection to our local community.
- E. Communicating with our own congregation via "Minutes for Mission" during worship services is of utmost importance. We encourage questions and are ever mindful of accountability.
- F. Pray for and trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit.

(Diane VanderMeer is a member of the VOW Board living in Loveland, Colorado.)

## Lesson 7

### The Last Parable and the Last Question

#### Theme

*Jesus teaches faithfulness to God's purpose as the overriding decision criterion for a life of discipleship.*

#### Read Mark 12:1-12

Jesus is coming to the close of his teaching ministry, but he has one more important parable to tell. This one will need no explanation, for the disciples know now what will soon happen (8:31). This parable is for the benefit of all the religious leaders who had challenged his authority yet again following the scene in the Temple. We recall from the Parable of the Sower that Jesus had told the Twelve the purpose of such a teaching pattern was to speak to those who had "ears to hear." (4:9, 23)

Verse 12 says that those who heard the parable "perceived that he had told [it] against them." All the major English versions translate the Greek preposition as meaning "against" rather than the more neutral "about" or "with reference to", which it can also mean. Why do you think the translators chose the stronger word for the leaders' opinion of Jesus' motives?

By now, Jesus has a sizable following among the people in Jerusalem. Since the Passover feast is approaching there are more people than usual from all over the world in the city and surrounding towns. He had already been confronted by the religious leaders over his authority to cleanse the temple of all the corrupt sacrifice sellers and money changers. (11:15-33) His challengers were already looking for a way to kill him that would fall within both religious and secular law.

- *How would you identify the various characters in this parable?*

It was a custom in Israel that land was contracted to tenant-farmers, what we might call share-croppers, for a portion of the profits the well-tended crops would bring. It also was the custom that land belonging to one who died without heirs could become the property of

the tenants. The unscrupulous tenants in the story sought to leave the land-owner without an heir so that they might become the logical inheritors.

Jesus has used the images from the vision the prophet Isaiah had before he heard the call of God (Isaiah 5:1-25) to ground his teaching about how God's people have acted over the centuries. The logical outcome will be his own death. Like the unfaithful leaders of Isaiah's time, the Israel of Jesus will have to deal with the consequences of God's wrath.

Imbedded in this parable is a mini-parable drawn from Psalm 118:22-23. The religious leaders of Israel were charged with being the builders of the nation. Just because they have rejected Jesus, doesn't mean they are rid of him. God has promised ultimate victory to his Son, who will be that person who holds everything together and brings God's purpose to completion. The cornerstone was not the one at the foundation level as it is in modern construction. The image is more like that of a keystone at the top of an archway or the pinnacle of the building.

- *If you were intending to trap Jesus into incriminating himself, how would you go about it?*

While the text doesn't say that the various parties who came to Jesus were in league with one another against him, we are about to see how all the public forces of Israel – religious and secular – came together to set up Jesus for destruction. In Jerusalem the people were governed by the Jewish Council. We often call it the Sanhedrin although our English versions use the word "council". Sanhedrin means "those who are seated together". The Sanhedrin was composed of 71 people of unquestioned Jewish ancestry; its authority was granted by the Roman governors and carried both civil and religious weight. The Romans "de-commissioned" the Sanhedrin after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Each of the encounters Mark records in the next verses shows how all the various elements of Jewish leadership tried to create a reason to accuse Jesus before the Sanhedrin.

### **Read Mark 12:13-17**

In any society or organization there are always parties, sects and factions which are independent of one another based on differences in beliefs or purposes. Each group may align itself with another for a time to accomplish a particular goal. At other times they will be opponents. In this case, the alliance was between the Pharisees and the Herodians. Once

before during Jesus ministry they had formed an alliance against him (3:6), and once Jesus had warned the Twelve against the corrupting influence of such an alliance (8:15).

The Pharisees were a religious sect within Judaism known for the merging of extension of the Law of Moses with oral tradition that filled Jewish life with so much legal minutiae that it was impossible to keep the whole law. For example, they defined what constituted work so exactly that Sabbath-breaking was almost always unavoidable. Their attitude was often what we would call holier-than-thou. They held seats on the Sanhedrin.

The Herodians were more of a secular political party loyal to the Herod family dynasty and intent on protecting their own power by keeping the public peace according to Roman standards. Both the Pharisees and the Herodians found it to their advantage to maintain the *status quo*, so they came together to put Jesus squarely between Jewish tradition and Roman law. If Jesus leaned in the direction of one of the parties, the other could accuse him either to the Sanhedrin or to the Roman governor.

Should we pay the taxes that Rome requires? The amount of the tax was about a day's wage for an ordinary worker. For many it was a financial hardship. It was probably less burdensome for Herod's family and many of the Pharisees than for the average person, but it represented a state of servitude even for them. The coin with which the tax was to be paid was considered a "graven image", and the Pharisees considered even possessing one a violation of the commandment against idolatry. Herod's tax collectors, on the other hand, would not be concerned about anything beyond getting enough revenue to satisfy Rome. Yet, the particular tax to which they referred was considered to be a tribute to Caesar himself. (The word here used for "tax" means "tribute". It would amount to a sacrifice made to Caesar who was considered to be a divine being.)

