

This the last Sunday of this Christian year
when we hear from the Gospel according to Mark.

While the Gospel according to Mark has
pretty much always been considered
a part of the New Testament canon,
it has been considered an enigma.

It's short, to the point, and is a complex document.

It is thought to be the first Gospel.

It is thought to be the outline or perhaps the inspiration
for both the Gospel according to Matthew and that of Luke.

But strangely, the first known commentary on the Gospel
was not written until the 5th century

and the second commentary was written in the 9th century.

In fact most of the scholarly work concerning Mark's Gospel
has been done in the late 20th century.

Part of the reason for this late attention is due
to our new ways of interpreting ancient texts.

Techniques such as, social-science criticism
and rhetorical criticism are brand new,
and they have added a great deal to our understanding.

Another reason why this Gospel has received so little attention
is 13th Chapter, the beginning of which we just heard.

This chapter is called the "Little Apocalypse."

Scholars have wondered why this writing
is where it is in the Gospel.

The entire Gospel is also considered to be an apocalyptic story,
that is, a story about the battle between good and evil

or between darkness and light
or between the powers God and the destructive forces of evil.

Much of this view of Mark's Gospel has come within the last forty years
and one of the primary theologians developing this perspective

is a professor at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley,
Mary Ann Tolbert. She was one of my professors.

One of our challenges in hearing the Gospel

is the encounter with a culture that is not our own,
an encounter with a culture that we barely understand
and we certainly do not think is reflected

in our modern or post-modern culture.
Our world view is vastly different from that of Mark
and his contemporaries.

Whoever he was and whenever he wrote,
Mark had a clear message and a hidden message.
Hidden only in that Jesus keeps telling his followers
not to tell anyone about what he is doing.
The clear message is the entire Gospel is a witness
to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

Back late January, we heard in the reading from the Gospel
where Jesus is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit.
The unclean spirit plays a game common to the times.
He calls Jesus a name,
and through that name calling he tries
to gain the upper hand.

Names were important in those days.
If you could name a person, that is put them in their place,
you could prove you were “better” than they were.
The man names Jesus, the Holy One of God.
Everyone there in the synagogue in Capernum
would know that Jesus,
a visitor from Nazareth, of all places,
a man from the working class
would never be able to live up to the name,
Holy One of God.
That would be impossible.

But Jesus does the impossible.
Jesus commands the unclean spirit to come out of the man,
and, lo and behold, it obeys Jesus.
The reaction of the crowd is astonishment,
“What is this? A new teaching - with authority!”
Jesus is the authority when it comes to representing God before all,
even before “unclean spirits.”

After Jesus leaves the synagogue,
he goes to the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John.
There he finds Simon's mother-in-law in bed with a fever.
Jesus comes to her bedside

and takes her by the hand and lifts her up.

The fever leaves her and she begins to serve them.

This little vignette is full of coded words and meanings.

In spite of what you might hear in other quarters,

this is most certainly NOT about a woman being cured in order that she can resume serving the men of the house.

She does that

but there is much more to the story.

We need to differentiate between disease and illness in Jesus time.

Disease was an inability to function.

Remember a person who could not function in that society was near death.

They truly were faced with the need to get their own "daily bread."

Disease most certainly would lead to death,

as there were no sure ways to recover from disease.

Simon's mother-in-law was diseased.

Illness in Jesus time was an alteration in a persons "state of being."

The man in the previous story was ill.

His state of being was changed and controlled by unclean spirits or demons.

Most healers in Jesus time, shamans and such,

were focused on healing the "state of being."

They couldn't deal with the diseased.

These ideas prevailed in one way or another until medical science

began to be able to deal with disease.

Even today in many ancient cultures

people wrestle with sickness affecting the "state of being" in hopes that they can cure "disease."

The astounding thing that Jesus did is

that he healed a man of his illness.

The astounding thing about this second story is

that Jesus cured the woman of her disease.

Jesus was a man of authority who could

both heal illnesses and cure disease.

Both of these actions restored people to their rightful place in society, in their community.

The third story we heard this year is the story of Jesus and the leper.

It is full of irony and reverses.

First, the leper came to Jesus!

He did not say, “unclean, unclean” as he was supposed to do.

The man comes up to Jesus, kneels and begs,

“If you choose, you can make me clean.”

The leper, like the man with an unclean spirit,

knows who Jesus is.

Mark is pounding on the point he made from the very beginning.

Jesus is the Son of God, the Holy One of God.

Jesus can both heal illnesses and cure disease.

He can restore one to physical, mental and social health.

