

The Gospel of Mark ~ Following The Servant King

Week 7: Mark 14:12 ~ 16:20

Christmas and Easter can be challenging times for pastor/teacher types. Why? Because we feel pressure to bring something fresh and new to well-known stories. I was personally feeling that heading into writing this week. Thankfully, I was reminded of a quote from C.S. Lewis. “*We don’t need to be taught new ideas so much as to be reminded of old truths.*” So with that in mind, I will simply trust that the Holy Spirit will bring fresh impact to a familiar story.

The Last Supper (14:12-25)

As was said earlier in this series, everything Jesus did and said in His earthly ministry had to do with announcing and enacting the Kingdom of God. This is especially true with what we know as the “Last Supper”. It cannot be overstated how important it is for us to understand the significance of this happening on Passover. Israelites observed Passover every year as a reminder of God’s covenant promise of redemption. As God acted on their behalf in the past (see Exodus 12) so He would act again. This was their hope and focus. But what no one saw coming was that instead of raising up a deliverer in the style of Moses, God was going to send a deliverer who would be the sacrificed lamb.

Try to put yourself in the place of Jesus’ disciples. They had observed the Passover every year of their lives. They knew the story of God’s rescue from Egyptian slavery. Every aspect of the meal was a way of retelling the story and a reminder of God’s faithfulness. Their hope was that God would act on their behalf again.

This particular night their anticipation was that, through Jesus, now might be the time when God fulfills His promise. But instead of fulfilling His covenant promise through force or violence, God, in Jesus, was going to become the victim of violence. The meal was going along as most Passover meals do...but then Jesus gets all cryptic about one of them betraying Him.

That changed the mood of the evening real quick as we read, “*They were saddened...*” (14:19) But the most surprising, even shocking, part of the meal was that Jesus went off script. There was a liturgy of sorts that the host (played by Jesus on this particular night) generally followed. Out of the blue Jesus refers to the bread as His body (14:22), and most shocking of all, even scandalous, He says, “*This is My blood of the covenant...*” (14:24) Whoa! Wait! What!

Israel’s entire identity as a people was connected to their covenant relationship with God. I don’t think you and I can possibly fathom how these words would have landed. Jesus was saying that something is about to fundamentally change. The Mosaic Covenant (i.e. the Law and the Prophets) was far more than a religious document, it essentially functioned as the Constitution for Israel. To say that something new was taking its place was revolutionary. Yet, at the same time, “change” was what they wanted. But as we’ve seen for the past couple of weeks in Mark, the disciples really didn’t have a clue about the type of change Jesus was bringing.

- *If you were to take an honest assessment of your faith, would you say your experience has been more of an effort to get Jesus on board with your agenda or of you trying to get on board with His agenda? Explain.*

It is important to appreciate the role a covenant played between a King and His people. It laid out expectations and ordered life.

- *How does the covenant you/we are in with Jesus order your/our life?*

Another interesting observation about the Last Supper (or the Lord's Supper) is that even when you put all four Gospel accounts together it is difficult to tell exactly when Judas left the meal. Scholars have argued for centuries. Why is this a question or issue of concern? Well, was Judas present when the New Covenant was initiated or had he left before then? If he was present then there is absolutely no ground on which Christians/the Church have to stand on to exclude people from the Lord's Supper. If the betrayer was welcomed, it's pretty hard to make a case that anyone can be excluded. If Judas had already left, then, some people reason, perhaps you can make a case for not including some people. But that opens the door for policing who is allowed at the Table and who is not. I don't believe that we are called to that.

Personally, I'm very happy with how CUMC practices the Lord's Supper/Communion...as an open table...all are welcome. It seems much more consistent with Jesus and the way we've seen Him announcing and enacting the Kingdom to have an open table in which all are welcome. It seems more inline with the prayer we prayed a few weeks ago, *"Lord Jesus, you stretched out Your arms of love upon the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace; so clothe us in Your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hand in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of Your name. Amen."*

Before we move on I think it's interesting to note that *"...they sung a hymn..."* (14:26) before heading out to the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. What hymn/song did they sing? Psalms 113-118 were used in connection with Passover, so probably one of those. (Have I mentioned that we're going to be going through a short series on the Psalms in the summer?)