Jesus knew that neither party was really interested in the answer to their question, so he answered with a question of his own. He indicated that he knew their motive. As he had done with the question of his authority (11:33), Jesus challenged them to answer his question first. Asking to have the denarius brought, Jesus showed both that he was *not* in possession of such a coin and also showed who among the group of questioners *was*. Now who is guilty of idolatry? Asking whose likeness was on the coin did not address the validity of the tax laws so much as it indicated that Jesus did not consider it a matter of great importance. Clearly, he was not the revolutionary they wished to label him as being.

- *What is the real issue Jesus chose to address with his answer? What actually belongs to Caesar anyway? What belongs to God?*

The spirit in which the tax is paid and the coin given is more important than the outward act. If one pays the tax as an act of civil obedience while acknowledging God alone as the one worthy of our sacrifice and the tribute of ultimate obedience, the two positions can not be contrary to one another. Here again, Jesus may presume that his audience knows their Scriptures. Psalm 50 tells us that God calls the faithful to him and declares as a part of the covenant he has made with us that “the world and all that is in it is mine” (Psalm 50:12b). It is possible to be faithful to God and be good citizens of the nation in which he has placed us once we understand that it is all God’s anyway.

- *What do you think the disciples learned from this encounter with the Pharisees and Herodians?*

#### **Read Mark 12:18-27**

The Sanhedrin also had among its members a priestly sect known as the Sadducees, supposed descendants of David’s own high priest Zadok. They were much more strict constructionists when it came to the Law of Moses, rejecting the expansion of the oral tradition. As the text says, they did not believe in the possibility of resurrection or eternal life, because they could find no grounds for such a doctrine in the Torah. Nevertheless, they used the concept to try to undermine Jesus’ credibility, for he had predicted his own resurrection would occur just three days past his death.

The hypothetical story the Sadducees laid out for Jesus came from the law of the kinsman-redeemer laid out in Deuteronomy 25. A woman who had been more than faithful to that command died after surviving her husband and six of his brothers. When they rise from the dead, there may be quite a conflict as the husbands, all of them legitimate according to Mosaic Law, vie for her affections and marital rights. Surely God did not intend to his faithful people to return to polygamy, Jesus!

- *What do you think is the primary issue in the question?*

Jesus charged them with not knowing their own Scriptures. They could not find anything about resurrection in the Torah, but Jesus could tell them exactly where to look. The story of Moses’ first encounter with God in Exodus 3 sets the doctrine of eternal life in the very

character of God's eternal being. It is not necessary to go beyond the Torah into the writings of the prophets in order to see God's power that would once again be revealed in the resurrected Christ.

As a further word of correction, Jesus told the Sadducees that they didn't know a whole lot about God's design for marriage either.

- *How do we understand the purpose of marriage scripturally, and within the tradition of the church?*

*The Book of Common Worship* gives an opening Statement on the Gift of Marriage (page 842) which includes the instruction that "God gave us marriage for the well-being of human society." Marriage is for this life alone. It models our covenantal relationship to God and the churches relationship under the New Covenant to Christ. In the resurrection life of God's eternal Kingdom, human relationships give way to the relationship of each faithful individual to God alone.

#### **Read Mark 12:28-34**

- *Can you name one aspect of your Christian walk that is most important to you?*

Finally, the scribes are represented as one confronts Jesus on the commandments. The scribes were the interpreters and teachers of the Law. Their writings applied the law to everyday situations. If he thought his question was going to be the one on which Jesus could be charged, he would be sorely disappointed. He could do nothing more than humbly agree with Jesus' answer. By asking what the first (or foremost or most important) commandment was, Mark had the scribe give Jesus the opportunity to choose between the oral traditions of the Pharisees or the seemingly more limited list of the Torah.

Jesus answered with the affirmation of faith which the people of Israel had declared since their days in the wilderness of Sinai, the glorification of God and the obligation of the believer to love him completely. Then, as if anticipating another question from the scribe, Jesus went a step further. The second most important commandment is to love one's neighbor.

- *How is the second commandment connected to the first?*

The scribe declared that Jesus had answered appropriately and asked no more questions. On the basis of Jesus' answer he was forced to acquit Jesus in the court of public opinion. We can almost see the light bulb go off over the scribe's head. He almost saw Jesus as he was meant to be seen. This particular scribe's faithfulness to his calling made him stop short of putting Jesus in the necessary untenable position for accusation before the Sanhedrin. He understood that faithful worship and service to God was more important than the outward trappings of religious life on which Israel had depended for so long.

