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MARK'S STORY OF JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

A literary study of the narrative of Mark's Gospel
with insights and conversation starters
in twenty sessions

A resource for the *Book of Faith* initiative
within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



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MARK'S STORY OF JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

From all inductions, **the gospel according to St. Mark is the earliest** of the four gospels in the New Testament. Most likely it was written around 70 CE, shortly before or after the Roman armies captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

Of course, **no one knows** exactly **who wrote this document**. Traditionally the name of John Mark, a companion of both the apostles Paul and Peter, has been associated with it. But the evidence that this person is the actual author is slim at a best.

And exactly **where it was written** and for whom **is also largely a guess**. Some scholars believe it originated in Rome, at a time when Christians were experiencing severe opposition, even persecution, during the latter years of Emperor Nero's reign. Others place it in Galilee or southern Syria, near the scene of Jesus' early successful ministry.

In any event, **this work is exceptional** for several reasons.

First, the author of Mark was the first to assemble the various traditions about Jesus which had been shared within the Christian communities, and to shape them into a continuous narrative.

It may be that Mark inherited connected portions of the account of Jesus' passion, from his last meal with his men through his crucifixion.

But by and large the oral and written anecdotes about his teachings and controversies and healings had existed somewhat independently of each other.

Second, the term "gospel" (*euaggelion*, or "evangel" in Greek) means "good news." Originally it referred to the church's proclamation *about* Jesus, particularly the saving benefits of his crucifixion and resurrection.

Mark is the first to call the story of Jesus a "gospel." At that time "gospel" or "evangel" was almost a technical term for an official announcement that a new emperor was arriving, or that a city or territory was to receive special treatment, such as a reduction in taxes.

Perhaps the political connotation of "gospel" is why the accounts of Matthew, Luke and John do not explicitly refer to themselves as "gospels."

Third, Mark provided the pattern which was later used by the authors of Matthew and Luke. Although they often improved Mark's style and grammar, between them they include over 90% of Mark's content. Additionally, John's gospel may have been influenced by Mark's traditions.

Fourth, Mark begins and ends abruptly. The gospel begins with Jesus' public ministry and ends with the announcement of his resurrection at Mark 16:8 (vv. 9-20 are later additions made by scribes who apparently thought more was needed).

Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, begin with stories of Jesus' birth, and they end with accounts of his post-resurrection appearances.

Fifth, its style is elementary and colloquial, which imitates its oral origins—sentences strung together with "and," "and," "and"; inconsistent use of the present and past tenses.

Nevertheless, **Mark uses some sophisticated literary devices**, such as flash-backs, intercalations (i.e. one incident sandwiched in between two others), and an emotionally challenging conclusion.

Sixth, among a handful of titles the early Christians attached to Jesus—such as "Messiah" or "Christ," and "Kyrios" or "Lord," and "Son of God"—**Mark highlights Jesus as the "Son of Man."**

Sometimes, as in Daniel 7:13 and the Book of Enoch, this is an apocalyptic title which indicates a heavenly deliverer. Other times, as in Ezekiel and Psalm 8:4 and in Mark's gospel, it refers to a mere mortal, an authentic descendant of Adam, in other words, a truly human person.

We could study this gospel from several perspectives. We could approach it **historically**, and treat it as an example of Greco-Roman biography. Then we could use it to learn what was happening in Jesus' own day, around 30 CE, or to learn something about the Markan community when the gospel was written a generation later.

We could examine it **theologically**, to understand what it has to teach us about our doctrinal teachings and ethical practices. Or we could treat it **devotionally**, as a resource for our life of prayer and meditation.

However, **this study will approach it as a piece of literature.** We will try to understand how it affects us **as a narrative.** In this case we will read it as a dramatic history **in a tragic mode.** In this way Mark's story will resonate realistically with our 21st century experiences in a conflicted world.

The basic ingredients in any story are (a) its characters, (b) its plot, and (c) its setting. Somebody ... has to do something ... somewhere.

In Mark's story, **the characters include Jesus**, who is the protagonist or "hero"; **the religious and civil authorities**, who are the antagonists or "villains"; **the disciples**, who are more or less loyal to Jesus; **the demons**, who are opposed to Jesus; **and the minor characters** whom Jesus heals and affirms and who are aligned with him.

Sympathetic readers enter the world of a story by identifying with some of the characters. Followers of Jesus would obviously not be inclined to identify with his opponents, and

they would shy away from identifying with Jesus himself.

More likely they would **identify with the role of the disciples**, who are sometimes faithful and loyal, but who ultimately fail in their duties.

Narrative plots typically are built (a) around a journey, in which the hero is separated from his homeland and returns home, or travels from one land to a new land. Other plots are based on **(b) a series of conflicts**, in which the hero eventually defeats his enemies.

The plot of Mark's gospel includes both (a) as Jesus travels around Galilee and then to Jerusalem, and **(b)** as he battles demonic forces and confronts his opponents, namely, the local authorities.

But in Mark a third technique comes to the fore: **a series of surprising turns**—sometimes actual reversals of our expectations—catches us unawares and **provokes us into reshaping our own lives** in ways which have a "cruciformed" shape, more in the self-giving style of Jesus himself.

The pages which follow, which go through Mark's gospel scene by scene, contain questions designed to challenge your own understanding of the text. You may hurry over or even skip some of them; others may provoke more extended reflection and discussion.

Do this in an attitude of prayer, and you may find that the story of Jesus will change the way you think and act as one of his modern-day followers.

At least, I hope that was the experience of members of Wooddale Lutheran Church in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, who journeyed with me through this gospel during the time I served as their interim pastor in 2014-2015.

— Pr. Mark Wegener

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MARK'S STORY OF JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

Prologue: Jesus Arrival Is Announced

1. He submits to baptism and testing (1:1-13)
preaching of John the Baptist – Jesus' baptism and temptation

Act One: Jesus Begins His Controversial Ministry in Galilee

2. After his initial preaching he calls his disciples (1:14-20)
Kingdom of God proclaimed – Simon & Andrew, James & John called
3. His healings lead to growing fame (1:21-45)
a demoniac in synagogue & Peter's mother-in-law healed – preaching around Galilee
– a leper cleansed
4. Controversies with religious leaders lead to growing opposition (2:1-3:6)
a paralytic healed – Levi called – questions about fasting & sabbath – a shriveled hand healed

Act Two: Jesus Reacts to Rejection by His Own People

5. Growing opposition leads to rejection by his family (3:7-35)
crowds follow – the Twelve appointed – argument about Beelzebul – Jesus' true family
6. His parables beside the sea lead to divisions (4:1-34)
sower & soils – purpose of parables – lamp stand – growing seed – mustard seed
7. More healings lead to rejection by his home town (4:35-6:6)
a storm on lake stilled – a Gerasene demoniac, Jairus' daughter & a hemorrhaging woman healed
– rejection at Nazareth

Act Three: Jesus Continues His Ministry Outside of Galilee

8. He sends out 12 disciples and feeds thousands; John is beheaded (6:7-52)
missionaries sent out – the Baptist killed by Herod – 5,000 miraculously fed – Jesus walks on water
9. He heals people and argues about food traditions (6:53-7:23)
healings at Gennesaret – argument about kosher traditions – all foods declared clean
10. Again he heals and feeds thousands, but his disciples still do not understand (7:24-8:26)
a foreign woman's daughter & deaf-mute healed – 4,000 miraculously fed – demand for a sign
– misunderstanding about bread in boat – blind man healed