- *Music and song have always been a part of worship. Do you have a favorite song, or a song that is particularly meaningful to you, around Easter? Why is it special to you?*

The Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42)

It is interesting that the place Jesus decided to go in His final moments before being arrested was a place called "Gethsemane". It is a garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The word "Gethsemane" means "oil presse". Symbolically/thematically it's an appropriate image as olives are pressed/crushed for their oil, so we see Jesus pressed/crushed in agony awaiting His impending arrest, trial, torture, and death.

On Good Friday 1991, Pope John Paul II offered 14 Scriptural Stations of the Cross, which is an alternative to the traditional Stations of the Cross. Interestingly, the first station is in the Garden of Gethsemane and the final station is the garden tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57-61).

Brian Zahnd has this to say about that, “...*the passion of Christ begins and ends in a garden, just as the story of the Bible begins in the garden of Eden and ends in the garden city of the New Jerusalem. The story of salvation really is the story of garden lost and garden regained.*”

Most significant is Jesus’ prayer in the garden, “*Abba, Father, everything is possible for You. Take this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will.*” (14:36) Please allow me to share some thoughts from Catholic priest and author Ronald Rolheiser...

“When Jesus is in the garden begging His Father to spare Him having to ‘drink the cup’, the real choice He is facing is not: Will I let Myself die or will I invoke divine power and save My life? Rather the choice is: How will I die? Will I die angry, bitter, and unforgiving; or will I die with a warm, forgiving heart?

Of course, we know how Jesus resolved this drama, how He chose forgiveness and died forgiving His executioners, and how, inside all that darkness, He remained solidly inside the message that He had preached His whole life; namely, that love, community, and forgiveness will ultimately triumph.

Moreover, what Jesus did in that great moral drama is something we’re supposed to imitate rather than simply admire, because that drama is ultimately the drama of love within our own lives also, presenting itself to us in countless ways. That is: At the end of our lives, how will we die? Will our hearts be angry, clinging, unforgiving, and bitter at the unfairness of life? Or, will our hearts be forgiving, grateful, emphatic, and warm, as was the heart of Jesus when He said to His Father ‘not My will but Yours be done’?

The Canadian author and activist Mary Jo Leddy once commented that in order to live in real courage we must die before we die. In any situation that is dominated by fear, she asserts, we need to be ‘living the resurrection’ before we die. This means that choosing not to die is not always the same thing as choosing to live. We need to choose truth, integrity, and duty even if it means pain and death; otherwise the deep instinct for self-preservation will cause us always to be more concerned about our own safety and comfort than about anything else—and fear will dominate our lives forever.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus dies before He dies, and thereby readies Himself for what awaits Him.”

- *“Not my will but Your be done” is the ultimate posture/disposition of the heart of a disciple of Jesus. How are you doing with that these days? What practices do you have in place to help cultivate that posture/disposition?*
- *How are you dying before you die in order to overcome fear?*

Betrayed...with a Kiss (14:43-52)

Last week I mentioned that we are left to speculate as to Judas' true motives in betraying Jesus. A common speculation is that Judas was trying to force Jesus' hand. He wanted Jesus to step up and be the type of Messiah that he, and many others, wanted Him to be. One of the reasons this is a popular conjecture has to do with the way Judas betrayed Jesus...with a kiss. I'll allow Brian Zahnd to explain...