Jesus recognized the scribe's moment of decision and commended him for his humility and honesty. We all want to think we understand what God desires. We all want to know we are headed toward the Kingdom of God. For the scribe the only thing lacking in his complete conversion was faith in Jesus as God's Messiah. We won't ever know if that scribe witnessed the risen Christ or came to faith by the proclamation of those who did. We do know that he came mighty close to what God intends for all of us.

- *What do these four passages have in common?*

#### **Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

- *How do our personal relationships inform the way we understand mission?*

**Sing:** *"Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me"* (Presbyterian Hymnal, #366; The Hymnbook, #404)

#### **Pray**

*Holy God, you are Lord of time and eternity. Grant that we may love and serve you with our whole heart and soul and strength. By your grace, make us able to love our neighbors. We pray that we will be found faithful to your Word, Christ Jesus. Amen.*



## Suggestions for Leaders

### Lesson 7

#### Preparatory reading

Re-read Mark 11 and be prepared to set the context of this lesson in the entry of Jesus and the Twelve into Jerusalem.

Read Isaiah 5:1-25 to give an understanding of the way this parable would have been heard by the religious leadership.

Take a look at the *Book of Confessions*. The Scots Confession (Chapter XXIV), the Second Helvetic Confession (Chapter XXX), the Westminster Confession (Chapter XXV/XXIII), and the Theological Declaration of Barmen (8.22-8.24) all have comments to make about God's intention for human governance.

See this website for a picture of the tribute coin to show the group.

<http://www.aaacoinjewelry.com/images/roman%20imperial%20denarius%2014-37AD%20blk1.jpg>

#### Activities and Materials

Many of the members of your study group who contribute to national and international missions receive newsletters from those mission organizations. In advance of your meeting for this lesson invite members to bring newsletters to share and circulate. This may open the group to a richer understanding of what particular missions can mean to individuals other than what the whole congregation supports.

The hymn text may be unfamiliar to some, but the tune, St. Catherine, is the one to which we sing *Faith of our Fathers*.

#### Opening Prayer

*Lord Jesus, you are still revealing yourself to us in your word. Help us to be faithful and attentive disciples as we study together this day; in your holy name. Amen.*

### **A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

Once upon a time, nearly 15 years ago, a special relationship began between two pastors' wives – Rosario Gallegos, and me, Sylvia Dooling. Today, our friendship is a rare and unusual treasure. We are sisters in Christ who do not speak the same language. But, we are unarguably one in the Spirit.

It all began during an adult work-study trip to Agua Prieta, Mexico. Our church's contact in Mexico was a PC(USA)'s mission project known as Frontera de Cristo, and our congregation is one of several in our Presbytery that has developed a working relationship with the project in general, and more particularly with a growing Presbyterian congregation in Agua Prieta known as Lily of the Valley Church.

On this particular work-study trip, it was our group's tasks to dig the footings for the new manse, set the re-bar, and pour the concrete foundation. But, more than a physical foundation was set during that visit to Agua Prieta; a foundation of love, mutuality and reciprocal support was also laid.

In the years that have followed, our husbands have preached in each other's churches, we have stayed in each other's homes, we have eaten at each other's tables, we have prayed together, we have wept together, and we have rejoiced together – they in Spanish, and we in English. In short, we have enjoyed a "pentecostal" sharing of life.

Rosario has taught me to meet the challenges of life with creativity and enthusiasm. She will forever be in my heart, and I thank God for this reciprocal mission.

(Sylvia Dooling, President of VOW, lives in Loveland, Colorado.)

## Lesson 8

### The Last Day

#### Theme

*The final day of Jesus' earthly life and the events that led up to it are the fulfillment of his whole ministry and everything he has tried to teach his disciples.*

#### Read Mark 14:3-9

- *How would you like to be remembered?*

Preparing to celebrate the Passover, Jesus stopped on his way to Jerusalem in the nearby town of Bethany where he had many friends, sharing the fellowship of the table with a man named Simon the Leper. An unidentified woman came in with an expensive flask containing about three-quarters of a cup of even more expensive, imported, perfumed ointment.

Snapping the neck of the flask, she poured the ointment all over Jesus' head. Altogether she had offered him about a year's wages for an ordinary laborer. We know nothing about how she managed it, whether from abundance or poverty (12:44). The purpose of the ointment was more important than its cost. We don't know what prompted the lavish gift, but Jesus took it as an opportunity to make the point about his death soon to come.

The others at the table immediately reacted negatively, but kept their thoughts to themselves.\* In Mark's account, it is not clear that their concern for the poor was openly expressed in their scolding of the caring woman. However, we know their thoughts on the basis of Jesus' verbal rebuke. Other gospel accounts put these thoughts into open conversation. (Matthew 26:6-13; John 12:1-8) The Gospel of John even attributes the words to Judas, suggesting that it was this interchange that prompted him to finally betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin. Yet Mark does not specifically connect the unexpressed thoughts to Judas' exit from the scene.