Act Four: Jesus Journeys with His Disciples toward Jerusalem

11. He predicts his death and resurrection and is transformed (8:27-9:29)
"Who am I?" – suffering & cross carrying predicted – Transfiguration – question about Elijah
– an "epileptic" boy healed
12. A second prediction leads to ethical teachings (9:30-10:31)
passion predicted – argument about greatness – a strange exorcist – warning against temptations
to sin – teaching on divorce – children blessed – a rich man rebuked & teaching on wealth
13. A third prediction leads to more misunderstanding (10:32-10:52)
passion predicted – James & John request privilege – blind Bartimaeus healed

Act Five: Jesus Teaches and Argues in and around the Temple

14. His entrances into Jerusalem challenge the establishment (11:1-12:12)
parade into city – a fig tree cursed – temple desecrated – fig tree & prayer – Jesus' authority questioned – parable of wicked tenants
15. Controversies in the temple stymie the leaders (12:13-13:2)
discussions re: paying taxes – the resurrection – greatest commandment – David's son
– scribes' avarice – a widow's mite – temple's destruction
16. Final instructions prepare the disciples for his absence (13:3-37)
apocalyptic warnings re: rumors of wars – persecution – desolating sacrilege – Son of Man – fig tree
– watchfulness

Act Six: Jesus Is Arrested, Tried, and Executed

17. The disciples flee the night Jesus is arrested (14:1-52)
plot to kill Jesus – anointing at Bethany – Judas' betrayal – Passover Seder & Lord's Supper
– desertion predicted – prayer in Gethsemane – arrest
18. In the morning he is tried by priests and the governor (14:53-15:20a)
priests' interrogation – Peter's denials – Pilate's interrogation – Barabbas released & Jesus
condemned – soldiers' mocking
19. That afternoon he dies, abandoned by all (15:20b-41)
cross carried by Cyrenean – Jesus crucified – ridiculed – abandoned in death – observed by women

Epilogue: Jesus' Resurrection Is Announced

20. Women react to his burial and empty tomb (15:42-16:8)
Jesus buried by Joseph of Arimathea – messenger confronts women at empty tomb
– they flee in silence

[Appendices (16:9-20)]



Prologue: Jesus Arrival Is Announced

1. He submits to baptism and testing (1:1-13)

preaching of John the Baptist – Jesus' baptism and temptation

*Almighty God, you have enriched your church with Mark's proclamation of the gospel. Give us grace to believe firmly in the good news of salvation and to walk daily in accord with it, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, #198)**

Read Mark 1:1.

- (1) “The beginning of the gospel....” Is this just the title of the opening verses? Or is it the title of the entire book? And if so, where will the story end?
- (2) Some of the best ancient manuscripts omit the words “the Son of God.” Does this make a difference for how you read the rest of the story?

Read Mark 1:2-8.

- (3) The biblical quotation is actually an amalgam of quotations from **Exodus 23:20** and **Isaiah 40:3**, apparently modified by **Malachi 3:1**. Check and see how Mark “adjusts” the Old Testament texts to fit the story of John.
- (4) Isaiah 40:3 says that a prophetic voice tells the people to prepare a road through the wilderness of Arabia in order that the Lord God can escort Jewish exiles in Babylon back to Judea. Mark treats this as a voice in the wilderness crying to the people to prepare a way for the Lord Jesus to arrive. In other words, “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way....” is changed to “A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way....” How about that?
- (5) Jewish tradition included a number of washing ceremonies in which people could bathe themselves and become ritually “clean” (see Leviticus 15 & Numbers 19). John adds a new twist to this custom: He washes the people who come to him. Hence he becomes known as “John the Bather,” or “John the Baptizer.” (The Greek term *baptizo* means “to wash” or “to bathe.”) Does the distinction between actively “washing yourself” and passively “being washed by someone else” make a real difference? If so, in what way?
- (6) John's camel's-hair-and-leather-belt wardrobe and his locusts-and-honey diet and his out-in-the-wasteland locale mark him as an ascetic prophet, like Elijah of old (see 2 Kings 1:8). He predicted the arrival of someone “stronger than I” who will “baptize you with (or: in) the Holy Spirit”—an obvious reference to Jesus. Did Jesus actually do this?

Read Mark 1:9-13.

- (7) After John baptizes Jesus, the skies are “split” or “ripped” (not “opened”), and the Spirit like a pigeon (or dove; it's the same word in Greek) flies down, and a voiced from the skies is heard. By whom? Just Jesus? John and the crowds? Us?
- (8) “You are my son, the beloved, with whom I am pleased.” What does this tell us about Jesus' role in the rest of the story?

- (9) So the Spirit kicks Jesus out into the wasteland for forty days of satanic testings and angelic ministrations. “And he was with the wild beasts.” Is this part of the satanic experience, or the angelic service?
- (10) We usually read the story of Jesus’ baptism on the First Sunday after Epiphany, and his temptations weeks later on the First Sunday in Lent. But Mark links them together, back to back, “immediately” and right after each other. Jesus’ baptism leads directly into temptation. Does our baptism by God mean we will be tested by Satan?

Consider the Scene

- Note that the setting for these events is in the “wilderness” or “wasteland.” How does this threatening environment color your appreciation of the story so far? What are you feeling?
- John anticipates the arrival of someone greater than he, but when Jesus arrives on the scene he submits to John’s baptism. A heavenly voice declares that Jesus is God’s beloved son, but then the Spirit consigns him to satanic testing. Do these unexpected reversals leave you somewhat disoriented?

* All the prayers are from the
Evangelical Lutheran Worship Book: Leaders Desk Edition
(Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), pp. 60-123.

Act One: Jesus Begins His Controversial Ministry in Galilee

2. After his initial preaching he calls his disciples (1:14-20)

Kingdom of God proclaimed – Simon & Andrew, James & John called

Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #31)

Read Mark 1:14-15.

- (11) In most stories, the main character’s first utterance can set the tone for everything that follows. One translation renders Jesus’ opening line like this:

*The time is up: God’s imperial rule is closing in.
change your ways, and put your trust in the good new!” **

How does this compare with the version you are reading?

- (12) Each phrase in Jesus’ announcement is important. How would you define or explain them?

“The time is fulfilled” _____

“The Kingdom of God” _____

“Has come near” or “Is at hand” _____

“Repent” _____

“Believe” _____

“Gospel” _____

- (13) By the way, just a few verses before, John was baptizing Jesus. Now he is locked up. What do you think happened? Was it because of something he said? If so, will Jesus get in trouble, too?

Read Mark 1:16-20.

- (14) After the first thing Jesus says, comes the first thing he does, namely, he recruits followers. Is this significant?

- (15) Simon and Andrew are commercial fishermen who work from shore; Zebidee’s sons James and John fish from their father’s boat. Does this tell us anything about their social status?

- (16) These four followers will learn to “fish for people.” Fish do not like to be caught. Do people?