“Was Judas trying to force Jesus to resort to violence and start the war for Jewish independence? I think so. The reason Judas greeted Jesus with the customary kiss (which was also a covert sign) is that Judas didn't so much want to betray Jesus as he wanted to manipulate Jesus. Judas wanted to provoke Jesus into launching a violent revolution. Judas wanted to remain a part of the inner circle of disciples following a now violent Jesus. Judas acted like he was still a faithful disciple because Judas wanted to be a faithful disciple—but only on his own terms. Judas didn't want to betray Jesus, he wanted to control Jesus. Judas wanted to be Messiah in a certain way—violent. When we try to make Jesus be the kind of king who will support our political agenda through violent power, we betray Jesus with a kiss.”

Again, we can't say for certain what Judas' motives were...but the kiss is intriguing. He could have easily pointed Jesus out to the arresting crowd without even getting close to Jesus. It is plausible that Judas was trying to communicate to Jesus that he was still on His side by getting up close and personal.

This makes Jesus' words all the more impactful, “*Am I leading a rebellion that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture Me?*” (14:48) Essentially, His question to Judas and the crowd was, “What do you think I've been doing all this time?” Judas had completely missed the point of what Jesus was up to. (Or, if he understood the point, he didn't like it.) Yes, Jesus was bringing the Kingdom of God...but no, it was nothing like anyone would have imagined. Swords and clubs (i.e. violence) is the only language many people understand, the only tool in their toolbox to get things done. Friends, we must let the peaceable, humble, sacrificial way of Jesus inform our imaginations for how we navigate the world around us. The temptation is to “fight fire with fire”, to meet power and force with power and force. But the way of Jesus guides us in a different direction. Do we trust that His way is the right and best way? And are we willing to accept the cost that comes with it?

- *How, or in what ways, do you try to manipulate Jesus, control Him, or accept Him but only on your terms?*

Peter (14:31, 66-72)

Before we move on to Jesus' trials, let's look at Peter for a moment. We're all familiar with his denial, three times no less, of Jesus, which followed his bold proclamation that he would never do such a thing (14:31). It is interesting that after his denial we don't see Peter again in the rest of the Mark's Gospel. Though we do hear him mentioned after the resurrection by a “*young man dressed in a white robe*” (16:5)...presumably an angel...who says “*Go, tell His disciples and Peter...*” (16:7, emphasis added). While the Gospel of John goes into far more detail into the reinstatement of Peter (see John 21:15-23), this is Mark's subtle way of letting his readers know

that things worked out for Peter. To his credit, even though filled with guilt and shame, Peter never gave up, he didn't quit. Friends, I hope you know that no matter how much guilt and shame you may feel, you can ALWAYS return to Jesus and find forgiveness.

- *How have you allowed guilt and shame to distance you from Jesus? How have you turned that over to Jesus and released it so you can receive the forgiveness He has for you?*

Incidentally, Mark doesn't name which disciple whacked off the servant of the high priest's ear with a sword (14:47), but we know from John's Gospel that it was Peter.

Trials (14:53-65; 15:1-20)

"Trials" might be an overstatement...interrogations might be a more accurate description. Please notice how few words Jesus says throughout these proceedings. He is simply passive...just allowing things to transpire...as if it's all according to plan (which it was).

Ronald Rolheiser has this to say, *"Why do we call Jesus' suffering just before His death His passion?...We tend to think that passion here refers to intense sufferings...this is not wrong, but it misses a key point. Passion comes from the Latin 'passio' meaning passiveness, non-activity, absorbing something more than actively doing anything...For almost all of His public life Jesus was actively doing something. However, from the moment He walks out of the Last Supper room and begins to pray in Gethsemane, all that activity stops. He is no longer the one who is doing things for others, but the one who is having things done to Him...This constitutes His 'passion', that time in His life and ministry where He ceases to be the doer and becomes the one who has things done to Him."*

How hard it is to be passive...particularly when you or a loved one is being wronged...especially if it is within your power to do something about it. Consider all the indignities and abuse that was done to Him during this time. No imagine if it was someone you loved, maybe your child, going through this and all you could do is watch. Mark doesn't really bring it out but it is a safe assumption that Mary was present and observed all this going on.