Jesus defended the woman's actions, scolding the scolders instead. How odd that he would say she was preparing for his burial. We are all called to serve Jesus in different ways. Simon provided hospitality. The woman provided the anointing. What did the others have to provide? Only criticism. We can choose to do good to "the poor" whenever we like. Jesus does not call us to decide how another should express her love of the Savior. In recognizing the woman's place in the Gospel story, he affirms also the way the others in the room are to be remembered by contrast?

- *How might we express our concern for the poor in a situation like this? Does Jesus' reaction seem consistent with what we know about him already?*

The *Presbyterian Book of Order*, as a basic understanding of our service to Jesus Christ in mission, tells us that “[t]he Church is called to undertake [its] mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ” (G-3.0400). Like the woman at the table, we do what we can.

- *What concerns might prevent us from taking the same risks as the woman?*

### **Read Mark 14:17-26**

The Passover celebration has been prepared. Now Jesus again reclines at the table, this time with only the chosen Twelve. The lamb had been sacrificed according to the time-tested reenactment of the original blood sacrifice that Moses had ordered for the protective marking of Hebrew homes in Egypt. The unleavened bread was on the table as directed. The dishes for dipping the bread and herbs were all set out according to custom. The cups of wine were ready for the memorial prayers.

Then between the predictions of his betrayal by Judas and his denial by Peter, Jesus took the familiar symbols of the Old Covenant and used them to mark the essential nature of the New Covenant. Jesus himself would be the sacrificial lamb for all time. In establishing this new Supper he also gave new meaning to the familiar bread and wine. He called the bread his body and the wine his blood. The Church repeats Jesus' own words (as expanded by Paul in I Corinthians 11:23-26) each time we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as we recognize his presence by the power of the Holy Spirit.

- *Describe for the group a meaningful Communion service. What made it meaningful for you?*

In the Reformed tradition we acknowledge that the bread and the wine (or juice) do not change physically into flesh and blood, yet Jesus is truly present in ways that are humanly indescribable. John Calvin has put it most beautifully: “. . . from the physical things set forth in the Sacrament we are led by a sort of analogy to spiritual things. Thus, when bread is given as a symbol of Christ's body, we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ's body is the only food to invigorate and

enliven our soul. When we see wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ's blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden. For if we sufficiently consider what value we have received from the giving of that most holy body and the shedding of that blood, we shall clearly perceive that those qualities of bread and wine are, according to such an analogy, excellently adapted to express those things when they are communicated to us." (Institutes, IV.17. iii)

Mark concludes his account of the unforgettable meal with the memory of the last hymn they sang together. No where else does Scripture record that Jesus and his friends ever sang during his ministry. Yet, no Communion service ever seems complete without a concluding hymn. Perhaps the Passover celebration provided them with the victory song of Moses and Miriam at the far side of the Red Sea (Exodus 15) or the *Hallel* of the Psalter (Psalm 118): "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

### **Read Mark 14:53-65**

At the conclusion of our last lesson we saw that Jesus had once again frustrated the desire of the Jewish leaders to trap him into an executable offense (12:34). Yet their plotting never really ended. They wanted his ministry and his life over before the next Passover celebration began just two days hence. It seems that the members of the Sanhedrin were always fearful of the reaction of the public, so they wanted to take care to avoid even the appearance of desecrating the holy festival. (vs. 1-2)

By the time they were able to arrest Jesus and bring him to trial, however, Passover had already begun. This made the trial itself illegitimate from the outset. It is useful to recall that Jewish days began at sundown rather than in the morning, so the members of the Sanhedrin may have left their own family tables to convene the trial. In addition, the witnesses against Jesus "bore false witness" in direct violation of the Ninth Commandment.

The primary charge against Jesus was that he had threatened to destroy the Jerusalem Temple, indicating that he had the power to rebuild in three days what had taken decades to complete (John 2:19-20, compare Mark 13:2 and 8:31). Begun by Herod the Great, the temple to which Jesus referred was the third to be built. The original temple of King Solomon had been destroyed at the time of the Babylonian exile and subsequently re-built by Zerubbabel at the time the exiles were allowed to return under Persian rule. The second temple was destroyed by the Romans some 60 years before Jesus' birth. Forty years later

Herod began again, but on a much grander scale. By the time of Jesus' trial, this third temple was the crowning glory of the Herodian Dynasty and of the Sanhedrin, as well.

- *What was Jesus really talking about when he predicted the three days to rebuild the temple?*

This Temple was designed on the same pattern as the original with a curtained chamber called the Holy of Holies into which only the High Priest was allowed to go annually for the Day of Atonement. This was the place where God's presence was to be encountered. Later, during the crucifixion, this curtain would be torn in two because Jesus' atoning death would make the historic meaning no longer necessary.

Outside the Holy of Holies, in one of the courtyards that ringed the Temple, the trial continued while Jesus said nothing in his own defense (Isaiah 53:7). It has been suggested that in not answering the question posed in verse 60, Jesus did answer most eloquently. He was not guilty of any offense charged. By answering the direct question of his identity with "I am", Jesus referred yet again to God's self-disclosure to Moses.