- (17) “Immediately” (note the emphasis) the four recruits abandon everything—nets, fish, boat, co-workers, father—to join Jesus. Is this what discipleship is all about today, for us?

Consider the Characters

- Reflect on your picture of Jesus so far in this story. What sort of character is he? What is he like? Do you like him?
- And, for that matter, what sort of characters are the four fishermen? Can you identify with them?

* Most quotations from Mark will be from *The Gospel of Mark: The Scholars Bible* by Daryl D. Schmidt (Sonoma, CA: Pleridge Press, 1990).

Act One: Jesus Begins His Controversial Ministry in Galilee

3. His healings lead to growing fame (1:21-45)

a demoniac in synagogue & Peter's mother-in-law healed – preaching around Galilee – a leper cleansed

Compassionate God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as our Savior. Bring wholeness to all that is broken and speak truth to us in our confusion, that all creation will see and know your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #34)

Read Mark 1:21-28.

(18) How do you suppose the scholarly scribes taught? What was the basis of their authority?

(19) By the way, what if anything did Jesus actually teach?

(20) “Unclean spirits” were both demonic and polluting, that is, they were aligned with satanic forces and they also rendered people religiously defiled. Note how often they are named.

1:12-3	1:39	3:22-26, 30	6:56	9:17, 20, 25
1:23, 26, 27	3:11	5:2, 8, 12-13, 15-16	7:25-26, 29-30	9:38
1:34	3:15	6:7 & 13	[8:33?]	

(21) Notice all the shouting. The demons scream at Jesus, “You Nazarene; God’s holy one!” And he yells right back, “Shut up and get out of him!” What do you make of this?

Read Mark 1:29-31.

(22) It probably was not proper for a strange man to enter a woman’s bedroom. But Jesus does, and he even grabs her hand and pulls her up! Note how often Jesus’ healing touch is mentioned:

1:31	1:41	6:5	7:32-33	8:22-23	9:27	10:13-16
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(23) By the way, note that Simon (later nicknamed Peter) was married. Is this important?

(24) One might think that a fever would go away by itself—unless it was a malarial fever and therefore deadly. (Some guesstimates are that of all the people who have ever lived and died, 50% of them probably died of malaria!) Are you aware of the ELCA’s anti-malaria initiative? Check it out at www.elca.org.

Read Mark 1:32-39.

(25) These summaries of Jesus’ successful healing, praying and teaching activities throughout Galilee set the tone for what is to come. What do you suppose is coming?

Read Mark 1:40-45.

(26) Leprosy, a dreaded skin disease, made a person unfit to live in the community (see Leviticus 13). Note their inappropriate actions: Instead of keeping his distance, the leper approaches Jesus; instead of shying away, Jesus reaches out and actually touches him! Who was risking the most?

- (27) Take note, also, of Jesus' attitude. He seems indignant and irritated. Check out the footnote to verse 41; is Jesus "pity-filled" or "anger-filled"? Does this surprise you?
- (28) The priests served as the "board of health" and were the ones who certified whether a person was healed and ritually clean (see Leviticus 14). How would their approval affect the man's life?

Consider the Plot

This scene features conflicts between Jesus and demonic forces as a major component of the plot, and a journey motif also appears as Jesus travels around Galilee. But consider also another plot device, namely, surprising reversals. Note how often our normal expectations are upset:

- Students normally search out a teacher, but earlier Jesus recruited his followers, and without explanation they abruptly joined his entourage.
- We expect good people to recognize Jesus' true identity, but here it is only the demons who know who he really is.
- Men don't touch women, but Jesus grabs the hand of Simon's mother-in-law.
- We think of Jesus as caring and compassionate, but here he seems angry and almost insulting.
- Jesus' fame is spreading around the country, but he orders the ex-leper to keep quiet.
- The leper should do as Jesus tells him, but instead he broadcasts his story abroad.

In coming scenes, look for more items which reverse our normal expectations.

Act One: Jesus Begins His Controversial Ministry in Galilee

4. Controversies with religious leaders lead to growing opposition (2:1-3:6)

a paralytic healed – Levi called – questions about fasting & sabbath – a shriveled hand healed

Almighty God, in signs and wonders your Son revealed the greatness of your saving love. Renew us with your grace, and sustain us by your power, that we may stand in the glory of your name, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #43)

Read Mark 2:1-12.

- (29) Although Jesus started out in Nazareth (Mark 1:9), apparently he has now relocated in Capernaum (see also Mark 1:21) where he has his own home. What are the social implications of this move? Has anyone in your family made an unexpected move?
- (30) Jesus reacts to the faith or trust of the four people who lower a paralytic through the roof, but he addresses the paralyzed man himself. And forgives the man's sins! Do you think that is what they were hoping for? What is the connection between sins and paralysis?
- (31) The scholarly scribes—where did they come from?—silently accuse Jesus of blasphemy, a sin which could merit a death sentence (see Leviticus 24:10-23)! How would you answer their question: “Who can forgive sins except the one God?”
- (32) All of verse 10 should probably be taken as a parenthetical aside addressed to “you” the reader. It is the first instance in which Jesus is referred to as “the Son of Man,” or “the Son of Adam.” This is an important title in Mark, perhaps the chief title for Jesus. Note how frequently it occurs.
- 2:10, 28 8:31, 38 9:9, 12, 31 10:33, 45 13:26 14:21, 41, 62
- (33) After Jesus heals him, the man hops up, grabs his cot, and waltzes off! “We’ve never seen the likes of this!” exclaim the people. Have you ever seen anything that amazing?

Read Mark 2:13-17.

- (34) Previously Jesus recruited followers “by the sea” (see item #14 in a previous session). Now he does it again, with equally successful results. That’s a good thing, isn’t it?
- (35) Except for the fact that Levi is a customs collector for goods which pass through this lakeside port, which aligns him with Herod Antipas and the Roman occupation forces. How about that?
- (36) Whenever Jesus shares a meal with Levi and his friends—it’s not clear whether at Levi’s or Jesus’ house—his disciples are censured by the scholars: “What’s he doing eating with toll collectors and sinners?” Have you been criticized for the company you keep?
- (37) “I did not come to enlist religious folks but sinners,” says Jesus. Which group are you in?

Read Mark 2:18-22.

- (38) The followers of the Baptist and the Pharisees criticize Jesus for not making his disciples observe the customary times of fasting. Is fasting the same as dieting? Do you fast?

Act Two: Jesus Reacts to Rejection by His Own People

5. Growing opposition leads to rejection by his family (3:7-35)

crowds follow – the Twelve appointed – argument about Beelzebul – Jesus’ true family

All-powerful God, in Jesus Christ you turned death into life and defeat into victory. Increase our faith and trust in him, that we may triumph over all evil in the strength of the same Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #114)

Read Mark 3:7-12.

- (47) Jesus is back by the sea. Check on a map to see where his fans are coming from—Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Transjordan, Tyre and Sydon. Are you impressed? What would that look like on a map of your own state? Does he ever make use of that boat?
- (48) His fame has spread. So why does he warn the unclean spirits not to reveal his identity?

Read Mark 3:13-19.