Then Jesus does something that was simply not done in those days.

Jesus touches the man.

Instantly, Jesus becomes ritually unclean himself.

Mark’s point is that Jesus is clean and remains clean.

He does the totally unexpected.

He is the ruler of the events

- of the disease and of the social situation.

Jesus can do and does what no one else can do.

Jesus then tells the man to not tell anyone

what has happened but go to the priest

and show him that you are clean.

We don’t know if the man went to the priest,

but we do know that he spread the word about Jesus.

He proclaimed him freely.

At this point in the story, Jesus disciples haven’t proclaimed Jesus,

much less proclaimed him freely.

In the world view of Jesus and Mark,

the cosmic battle between good and evil was thought

to be carried on both on earth and in the cosmos.

There was a mirror image of the battle between the two.

Mark establishes the ground for the battle in the beginning lines.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Mark shows at the beginning

that Jesus is going to be the mighty warrior

on behalf of good.

For a person to be called the “*son of*” meant
that the person would have all the attributes of the father.
Mark says straight up that Jesus is the Son of God,
so he will have the attributes of God.
In doing this Mark establishes the legitimacy of Jesus.
While Jesus was not born of the honored class,
his legitimacy is established by his name.
Over and over again in the Gospel,
those who are outside Jesus circle name him accurately.
In the cosmic battle the “evil ones” are the ones
who recognize Jesus and acknowledge his name.
They knew who they were battling.

Throughout his days in Jerusalem,
Jesus is in conflict with the temple leadership,
and his last words before leaving the temple
predict the coming destruction.

In addition, the mention of his departure
underscores the point in a subtle way,
recalling the departure of “the glory of the LORD”
from the temple and Jerusalem in Ezekiel
in connection with the Babylonian exile
and destruction of the first temple.

There is thus no doubt that the apocalyptic scenario
signals the judgment of God directed specifically
at the temple establishment.

Literalist readings in our contemporary society of apocalyptic texts
are not only simplistic;
they also ignore the moral force of the apocalyptic genre.

When we read Mark’s account of Jesus’ last days in Jerusalem,
for example, it is important to look beyond the mere fact
of the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus
and ask about what Jesus stood for in moral terms.

If we do so, we will be drawn not only to passages
such as last week’s gospel lesson, in which Jesus’
condemnation of the scribes’ economic exploitation
of widows is central,
but also back to earlier parts of Mark, such as chapter 10,

in which Jesus not only has harsh words for the rich
but also condemns hierarchical social patterns
in general.

In addition, we should allow these to inform the way
we view Jesus' predictions of his death
and related calls to humility and self-sacrifice,
even to the point of death.

Luke Timothy Johnson says the disciples are not given the gift to know,
and what they have been given is not a secret but a mystery.

This may well be the key word in Mark's narrative.

Jesus himself is the singular "mystery of the kingdom,"
and he is so as the Holy One.

He is recognized fully only by God and other spiritual forces.

He radiates an intense and fearful power.

It is a power, furthermore, that at once attracts and repels,
so that some are drawn to him and some reject him.

Most of all, the mystery resists understanding.

It cannot be deciphered, controlled, or reduced to a formula.

The mystery of the holy, even when revealed,
remains beyond reach.

This presentation of Jesus as the Holy One

helps us appreciate Mark's two-edged portrayal of the disciples.

One side of the portrayal is positive:

they are specially called by Jesus to be with him
and share his work;

they are given the mystery that is himself;

to them is revealed his identity

as suffering Son of man and glorious Son of God;

and they hear his secret discourse

on the tribulation and triumph to follow.

The other side of the portrayal is almost negative:

they do not in fact understand;

they reject a suffering messiah,

seeking instead a place of honor in a glorious kingdom;

Judas betrays Jesus for money;

Peter denies even knowing him;

and none of them stays with him to the end—"They all fled".

These literary observations suggest something
of Mark's religious purpose in shaping the story of Jesus
and the disciples in this fashion.

Mark's readers would naturally, as we still do,
identify themselves with the disciples.

Mark therefore uses that relationship to teach his readers.

The message is mainly one of warning
against smugness and self-assurance.

He seems to be saying "If you think you are an insider,
you may not be;

if you think you understand the mystery of the kingdom
and even control it, watch out;

it remains alive and

fearful beyond your comprehension.

If you think discipleship consists in power

because of the presence of God,

beware;

you are called to follow the one who suffered and died.

Your discipleship is defined by his messiahship,
that is, in terms of obedience and service."

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by The Rev. Perry W. Polk