#### **Read Mark 15:1-20**

Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin and sent on to Pontius Pilate for sentencing since they had no authority to impose the death penalty under Roman law. In Pilate's court, Jesus again had the opportunity to defend himself, but except for one brief, inconclusive response he continued his silence. Pilate had every reason to wonder how to proceed. The accused had no defense, and the accusers seemed to have the support of the people who waited outside the Governor's headquarters for a verdict.

Knowing the custom the Roman's had established with the people of Jerusalem, a crowd had gathered in the street in expectation. Pilate would soon release one prisoner as a sort of gift to the people in celebration of the Passover.

- *What symbolism do you find in this custom?*

Arrested for insurrection, a convicted murderer named Barabbas was among those who might be released. Mark does not tell us how many other prisoners there might have been, but he does indicate that there were others. On that basis, we do not know why Pilate chose Barabbas as the logical alternative to Jesus. Perhaps he wanted to draw a contrast between

the one whose only offense seemed to be theological and the one whose crimes were obvious. Nevertheless, the crowd, incited by the chief priests, chose Barabbas for release and Jesus for death.

At this point Pilate had no recourse but to comply with the desires of the shouting mob, many of whom may already have been friends of Barabbas. So Jesus was led away to be beaten and prepared for crucifixion. Intending to break the prisoner's spirit, the soldiers sought to humiliate this "King of the Jews" with a crown and a purple robe. The thorny vines that made up the crown were intended to draw blood, particularly when Jesus was also being hit over the head. The beating would also weaken the prisoner physically. Now all is ready for the final event of the day.

### **Read Mark 15:21-41**

Already weak and bleeding, Jesus is led down the road to climb the skull-shaped hill to be crucified. From a private and clandestine trial, Jesus was led to a very public death. Ancient writers like Cicero and Flavius Josephus have noted the extreme brutality of death by crucifixion. This ghastly sight of several crosses filled with criminals and political rebels was expected to be a deterrent to further crime and rebellion.

*In Reformed worship settings, the sanctuary cross is empty, symbolizing Jesus' victory over death in the resurrection. Can this desensitize us to the extreme nature of crucifixion?*

On the cross, Jesus was positioned so that his arms would bear most of the weight of his body. His knees were bent and his feet were nailed to the cross, probably through the ankle bone, to keep his knees in that position. In this position, the lungs were unable to expand enough to breathe properly, eventually causing death by asphyxiation over several days. To breathe, the crucified one used his legs to push himself upright, putting stress on his arms until he could stand the pain no longer. Then he would sink back down to relieve the increasingly painful arm joints until he needed to gasp for breath again.

The crucifixion was awful. But lots of people have been crucified. What made Jesus' crucifixion so terrible was that "He became sin for us" (I Corinthians 5:21). He became the full consequence/embodiment of evil in this world. Then he paid a terrible price for it. For this reason, Calvin suggests that the Apostles' Creed should read: suffered under Pontius Pilate, he descended into hell. He died and was buried."

*What comforts you in times of stress? As a group read Psalm 22 and discuss the interplay between grief and consolation the Psalmist expresses. Why do you suppose Mark recorded only this last saying of Jesus?*

Mark records Jesus' final outcry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Bystanders hearing the Aramaic dialect mistook his meaning and thought he called for Elijah. We recall that it was predicted that Elijah would return before the Messiah would appear. Then Jesus died. What might have taken days took only a few hours. With that, the curtain of the temple was torn, beginning the metaphorical destruction of the role of the temple as mediator between God and humanity.

*How would you interpret the declaration of the centurion?*

### **Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

- *How have you seen relationships mended at the foot of the cross?*

**Sing:** "Were You There" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #102; *The Hymnbook*, #201)

### **Pray**

*O God, we thank you for your unfathomable love that kept Jesus on the cross for our salvation. Help us to declare him the Son of God, even in the face of those who would mock him. Amen.*

### **Notes**

\* There are differences among English versions concerning the translation of the Greek phrase *pros heautous*. Some favor "to themselves" (RSV, ESV) or "within themselves" (KJV), implying that the words were mere thoughts. Others favor "among themselves" (ASV, Geneva) or "to one another" (NIV, NAS, NRSV), implying that audible communication was taking place. Even if the latter interpretation is accurate, the context suggests that the communication was likely murmured beneath the major conversations in which Jesus was participating. For the purpose of this study, the writer prefers the former interpretation. Either way, it is not a point over which your group should stumble.



## **Suggestions for Leaders**

### **Lesson 8**

#### **Preparatory reading**

Be sure to read both of these chapters in their entirety so you are prepared to give a synopsis of intervening events. This lesson covers a number of familiar and significant events in Jesus' last few days. There is more here than can be addressed in the brief time most study groups have. If your calendar allows, you may want to divide the study into two sessions along the chapter lines.