- (49) Now Jesus is on a mountain where he summons twelve men who are to stay “with him” as his companions. Note that they are not called “disciples,” much less “apostles” (as some manuscripts suggest). What would it mean for us to “stay with” Jesus?
- (50) Here are some interesting insights about this list of names:
- The men in Jesus’ “inner circle” are given nicknames: Simon becomes Peter or Rock; James and John, “Thunder Brothers.” Are these appropriate names, or are they somehow ironic?
 - Of the next eight names, only Andrew is mentioned again anywhere in this gospel.
 - Simon the Cananean (or Zealot) and Judas Iscariot (specifically called “one of the twelve” here and later in the story) may have been assassins.
 - Is anyone missing (see #33 & #34)?

Read Mark 3:20-21 & 31-35.

- (51) Back home (in Capernaum? or Nazareth?) Jesus is so busy interacting with his fans that he “couldn’t even grab a bite to eat.” And when his family arrives on the scene—this is his unnamed mother’s only appearance in this gospel!—they want to take him back because they think he’s “out of his mind.” What do you think? Does following Jesus make people think you’re a little crazy?
- (52) Jesus snubs his family. Wow! Has anyone ever disowned you? How does that feel?
- (53) “Whoever does God’s will,” says Jesus, “that’s my brother and sister and mother.” So, would Jesus recognize you as one of his close relatives?

Read Mark 3:22-30.

- (54) The scribes from headquarters make two accusations: (a) Jesus “is under the control of Beelzebul,” and (b) “he drives out demons in the name of the head demon.” If you were to accuse a preacher with malfeasance, what charges would you bring? (Your pastor would like to know.)

- (55) Jesus refutes his accusers in reverse order. (b) A kingdom or house “divided against itself won’t be able to survive.” Ergo, Jesus is obviously not in cahoots with demonic forces. Can you name any one who *is* aligned with evil forces? Personally? Locally? Nationally?
- (56) Jesus’ refutation of (a) begins with an oath-like introduction: “Amen, I tell you,” the equivalent of “I swear to you. . .” Note how often this occurs [along with a simple “I tell you.”]
- | | | | | | |
|------|-------|-----------|-----------------|--------|---------|
| 3:28 | 9:1 | 11:23, 30 | 13:30 | [2:11] | [11:33] |
| 8:12 | 10:15 | 12:43 | 14:9, 8, 25, 30 | [9:13] | [13:37] |
- (57) “Whoever blasphemes against the holy spirit is never ever forgiven” is Jesus’ retort to (a) his opponents’ first accusation (see #30). Is this the time to talk about the so-called “unforgivable sin”? Better get your pastor in on this conversation!

Consider the Intercalation

This is just the first of several times when Mark will “sandwich” one event inside another.

- A¹ - Jesus’ relatives arrive to take him back home.
- B¹ - Scribes accuse Jesus of cooperating with demonic forces.
- B² - Jesus refutes the accusations.
- A² - He disowns his family.

Intercalation is a sophisticated literary device. Look for it several more times before the story is finished. How are the two events related thematically? Do they interpret each other?

Act Two: Jesus Reacts to Rejection by His Own People

6. His parables beside the sea lead to divisions (4:1-34)

sower & soils – purpose of parables – lamp stand – growing seed – mustard seed

Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your word. By your Holy Spirit help us to receive it with joy, live according to it, and grow in faith and hope and love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #128)

- (58) Although we have been told about Jesus’ teaching ministry on several occasions, this is the first time that we actually get to sample what he taught! His teachings here are in the form of parables, short stories which challenge us to reassess our understanding of what life in God’s kingdom is really like. Note how often the term “parable” is mentioned in this gospel.

3:23 4:2, 10-11, 13, 30, 33 7:17 12:1, 12

Which of these refers to short anecdotes or parables as we usually understand the term? Some think that Jesus’ parables are really more like riddles. Check it out in what follows.

Read Mark 4:1-8 & 13-20.

- (59) Finally Jesus makes use of that boat (see #47). The sower scatters seeds on patches of ground which most farmers would avoid—unplowed paths, shallow rocky dirt, and weed-infested soil. Do you think he is wasteful? Or overly generous?
- (60) But the good soil produces 30-, 60-, 100-fold. Is this an ordinary harvest? Or is it extraordinary?
- (61) Equating “seed” with “teachings” was and is a common comparison. The story suggests that Satan—where have we heard of him before? (see #9)—will snatch Jesus’ teachings from some hearers, that others will abandon it under pressure, and others will find worldly enticements more important. Does this apply to any of the characters in this gospel? Does it apply to anyone you know? Does it apply to you?
- (62) Notice that Jesus does not explain what it means for the “seed,” i.e. his teaching, to expand and grow. What do you think this would look like?

Read Mark 4:26-29.

- (63) Actually farmers *do* know how to encourage seed to grow. That is why they cultivate and fertilize and irrigate their fields. And they do not merely sleep away the days between sowing and harvest-ing. How does this “automatic” growth illustrate life in God’s kingdom?
- (64) Or is the accent on the sudden rush to harvest the ripened grain? How does this illustrate life in the kingdom of God?

Read Mark 4:30-32.

- (65) Mustard bushes, which usually grow along the edge of a garden but never in with the vegetables, can grow six or eight feet high. Is Jesus suggesting that God’s reign is like an overgrown weed?

- (66) And birds do not normally “tent” or nest in the reedy stalks of mustard bushes, which are self-seeding annuals. What is going on here?

Read Mark 4:2, 9, & 33.

- (67) On the one hand, parables seem to be Jesus’ favorite method of teaching, and he expects his hearers to understand them. Do you understand them?

Read Mark 4:10-12 & 34.

- (68) On the other hand, parables seem to be Jesus’ way of distinguishing between “insiders” and “outsiders.” Which are you?
- (69) By quoting **Isaiah 6:9-10** Jesus seems to be suggesting that he uses parables in order to keep some seekers and hearers from understanding and to keep them from being forgiven. How about that?

Read Mark 4:21-25.

- (70) These provocative sayings, placed in the middle of this collection of parabolic riddles, promote the idea that the kingdom is a mystery. Which do you find most encouraging? Most troubling?
- Lamps belong on a stand, not under a basket.
 - Hidden secrets will be exposed to light.
 - The measure you give will be the measure you get.
 - Those who have much will get more; those who have little will get less.
- (71) Reflect on the riddling effect of all these parabolic teachings. Do they challenge your understanding of who Jesus was? Are they in line with the kind of character Jesus is in Mark’s story?

Consider the Implied Reader

Professors of literature often talk about the “implied reader” when they analyze narratives. They are not referring to the story’s original audience (in this case, residents of the Roman Empire around 70 CE), nor do they mean the actual readers of the story today (in this case, you!).

Rather, they are imagining the kind of person for whom this story would resonate, the sort of person who would share the author’s values and outlook, one who would identify with some of the characters in the story.

In your estimation, is the implied reader of Mark’s gospel . . .

- . . . an insider, or an outsider?
- . . . a disciple, or an opponent?
- . . . male, or female?
- . . . younger, or older?
- . . . a church person, or an unchurched neighbor?
- . . . a Christian who needs encouragement, or an unbeliever who needs converting?