It is popular in our day and age to think of passivity as weak, or uncaring and complacent, or perhaps even complicit. I think we need to be careful about judging too quickly. Sometimes passivity is exactly what is needed. But this, of course, is a matter of discernment. Sometimes the Holy Spirit leads us to passivity when our instincts might be to act. The goal is to seek out and follow the guidance of the Spirit, as opposed to simply following our instincts/impulses. And intentionally doing nothing, to simply accept what is happening, is a form of suffering.

- *Describe a time when there was nothing you could do and you simply had to accept what was happening. Describe a time when there were options for action but you intentionally chose to be passive?*

Again, Jesus didn't say much during these proceedings...which makes what He did say all the more important and impactful.

- When asked directly by the high priest, “*Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?*” (15:31) He replied, “*I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.*” (15:62) Recall that He quoted this same verse from Daniel 7 during the Olivet discourse back in chapter 13. Remember Mark’s entire point in his Gospel is to show that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah. Previously we’ve seen Jesus keep His identity on the downlow, but now, at this most crucial juncture, He fully acknowledges who He is...knowing full well what the consequences would be.
- When asked by Pilate, “*Are you the king of the Jews?*” Jesus responded, “*Yes, it is as you say.*” (15:2) This, we need to understand, is what ultimately got Jesus killed. Pilate didn’t give a rip about the religious charge of blasphemy. But to claim to be a king, well, that was treasonous. Interestingly, Pilate doesn’t seem to consider Jesus a credible threat, even with Jesus’ admission of being a king, as he seems inclined to release Jesus.

Then we’re introduced to a new figure, Barabbas, who was an insurrectionist and murderer. What we want to keep in mind is that Barabbas wasn’t a common criminal, but a political prisoner. Many would have considered him a national hero. He was more inline with the likes of William Wallace or Che Guevara...or maybe even George Washington, had Washington ever been captured by the British. As such, people would have thought of him as a potential messiah. Matthew’s Gospel states that his full name was actually Jesus Barabbas. (Jesus was a popular name.) If this is indeed the case, then we have a very interesting situation. The name Barabbas means “son of the father”.

So, basically, between Barabbas and Jesus we have two very different visions of a Messiah—one who wants to lead a violent rebellion and revolution following the basic pattern of the world, and the other who is leading a revolution of love. Sadly, the crowd preferred the worldly model/style. I recently came across a blog/substack post by Kristin Kobes Du Mez that I’d like to share with you that speaks to this very thing...(it’s long but very good and worth your time).

https://kristindumez.substack.com/p/the-choice-before-us?ck_subscriber_id=1764989023&utm_source=convertkit&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=%5BGravity%20Weekly%5D%20Easter%20recipes%20%2B%20how%20to%20keep%20going%20%2B%20on%20tyranny%20and%20mammon%20-%2017163173

- *How important is it to understand the political nature of Jesus, the gospel, and the Kingdom? What is lost if we don’t recognize the political essence of the Christian faith and discipleship?*

Before the crucifixion we encounter one more new person...Simon from Cyrene...who carried Jesus’ cross for Him. In His tortured and tired state Jesus simply didn’t have the strength to carry the cross from the Praetorium to Golgotha. Mark doesn’t tell us much about Simon other than where he was from and that he had two sons. Interestingly, Mark mentions Alexander and

Rufus in such a familiar manner that scholars believe they must have been known to the original readers.

As the apostle Paul was closing out his letter to the Romans he sends greeting to someone named Rufus (see Romans 16:13)...it's hard to say whether it was the same person or not. But church tradition holds that Rufus and Alexander later became missionaries. Some even speculate that Simon was one of the people from Cyrene who later preached the gospel in Antioch in Acts 11.

On the Cross (15:25-41)

Jesus was on the cross from roughly 9 am to 3 pm. Crucifixion was gruesome on many levels. But as a state sponsored death sentence it was meant to communicate the message, *"This is what we do to enemies of the empire."* Crucifixion was meant to terrorize an oppressed people into submission. It was the power of the empire on display...the power to take life at will.