Dr. Alex Metherell has written an important paper on crucifixion from a biomedical engineering standpoint. Some of the illustrations can be useful in this lesson. It can be found on the internet at

[http://www.firstpresocnj.net/Documents/alex\\_metherell\\_passion\\_review.pdf](http://www.firstpresocnj.net/Documents/alex_metherell_passion_review.pdf)

#### **Suggested Activities**

Invite participants to write a brief epitaph for themselves in preparation for the study time. Or read from a book of famous or humorous epitaphs before the section on Jesus' anointing.

If time allows invite the group to compare and contrast the various descriptions of Jesus' words found in Matthew 26:26-29, Luke 22:14-20, and I Corinthians 11:23-25.

#### **Opening Prayer**

*When we open your word, Lord God, we are able to see how precious is the gift you have given us in your Incarnate Word, Jesus. Fill us with your Holy Spirit as we read and discuss the events of Jesus' last days, so that we may better understand your purpose for us. For we come in Jesus' name and at his call. Amen.*

### **A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW: Reaching Through the Breach**

*Ephesians 2:14 and 18 "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility; ... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."*

The four hour early morning Ferry ride from Juneau to Angoon, Alaska sets my mind to wander through the quiet blue-green coves, tumble over valleys still filled with their glaciers, those majestic rivers of ice that grind away at the granite mountains who hide their heads in the clouds and mist of our deciduous rainforest here in South East. While one of our church musicians and her husband sleep nestled together like two teaspoons in their sleeping bags on the floor my mind mulls over the events and people that have shaped our partnership with the little Presbyterian Church in Angoon and have prompted this journey.

Several years ago the pastor of our church and his family and two other families from our congregation went to Angoon and built a handicap access ramp to the church there. They also shared fishing, fellowship and music. What most impressed the people of the church in Angoon was that these folks would bring their families, even very young children to their village to fellowship with them. One of the elders there later said, "We were so amazed and honored that you would trust us with your children." Why should this be amazing?

Angoon is one of the most rural communities here in South East and one of the most traditional Alaska Native communities. Over 100 years ago Angoon was also the only Alaska Native community to be attacked by the U.S. Military. On account of a disregard for the customs of the Tlingit people in Angoon, a U.S. Navy Captain took as an act of aggression a demand for blankets to pay for the life of a prominent man in the community who had been killed in a whaling accident. This standard Tlingit practice resulted in the total destruction of their village as the U.S. Navy Cutter blasted the entire coastal village to smithereens and then demanded hundreds of blankets in exchange for a cease fire. Not only were people's homes gone, but so was the wealth and tradition of centuries represented by the blankets. Angoon is one Tlingit community that has a very understandable reason for hating and distrusting white people. In fact their reputation is such that many white people are afraid to go there even today. And the people from our church went with their children. That is what amazed them.

Later that year our congregation was planning a short-term mission trip to the Dominican Republic. One of our Elders had the idea to invite four members of the Angoon Congregation to go as a part of the team. Since that time we have taken groups of families and teenagers

over to Angoon every summer to put on VBS, special worship services, and work on the Manse and the Church and one of the Elders' fishing boats. That experience of doing mission together solidified our relationship and forged lifetime friendships. When one Angoon member of our team and his son were drowned in a fishing accident the next year, we were able to go to Angoon and support his wife, also a member of our mission team. At the "Year Party"—a Tlingit custom of marking the end of mourning a year after a person has died—for their son the family there in Angoon adopted me into their clan and gave me a Tlingit name. This was the first time in many years, they told me, that a white person from outside the village had been adopted. One of the people who greeted me after the party wanted to know who I was marrying, since they could not fathom any other reason for my adoption. Several others from our congregation will be adopted into the families of the church members there at the Year Party this fall for the husband and father who died. It is only through Christ, at the foot of his cross, where we are all the same, sinners in need of grace, that these long and thick and high walls of racial division can be demolished. It has been such a privilege to be a part of this reconciliation of the cross, this quiet power that amazes the people who wonder why we are in their village and the people in our hometown who wonder why we would go.

And this time we go to pay our respects and mourn the loss of the Commissioned Lay Pastor who just died. An elder of the church and respected elder among the Tlingit people, this dedicated pastor came to our congregation just a few months before, while he was dying, to preach at all three of our services and read the scriptures in Tlingit on World Communion Sunday. His love for us was stronger than death's grip, and he came to proclaim this reconciling gospel to us with passion and power, even though he was just a few months from the end of his life on this earth.

My mind ceases to wander as the ferry docks in the stunning cove at Killisnoo, the original site of the Tlingit settlement on Admiralty Island. My friends and I roll up sleeping bags and blankets and make our way down the stairs and up the ramp to the waiting arms of our brothers and sisters in Angoon. The next day I stand with these brothers and sisters and sing while members of the clan shovel dirt onto the coffin we have lowered into the ground. As a few rays of sunlight filter through the dense green canopy I am reminded of the difference even a little light makes in a dark place and it is my turn to be amazed—amazed at the goodness of God even in the midst of tragedy—amazed at his knitting together two peoples into one—and as I pronounce the words of committal and benediction my heart swells with gratitude for the access he gives us together to the Father through the one Spirit, so that we

*Straight to the Point: Do You See Him Now?*  
A Study of the Gospel of Mark

may share the same sure hope of resurrection and an eternal life in Christ that is no respecter of color or custom.