Act Two: Jesus Reacts to Rejection by His Own People

7. More healings lead to rejection by his home town (4:35-6:6)

storm on lake stilled – a Gerasene demoniac, Jairus' daughter & a hemorrhaging woman healed
– rejection at Nazareth

O God of creation, eternal majesty, you preside over land and sea, sunshine and storm. By your strength pilot us, by your power preserve us, by your wisdom instruct us, and by your hand protect us, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #120)

Read Mark 4:35-41.

- (72) Mark consistently refers to this (so far, unnamed) fresh water lake as a “sea.” How does this influence your picture of the setting of this incident?
- (73) Note the contrasts: first there’s a “great wind,” then a “great calm,” and finally a “great fear.” Don’t you wish the disciples had responded with a “great joy”?
- (74) “Silence!” shouts Jesus, “Shut up!” Notice that this is what he told the demon (see #21). Are storms demonic forces? And, for that matter, whatever happened to the other boats with them?
- (75) By the way, does this remind you of the story of Jonah? See **Jonah 1:4-6**. What are the similarities? What are some differences?

Read Mark 5:1-20.

- (76) Jesus’ first action in foreign territory, like the first in his adopted hometown, is an exorcism at Gerasa. Or is it Gergasa? Or Gadara? Check it out on a map.
- (77) The man has an unclean spirit, an unclean residence in a grave yard, in a territory where people raise unclean hogs. How bad can it get?
- (78) And was he at the dock when Jesus disembarked (v. 2)? Or did he arrive from a distance (v. 6)?
- (79) The shouting spirits, apparently about 2,000 in number, go by the name “Legion.” A legion was a unit of over 5,000 soldiers and cavalry in the Roman army of occupation. Do you think this incident somehow reflects a subversive political ideology?
- (80) The demons beg to enter the swine; the owners of the pigs beg Jesus to leave their territory; the healed demoniac begs to accompany Jesus. The first two get what they ask for; the latter does not. Who ends up better off?
- (81) Instead of becoming a follower of Jesus, the man becomes an evangelist. Instead of telling what *the Lord* has done for him, he tells what *Jesus* has done. Is that the same thing?

Read Mark 5:21-24a & 35-43.

- (82) Back on the Jewish shore, a local synagogue official grovels before Jesus and begs him to come, touch and heal his little girl who is near death. Have you known anyone that desperate, who would do anything to save their child?

- (83) Even though messengers report that the girl has died, Jesus continues to Jairus' house. And even though the mourners are already keening, he says that she is not dead, merely asleep. What do you think? Is the girl actually dead? Or is she merely comatose?
- (84) This is not a public event. Only Jesus, his three closest comrades, and the girl's parents witness her restoration. After Jesus' touches her (does that sound familiar?), she wakes up and can walk, and eat. Reflect on the emotional impact of all those details. How do they make you feel?
- (85) Mark translates Jesus' Aramaic "*talitha koum*," so Greek-speaking auditors will not get the impression he is using a magical formula, some "*Abracadabra*." Look for other instances where Mark translates Aramaic words or explains Jewish customs for the readers.

Read Mark 5:24b-34.

- (86) On the way to Jarius' house, Jesus interacts with a woman who suffers from abnormal vaginal bleeding. According to **Leviticus 15:19-30**, such a person must remain secluded, and anyone who comes in contact with her also becomes "unclean." However, this woman leaves her home, joins the crowd, and dares to touch Jesus' garment! How would you describe her? Desperate? Brazen? Courageous? "Uppity"? Illegal? Faith-filled?
- (87) She spent all her savings on doctors, but ended up worse off. Today medical bills are one of the chief reasons people go bankrupt. Does this sound familiar?
- (88) At the end, Jesus says, "Daughter, your trust has cured you?" Or is it: "Your faith has saved you?" The usual Greek words for healing and curing are *hiama* and *hygiaino* (as in "hygiene") and *therapeuo* (as in "therapeutic"). Here and in 5:23 & 28 the word is *sozo*, which means "to save."
- (89) For the second time one story is "sandwiched" within another. Note some ideas which are present in both—"faith" or "trust," "fear," "kneeling," "touching," "daughter," "saving." Also, the woman was bleeding for 12 years; Jairus' daughter was 12 year old. Hmm... Just a coincidence? Think about it long enough, and you'll get into the story.

Read Mark 6:1-6.

- (90) Back in his hometown synagogue—would that be Nazareth or Capernaum (see #28)?—Jesus' neighbors "were resentful of him." They remember him as a woodworker (that is, as a common day laborer), as James, Judas and Simon's brother, and they call him "Mary's son." Are these compliments, or insults?
- (91) Act Two ends as did Act One, with another rejection of Jesus (see #45). Is there a lesson here for us? Too much success breeds opposition and rejection—something like that?

Consider an Important Theme

The theme of "faith" or "belief" or "trust"—these English words translate the same Greek term—pops up several times in this section. What is the opposite? "Unfaith," "disbelief," "mistrust"? Or "fear," "terror"? More often than not, in Mark's narrative the opposite of trust is fear.

- Does this resonate with your own experience?

Act Three: Jesus Continues His Ministry Outside of Galilee

8. He sends out 12 disciples and feeds thousands; John is beheaded (6:7-52)

missionaries sent out –the Baptist killed by Herod – 5,000 miraculously fed – Jesus walks on water

O God, powerful and compassionate, you shepherd your people, faithfully feeding and protecting us. Heal each of us, and make us a whole people, ha we may embody the justice and peace of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #132)

Read Mark 6:7-13 & 6:30-31.

- (92) When Jesus sends the Twelve out two-by-two, they go with minimum provisions, only a staff to ward off predators. Is this how we send out missionaries today?
- (93) Those who do not accept them are brushed off with a defiant gesture, the equivalent of our “middle finger salute.” Is that the way we want to treat those who do not welcome our preaching?
- (94) The Twelve successfully replicate Jesus’ own preaching healing ministry. This is the only place in Mark’s gospel that those who are “sent out” (*apostello*) are called “apostles” (*apostoloi*) or “emissaries” (see #49). Why don’t we have official “apostles” today?

Read Mark 6:14-29.

- (95) Some people think Jesus is John the Baptist *redivivus*, or Elijah, or another prophet. But Herod opts for the first choice. Why? (This question will come up again; watch for it.)
- (96) Now it gets complicated. Herod Antipas was not really a “king.” From 4 BCE to 39 CE he was actually the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, with his headquarters at Tiberius about ten miles south of Capernaum on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Antipas was the sixth son of Herod the Great, the first of three sons with his fourth wife Malthace. Herod the Great was given the title “King of the Jews” by the Roman senate in 40 BCE. Early on he was supported by Mark Antony, and later switched his allegiance to Octavian (a.k.a. Caesar Augustus) after 31 BCE.
- Previously Antipas had married the daughter of King Aretas of Nabatea. Later he divorced her to marry Herodias, who was the wife of Antipas’ half-brother Herod, the third son of Herod the Great and his third wife Mariamne II. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, the third son of Herod the Great and his second wife Mariamne I. (Mark 6:17 is in error here; Herodias was not the wife of Philip. Philip was another of Antipas’ half-brothers, the son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra.)
- By the way, this means that Herodias was the (half)niece of both of her husbands! Also, she and her first husband had a daughter named Salome. Does this sound like a soap opera, or what?
- (97) This is the third “intercalation.” The story of John’s beheading is sandwiched inside the account of the sending and return of the twelve. This “flash-back” actually anticipates themes which will come up later in the story. Which details do you find most intriguing?
- that Herod “was very confused, yet he listened to John eagerly”?
 - that this was Herod’s birthday party, a men’s only affair for elite officials?
 - that he ogled his step-daughter’s erotic dancing?
 - that he sealed his foolish offer with an oath?
 - that the girl asked for John’s head served up on a platter, immediately?
 - that John’s disciples gave his corpse a respectful burial?