Many have interpreted Jesus' words on the cross, *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"* (15:34) to mean that God turned His back on Jesus. Please allow me to offer an alternative explanation. Those words from Jesus are the opening line from Psalm 22. (Did I mention we're going to take a short jaunt through Psalms this summer?). If you read Psalm 22 in its entirety (and I encourage you to do so), you'll see that it ends far more hopeful than it begins. Additionally, when Jews quoted a psalm it was meant to draw to mind the entire psalm. To all those who were standing around the cross—those mocking Him and those grieving for Him—by quoting a bit of this psalm Jesus was saying things aren't as bleak as they seem. Again, if you read that psalm in its entirety you notice how hopeful it is. For example...*"For [God] has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; He has not hidden His face from him but has listened to his cry for help."* (Psalm 22:24)

Mark's Roman audience would have been particularly interested in the detail that it was a centurion (Roman military officer) who came to the conclusion upon observing all that was going on that *"Surely this man was the Son of God!"* (15:39) This centurion had likely overseen many crucifixions, but there was something noticeably different about this one.

It is truly amazing that the symbol of the power to wield death and rule by violence (the cross) has been transformed into a symbol of hope, peace, and love. This transformation of meaning is a parable of sorts of the kind of transformation and redemption that the Kingdom of God is all about. God is in the business of redeeming hopeless situations. And make no mistake, my friends, without God this world is a hopeless place. So whenever you feel that things are hopeless, allow the cross to remind you that God has not abandoned you/us.

- *Describe a time in your life when God redeemed a seemingly hopeless situation.*

Resurrection (16:1-8)

Mark includes much less details regarding the resurrection compared to the other Gospel writers. His Gospel ends quite abruptly. (Your Bible likely notes that the original ending is verse 8...with verses 9-20 being a later add-on.) In fact, with the original ending, we don't actually see the resurrected Jesus...just an empty tomb and an angel stating that "*He is risen! He is not here.*" (16:6)

Notice the last verse of the original ending, "*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*" (16:8) What a weird way to end. Not the most inspiring ending. But it smacks of authenticity. And it puts the ball in the readers' court to come to their own conclusion.

P.S. (16:9-20)

Apparently someone thought that you can't end a book like that. While verses 9-20 may not be original, it was a very early addition. By whom? No one knows. It certainly reads like a tacked on summary. Much of these verses can be corroborated by the other Gospel writers...

- Mary Magdalene was the first person to see the resurrected Jesus (John 20:10-16)
- Jesus did appear to two disciples while they were walking in the country (Luke 24:13-32)
- Jesus did commission the disciples to preach the gospel to all the world (Matthew 28:18-20)

Probably the most questionable and troublesome part is verse 18 "*they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all...*"

Personally, I kind of like how Mark ends at verse 8. It's real, it's honest, it leaves the reader wanting more.

So as we come to the end of Mark, we are invited to ask ourselves: Do we believe Jesus is the Messiah? And if so, what are the implications? Also we need to remember that the Resurrection is all about a new beginning...

Soul Training Exercise ~ Wonder

Have we become so familiar with the cross and resurrection that we are unfamiliar? Mark ends (originally) with early followers of Jesus trembling, bewildered, and afraid. Do we allow ourselves to feel the full impact of what it all means? (Probably not because it would leave us staggering, confused, and disoriented.) But that's sort of the point. There is nothing "normal" about death leading to life...but it changes everything. We are now living in the early stages of New Creation.

So the invitation this week is to simply allow yourself to sit and wonder. Allow yourself to feel all that it makes you feel. Allow the awesomeness of it all to wash over you. Allow yourself to be amazed and overwhelmed...because it is that BIG of a deal. Allow yourself to imagine the implications of it all. Be wonder-full, my friends.