(The Reverend Tracee Hackel is a VOW board member from Auk Bay, Alaska.)

## Lesson 9

### Resurrection

#### Theme

*What we don't see now confirms what we have seen of Jesus all along.*

#### Read Mark 16:1-8

A beginner's needlepoint project looks confusing at first blush. A white rectangle is interspersed with straight lines. One must look carefully to see that the lines represent the internal parts of the letters that make the name Jesus. Once you catch on to the visual effect, Jesus is all you can see. Similarly, an aerial photograph of a group of islands in the North Sea seems to produce a sort of photo-negative image of a common portrait of Jesus. Once you find the facial features among the scattered islands, it is hard to see anything other than Jesus' face. In both cases, Jesus is more present in what *isn't* there, than in what *is* there.

As Mark relates the resurrection story, Jesus doesn't appear at all. Yet his risen presence is real and the dominant feature of the event. If we are to see Jesus now, it will be in his absence from the same tomb in which we saw him buried. We are called to walk the same path as the women from the foot of the cross to the entrance of the tomb. Mark tells us that these three women – Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome – had been with Jesus and had ministered to him all through his Galilean ministry (15:40-41). Clearly, they had no intention of letting that ministry end with Jesus' death.

Jesus had been taken from the cross shortly after 3:00 in the afternoon on Friday. The Sabbath, on which no work and no extensive travel could happen, was to begin in three short hours. Jewish law instructed that the dead must be buried within 24 hours of death. Jesus could not be left on the cross through the Sabbath, and a generous member of the Sanhedrin had helped to fulfill the law, but the women had no time to do more than mark the location of the tomb before hurrying home to prepare the Sabbath meal (15:42-47).

Now the Sabbath was past, so the women could gather up the necessary spices and ointments to properly prepare Jesus' body. They came as soon as they were able, at dawn. Mark tells us that this was the first day of the week, for the Sabbath was considered the last day because God rested at the end of the week of creation (Exodus 20:11). Now the risen Christ comes on the first day, making it the Lord's Day and changing the whole way

Christians will always view time. We recall his first proclamation: “the time is fulfilled” (1:15).

Walking to the place where they had last seen him, the three women wondered what it would take to accomplish their last act of loving ministry. They expected to encounter a major obstacle. The tomb was already sealed by a large stone. How were they to get to Jesus? Who would be just hanging around at that hour in a burial ground that might be able and available move the stone? Who would have to give permission?

- *What obstacles might you face in wanting to serve Jesus? What do you think you might need to overcome those obstacles?*

To their surprise the stone had already been rolled away from the tomb’s entrance! In contrast to the explanations in the other gospels, Mark’s spare account gives us no clue about how it happened. If that were not enough to startle them, they found a young stranger sitting in the last place they had seen Jesus lying. Interestingly, Gregory the Great (6<sup>th</sup> century) has suggested that the “right side” of the tomb indicated eternal life in contrast to this (earthly) life signified by the left side.<sup>1</sup> However, we interpret this detail of Mark’s account, we can easily identify with the concerns of the three women who already thought their task was going to be hard enough without this development!

- *What causes you to be alarmed? Does it help if someone says, “Don’t be alarmed?”*

The suggestion of the young man in the white robe sounds similar to Jesus words to Jairus (5:36): “Do not fear. Only believe.” We might expect the women to hear it with the same incredulity. What do you mean, “don’t be alarmed”? All our expectations are turned inside out, and you don’t think we ought to be alarmed! In fact, they left the tomb to carry out their new mission reluctant to speak and trembling with fear.

The young messenger’s next words were also puzzling. He knew exactly what the women had hoped to find – the dead body of Jesus. Yet, something better awaited them. In the words “seek”, “see”, and “will see” we get the sense of past, present and future all in one moment. “You seek Jesus,” he said. Did the women hear the promise of Jeremiah in those words? “You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart,” (Jeremiah 29:13). It seems obvious that he is “not here” in the tomb, but risen? See the empty place where you expected him to be. When you have conveyed the news to the disciples, you will see that Jesus is true to his words.