- (98) By the way, does Herod Antipas' birthday bash remind you of any other royal banquets? Take a look at **Esther 1:1-22**.
- (99) In this gospel John's fate anticipates Jesus' fate. What are some similarities? Some differences?

Read Mark 6:30-44.

- (100) Did Jesus intentionally escape from Antipas' territory? It's anyone's guess. The crowds, however, wouldn't let him alone. And here for the first time we hear that Jesus has "compassion" or "sympathy." Would you like to be compared to "sheep without a shepherd"?
- (101) Supper time and no food! And it would take "half a year's wages worth of bread" to make a meal for the crowd. What might it cost for your local food shelf to buy enough food to feed all the hungry people in your community?
- (102) Five biscuits and two fish feed thousands with twelve tubs of leftovers! Notice the sequence: Jesus gives a blessing, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples, who distribute it to the people. Is this how your food shelf works? Your Communion services?
- (103) By the way, does this miraculous multiplication of bread and fish remind you of any other "food in the wilderness" story? Check out **Exodus 16:1-36**.

Read Mark 6:45-52.

- (104) Notice the sequence: Jesus forces the disciples to embark for Bethsaida, then he dismisses the crowd himself, and then he climbs the hill to pray. This is the second time we see him praying (see #24). What do you suppose he was praying about?
- (105) Notice the differences between this sea story and the previous one (see #73 & #74).
- It's a strong headwind, not a gale.
 - Jesus is on shore, not asleep on a pillow.
 - He is walking upon the sea, and intends to bypass the boat.
 - The disciples think they're seeing a ghost.
 - The wind dies down when he gets into the boat; there's no shouting here.
- (106) "Take heart, it's me!" he says. "Don't be afraid." When have you felt relieved when someone you value has appeared on the scene?
- (107) The disciples "hadn't understood about the loaves; they were being obstinate." What do the loaves have to do with this? Are you just as confused as they are?

Reconsider the Disciples' Character Role

If we readers continue to identify with the disciples, how are we doing?

- On the one hand, we are still with Jesus, through thick and thin.
- On the other hand, we apparently don't understand exactly what is going on.

How do you feel about that? Is this true to life as you have experienced it?

Act Three: Jesus Continues His Ministry Outside of Galilee

9. He heals people and argues about food traditions (6:53-7:23)

healings at Gennesaret – argument about kosher traditions – all foods declared clean

Gracious God, your generosity waters the world with goodness, and you cover creation with abundance. Awaken in us a hunger for the food that satisfies both body and spirit, and with this food fill all the starving world; through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #37)

Read Mark 6:53-56.

- (108) The disciples’ boat lands at Genessaret. Is that where they were headed (see #104)?
- (109) This summary of healings contains familiar themes. Where have we heard this before?
- People recognize Jesus right away (see #99). _____
 - They carry sick people on mats (#29). _____
 - Jesus goes through villages and market places (#25). _____
 - Those who touch his hem are healed (#86). _____
 - Actually, they are “saved.” (#88). _____

Read Mark 7:1-13.

- (110) Once again scribes and Pharisees (see #30, #37, #54 & #64) confront Jesus and complain that his men eat with unwashed hands. Is this about hygiene? Or something else?
- (111) Jesus counters by calling them “hypocrites” or “phonies” and by quoting **Isaiah 29:13**. Does this match your version of the passage in your Old Testament? (This text works best if it is from the Greek Septuagint, rather than from the Hebrew Scriptures.)
- (112) “God’s commandment” *versus* “human tradition”—are they always opposed to each other? Or can some traditions help us follow God’s word? If so, do you have any examples?
- (113) **Deuteronomy 5:16** and **Leviticus 20:9** surely imply that we should support our aged parents. How do we do this today? Are Social Security, and our IRAs, pension funds and 401-Ks enough?
- (114) If a son declared his income “dedicated to God,” his parents could have no claim on his money. What a loophole! Can you think of other sneaky ways of protecting your financial assets?

Read Mark 7:14-15.

- (115) Jesus’ address to the crowd contrasts “what goes into a person” with “what comes out of the person.” Without reading farther, what do you suppose he is driving at? And how does this relate to the issue of eating with unwashed hands?

Read Mark 7:17-23.

- (116) Jesus’ explanation of this “riddle” to his disciples employs a bit of scatological humor. Food goes in your mouth at one end of the digestive system, and out the other end into the

toilet. It can't make you unclean. Or can it? Talk to a restaurant inspector. Or does Jesus mean something else?

(117) But what comes out of your heart, that is, out of the center of your personality, *can* be morally impure, right? Notice the two carefully balanced lists—first six immoral actions, then six vices:

- illicit sex - thefts - murders - adulteries - envies - wickednesses
- deceit - promiscuity - evil eye - blasphemy - arrogance - foolishness

Which do you think is the worst? Do any of these describe you? Or anyone you know?

Reread Mark 7:3-4, 11b, & 19b.

(118) Three times the author explains a strange word or custom to the reader:

- Pious Jews wash or “baptize” their hands and utensils to stay ritually clean.
- “Korban” means “consecrated to God.”
- All foods are now kosher.

Do you find this helpful? What does this tell you about the first readers of this gospel?

Consider the Structure

The three scenes in Act Three are arranged in a thematically parallel fashion.

Mark 6:7-52

Jesus' healing mission

John's execution

feeding of 5,000

walking on water to disciples
to disciples

Mark 6:53-7:23

Jesus' healings at Genessaret

controversy about food

explanation to disciples

Mark 7:24-8:26

healings of woman's
daughter & deaf-mute

feeding of 4,000

boat trip with disciples

healing of blind man

Others arrange these events in two parallel sequences.

Mark 6:30-7:37

feeding of 5,000

walking on water to boat

controversies with Pharisees

woman & “children's bread”

healing of deaf-mute

Mark 8:1-26

feeding of 4,000

nighttime crossing in boat

demand for sign from heaven

disciples misunderstand about bread

healing of blind man

- Which sequence do you find more helpful for tracking the plot of Mark's gospel?
- Which can be explained by assuming that Mark is based on two similar written sources?

By the way, speaking of feeding hungry people, are you aware of the Christian advocacy movement known as *Bread for the World*? If not, now would be a good time to google it and get on board.

Act Three: Jesus Continues His Ministry Outside of Galilee

**10. Again he heals and feeds thousands,
but his disciples still do not understand (7:24-8:26)**

a foreign woman's daughter & a deaf-mute healed – 4,000 miraculously fed – demand for a sign
– misunderstanding about bread in boat – a blind man healed

Gracious God, throughout the ages you transform sickness into health and death into life. Open us to the power of your presence, and make us a people ready to proclaim your promises to the whole world, through Jesus Christ, our healer and Lord. Amen. (ELW #153)

Read Mark 7:24-30.