- *What might it mean for us to “seek” Jesus in our time? What will help us to “see” that he is our risen and reigning Lord? How “will (we) see” him in his word?*

Remembering at the last as we noted at the beginning that Mark wrote as a result of his relationship to Peter, we hear what Peter finally understood about Jesus. The messenger seems to single Peter out in his instruction for the women to tell the disciples. Even though he had failed to be completely trustworthy in Jesus’ time of need, Peter stood forgiven. Jesus still had a purpose for him. By specifically including Peter in the proclamation of the women, he was able finally to see with the eyes of resurrection faith that the gracious gift of redemption included even him! With this resurrection faith, Peter would later be able to write to us: “Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.” (I Peter 1:8-9)

- *What might Peter’s memory mean for our understanding of God’s purpose for each of us?*

#### **Read Mark 16:9-20**

It is commonly presumed that the earliest manuscripts of Mark’s work ended at verse 8, but to conclude there seems to leave readers hanging in mid-thought on an incomplete ending. There is no objective history that will tell us what happened to Mark’s real ending, only speculation. The most common suppositions are that the author died before he finished, or the original manuscript was torn in some way and the fragment was never recovered. For that reason, most English translations will include these verses, called the longer ending, in brackets.

- *What differences do you notice between these verses and what you have already seen in Mark’s writings? Do they help or hinder your understanding of Mark’s overall purpose?*

Nevertheless, these verses were known as part of Mark’s Gospel in the literature of the church as early as the second century and found in the writings of Ignatius, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.<sup>2</sup> By the time the New Testament canon was fixed in the latter half of the fourth century, references to these verses were commonly found in the writings of the early church fathers. Someone thought we should know them, so let’s consider what they have to teach us.

Mary Magdalene is still the first to see the risen Christ. Even though the other women with her saw only the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene was an eye-witness not only to his absence, but to his presence. The grieving disciples remained skeptical even after two of them recognized him on the road. Finally, Jesus confronted the thick-skulled group with their intransigent unbelief and commissioned them to proclaim the gospel anyway, telling them the power of faith for all who would come to believe on their account.

- *What portions of the other gospel accounts do you find echoed in these verses? Why do you suppose someone thought these brief details important to add?*

To add to the discussion, two other brief passages have been found in various ancient manuscripts. The first, called the shorter ending, appeared as an unnumbered verse following verse 8:

*And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. [Amen]*

The second was a supplement to the supplement, added after verse 14:

*And they excused themselves, saying, "This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things of the spirits. Therefore, reveal your righteousness now" – thus they spoke to Christ. And Christ replied to them, "The term of years of Satan's power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who have sinned I was handed over to death, that they may return to the truth and sin no more, that they may inherit the spiritual and imperishable glory of righteousness that is in heaven."*

- *Can you see a reason why early Christians would have found one or the other of these portions to be important additions to the understanding of Mark's resurrection story?*

As a conclusion to the longer ending, the writer mentions the events of the ascension in which the disciples were once again unable to see the physical form of Jesus. Yet we can be assured that they see him now, and so may we.

**Read A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**



- *How does this ministry give evidence of Christ's continuing presence among us?*

**Sing:** "The Day of Resurrection" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #118; *The Hymnbook*, #208)

**Pray**

*Lord our God, we have been seeking you in your word and in our fellowship. We thank you for your presence among us and for your servant Mark, whose gift to the church strengthens our resurrection faith. All glory and honor be yours through Christ Jesus our risen Savior. Amen.*

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In Oden, Thomas and Hall, Christopher, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, volume II – Mark*, Downers Grove, ILL: Intervarsity Press, pages 243.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pages 253-256.

## **Suggestions for Leaders**

### **Lesson 9**

#### **Preparatory reading**

For a helpful background discussion of women's role in burial customs, see page 110 of the *Study Bible for Women*, edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger, Baker Books, 1995.

#### **Opening Prayer**

Risen Lord, let your word dawn on us as on that first morning, so that we may be filled with resurrection faith. Help us to share the Good News with one another in this time of worship and study; for we gather in your Holy name. Amen.

### **A Mission Story from the Heart of VOW**

Near our church in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains an old log cabin sits beside a bend the road. You might not even notice it because it looks similar to many other simple buildings you have already passed except for the sign out front telling you it is the craft cabin for the Coalition for Appalachian Ministries (CAM). CAM is a partnership of the PC(USA), the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church to serve the needs of the poverty-stricken Appalachian region.

CAM buys hand made crafts directly from regional crafters for a fair price that enables them to pay their bills. The cabin acts as an outlet for these goods at only enough mark-up to keep the cabin's bills paid. Beautiful quilts made according to traditional mountain patterns sit next to cedar keepsake chests and mountain dulcimers. Tatted lace, bonnets, aprons, ornaments and houses for dolls or birds compliment local church cookbooks as attractions for the many tourists that travel the back roads of East Tennessee.

The women who operate the cabin also pack their treasures to offer at General Assembly and the PW Triennial Gathering. They will tell you stories of the way particular crafters have been given new hope and new life through their ministry. One of the best ones is about a man who took up birdhouse building after the death of his wife and found his way through grief in the process. The CAM Cabin Crafts represent a portion of a broader emphasis on practical ministries of economic support for the people of Appalachia. You can find more about CAM's ministry at [www.appalachianministry.org](http://www.appalachianministry.org).

The Reverend Terrye McAnally is a VOW board member from Sevierville, Tennessee.