- (119) Tyre, on the Phoenician coast in the province of Syria, is clearly outside Jewish territory. How Jesus would have access to a private home is unclear, as is how the people there could recognize him. In any event a Greek woman, that is, a polytheist, grovels at his feet and asks him to throw out a demon or unclean spirit from her daughter. On the basis of similar scenes before, you would expect him to help her, wouldn't you?
- (120) Instead he refuses: she's no better than a "dog" and doesn't deserve the "children's" food! You wouldn't expect him to insult her like this, would you? Do you know any foreign women who get treated like this?
- (121) The woman can give as good as she gets! Even if she's only a dog, at least she should be allowed the scraps from the children's meal. Do you realize that she is the only person in this gospel who addresses Jesus as "Lord"? Or is it "lord"? Or "sir"? (The Greek is *kyrie*.)

Read Mark 7:31-37.

- (122) Back near Jesus' home territory, a deaf mute is brought for a healing touch (see #22). In private he performs a series of strange rituals. He pokes his fingers in the man's ears, dabs spittle on the man's tongue, moans toward the sky, and utters a formula, "*ephphatha*." Do these look like magical manipulations? Could Jesus have been a magician?
- (123) In any event, it works. The man can hear now and speak without stuttering. Compare the people's reaction with **Isaiah 35:4-6**. Is more going on here than meets the eye?

Read Mark 8:1-9.

- (124) Compare this second miraculous feeding with the previous one (see #101 & #102).
- In both cases Jesus has compassion for the crowds, and dismisses them.
 - Earlier they had been with him just one day; here it's three days.
 - Then they could have bought food in nearby towns; here they are too far away to do so.
 - Then they sat on green grass; here, on the ground.
 - Then they had five loaves and two fish; here it's seven loaves (plus a few fish).
 - Then he "blessed" loaves and fishes; here he "gives thanks" for bread and "blesses" fish.
 - Then they gathered twelve baskets of leftovers; here it's seven hampers of scraps.
 - Then 5,000 had more than enough to eat; here 4,000 have more than enough.
- (125) Doesn't it seem strange that the disciples apparently have forgotten all about the earlier feeding?

Read Mark 8:10-12 & 13-21.

- (126) After sailing to the otherwise unknown district of Dalmanoutha, Jesus is accosted by hostile Pharisees who demand that he authenticate his work by producing a “sign from heaven.” Is that a legitimate request? Would you want televangelists, for example, to provide their credentials?
- (127) Jesus swears, “[I’ll be damned] . . .if I give this generation a sign,” turns his back on them, and jumps into the boat again. Do you detect some impatience here? With his opponents?
- (128) Then comes a discombobulating boat scene. The disciples (who just witnessed thousands fed with bread) have only brought one loaf with them. Jesus warns them about the impure “leaven” of the Pharisees and Herod (see # 45). What, if anything, is the connection with these two ideas?
- (129) Jesus’ quiz—“How many?” “How many?” “Don’t you get it?”—is calculated to shame his men. Do you detect some frustration here? Frustration with his own disciples?
- (130) There is no rational connection between the number of loaves and anything else, and at this point the issues is dropped, never to be raised again. Readers who identify with the disciples may be left as frustrated *about* the story as the disciples are *within* the story. Is that true for you?

Read Mark 8:22-26.

- (131) Finally they reach Bethsaida (see #104). Trace their itinerary on a map: Across the lake from Bethsaida (Mark 6:45), to Genessaret (6:53), then Tyre (7:24) and Sidon (7:31), through the Decapolis toward the Sea of Galilee again (7:31), the district of Dalmanoutha (? - 8:10), and finally to Bethsaida (8:22). Do you get the impression they don’t know where they’re going? Does our journey through life ever seem like that? Somewhat random and purposeless?
- (132) This is the first time Jesus meets a blind person. Notice that it takes him two tries to get it right. Purposeless journeys, inept disciples, “magical” healings—do you get the impression that things are in decline here at the end of Act 3, halfway through the story?

Consider a Theme

A single theme—“bread,” “loaf,” “food”—penetrates the scenes in this act, and is supported by the food and meal references in earlier scenes. Most all are positive and nurturing . . .

- John’s locust and honey diet
- Peter’s mother-in-law’s service
- Jesus’ dining with sinners
- The disciples’ refusal to fast
- Their Sabbath grain-picking
- David eating the priests’ bread
- Jesus’ lack of time to eat
- His three seed stories
- His order to feed Jairus’ daughter
- Feeding the 5,000
- Arguing about kosher food practices
- Feeding the 4,000
- Confusion about one loaf & leaven

. . . except for the head-on-a-platter served up at Herod’s birthday banquet!

- Watch for this bread/loaf/food them in coming scenes. Is it nurturing, or not?

Act Four: Jesus Journeys with His Disciples toward Jerusalem

11. He predicts his death and resurrection and is transformed (8:27-9:29)

“Who am I?” – suffering & cross carrying predicted – Transfiguration – question about Elijah
– an “epileptic” boy healed

O God, through suffering and rejection you bring forth our salvation, and by the glory of the cross you transform our lives. Grant that for the sake of the gospel we may turn from the lure of evil, take up our cross, and follow your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (ELW #156)

Read Mark 8:27-33.

- (133) At Caesarea Philippi, the northern end of what once was the united Kingdom of Israel and Judah, Jesus poses a question about his *public* reputation, with the same responses as earlier (see #95). His *personal* question—“What about you, who do you say I am?”—elicits a different response from Peter: “You are the Anointed!” That is, “the Messiah,” “the Christ.” How would you answer?
- (134) But Jesus immediately squelches that idea and talks instead about the impending fate of “the son of man.” Or is it “the Son of Man,” or “the son of the man,” or “the son of Adam”? Does this title emphasize Jesus’ divinity, or his humanity?
- (135) In the first of three such announcements, Jesus openly predicts his suffering, rejection, death and vindication. So Peter scolds Jesus, and Jesus in turn scolds Peter and calls him “Satan.” Where have we heard that before? (See #9 & #61.)

Read Mark 8:34-9:1.

- (136) To a larger crowd Jesus describes his followers as people who will “deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow me!” For the first time this story mentions a cross, which was an instrument of torture, an obscene and repulsive image. It doesn’t mean merely to “put up with life’s hardships.” What exactly does it mean?
- (137) Four striking contrasts and rhetorical questions follow:
- A¹ - Those who save their life (or soul) will lose it, and *vice versa*.
 - B¹ - What good does it do to gain the world at the expense of your life (or soul)?
 - B² - What would one barter for one’s life (or soul)?
 - A² - Those who are ashamed of Jesus will *vice versa* be shamed by the son of Adam.
- How would you answer these questions or explain these paradoxes?
- (138) Have not all the people in Jesus’ original audience died by now, 2000 years later? And we have yet to “see God’s imperial rule set in with power.” Or have we?

Read Mark 9:2-8.

- (139) Jesus’ “transformation” or “transfiguration” (*metamorphosis* in Greek) is a surreal scene:
- a mountain-top experience
 - conversing with Elijah, and Moses
 - accompanied by three main disciples
 - an over-shadowing cloud
 - whiter-than-white clothes
 - God’s (?) voice: “This is my favored son.
- How would you interpret this scene? What does it add to the story? Does this remind you of Jesus’ baptism (see # 8)? And what exactly should they (and we?) listen to?

- (140) Elijah and Moses did not die in the usual way (see **2 Kings 2:11** and Deuteronomy **34:5-6**) and, some thought, could return again (see **Malachi 4:4-6**). What could they have been talking about?
- (141) And what was wrong with Peter's offer to "set up three tents," one for the "rabbi" as well as for Elijah and Moses of them?
- (142) By the way, does this scene remind you of the theophany (look it up) in **Exodus 24:15-16**, and the instructions for building a tent in **Exodus 25:8-9**?

Read Mark 9:9-13.

- (143) If the three disciples think "the son of Adam [will] rise from the dead" refers to the resurrection at the end of time, their question about Elijah coming first is understandable. But if "Elijah in fact has come," does this refer to John the Baptist?
- (144) And where precisely do the Scriptures "claim that the son of Adam will suffer"?

Read Mark 9:14-27.

- (145) Back with the rest of his disciples, who are arguing with some scribes, a man from the crowd complains that his men were not able to help his son, whose symptoms look like *grand mal* epileptic seizures. Have you ever witnessed someone going through a convulsion like this?
- (146) The appeal of the boy's father is heart-wrenching: "I do trust! Help my lack of trust!" Have you ever wanted to plead "I believe; help my unbelief"?
- (147) The gospel does not describe this as a healing in medical terms, but as an exorcism. At Jesus' command, the unclean spirit screams and sends the boy into paroxysms which leave him stiff as a corpse. But Jesus grabs his hand and stands him up. Isn't that what he did with the "dead" girl (see #84)?

Read Mark 8:28-29.

- (148) So what is the key to healing? A trusting faith? Or praying?

Consider Another Theme

Through the first half of the story the journeys of Jesus and his disciples have been rather aimless and seemingly without purpose or direction (see #131).

- from Nazareth to Capernaum
- through neighboring villages
- from the seaside, to a mountain, and back to the sea
- across the sea to the Gerasenes, and back
- across the sea to a private place, then to Genesaret, Tyre, Sidon, the Decapolis, the sea, Dalmanoutha, and Bethsaida

From now on, however, their journeys "on the way" do have a goal as they travel....

- from Caesarea Philippi,
- to Galilee and Capernaum,
- to Trans-Jordan and Jericho,
- and finally to Jerusalem.

How does this advance the plot of Mark's story of Jesus and his disciples?

Act Four: Jesus Journeys with His Disciples toward Jerusalem

12. A second prediction leads to ethical teachings (9:30-10:31)

passion predicted – argument about greatness – a strange exorcist – warning against temptations to sin
– teaching on divorce – children blessed – a rich man rebuked & teaching on wealth

Sovereign God, you have created us to live in loving community with one another. Form us for life that is faithful and steadfast, and teach us to trust like little children, that we may reflect the image of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #165)

Read Mark 9:30-37.

- (149) The second stage of Jesus' journey south through Galilee begins with another passion-resurrection prediction, which his men fail to understand and are afraid to question. Have you ever known someone who expressed a "death wish"? How did you feel about that?
- (150) The last time they visit Capernaum, the disciples' embarrassed silence is evidence that they have been arguing about which of them is the greatest. So Jesus asserts that the first will be last, and *vice versa*. Which are you? First, or last? In what context?
- (151) It's not that children are so innocent or trusting or humble—any parent knows how obnoxious they can be!—as much as they are of little status or importance. So Jesus' logic is impeccable: you want God, you accept me; you want me, you accept a child. Are you OK with that?

Read Mark 9:38-50.

- (152) Even outside exorcists are OK if they use Jesus' name, because if they're not against us, they're for us. Does this hold true in your life? In congress? In international politics?
- (153) We get the general drift of the series of sayings which are strung together by "catch words," but we may have difficulty explaining exactly what each one means.
- You should accept a child *in my name*.
 - Someone was driving out demons *in your name*.
 - Someone may give you a cup of water *in the name* of Christ/Messiah/Anointed.
 - If you *mislead* a little believer, you deserve catapontism. (Look it up.)
 - If you hand *misleads* you, *cut it off* and *enter life*, not *Gehenna* and *fire*.
 - If your foot *misleads* you, *cut it off* and *enter life*, not *Gehenna*.
 - If your eye *misleads* you, pluck it out and *enter* the Kingdom, not *Gehenna* with its worm and *fire*.
 - Everyone is *salted* with *fire*.
 - *Salt* is good, if it doesn't go bland.
 - Become *salty* and live in peace.

Which of these do you find most interesting? Most encouraging? Most disturbing? By the way, notice how "live in peace" at the end counters the disciples' arguing at the start.

Read Mark 10:1-12.

- (154) As their journey continues through Trans-Jordan, Jesus is confronted with a question about the legitimacy of divorce (a subject which got John the Baptist in trouble; see #96). Note how his references to God's original intention in **Genesis 1:27 & 2:24** apparently

overrides Moses' later decree in **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**. Is this fair, to quote God's words against God's law?

- (155) Notice how Jesus treats both husbands and wives equally; both are morally challenged. Do you think he means to prohibit every case of remarriage after divorce? Or is he talking about people who get a quickie divorce just in order to marry someone better?

Read Mark 10:13-16.

- (156) Once again it's Jesus and children (see #151); he welcomes and hugs and blesses them. But what exactly does it mean for us adults when he says, "Amen, I swear to you, whoever doesn't accept God's imperial rule the way a child would, certainly won't ever set foot in it"?

Read Mark 10:17-24a, 24b-27, & 28-31.

- (157) The *first* of three conversations about money (vv. 17-24a, with some man) begins with a question about how one must *perform* in order to *inherit* life eternal. Do you see a contradiction here?
- (158) Jesus recommends obeying several of the commandments. Compare his list with the ones you memorized in the catechism. What's missing? What's their order? Where did the anti-defrauding one come from? (Hint: see #114.)
- (159) This is the only place in Mark's gospel where we are told that Jesus actually *loves* someone. What do you think of that?
- (160) The man is a millionaire, so he goes away sad. And the disciples are shocked! Why?
- (161) The *second* conversation (vv. 24b-27, with the disciples) contains the famous camel-through-a-needle's-eye quip, an over-exaggeration to emphasize how impossible it is for a rich person to get into the kingdom (but it's not impossible for God to get him or her in). If three key religious duties are praying, fasting and giving alms, no wonder the disciples are confused: Anyone can pray and fast, but you have to have some wealth in order to give alms. Does this make sense today?
- (162) In the *third* conversation (vv. 28-31, with Peter) Jesus assures those who have abandoned family and property for the sake of the gospel that they will receive a hundred times over, plus persecutions, and also life eternal. Does this sound like a warning? Or what?
- (163) Notice how "eternal life" here rounds out the section (see #157), and how the "first versus the last" saying rounds out the entire scene (see #150). Again, which are you?

Consider the Application

This section of clearer teachings on family matters—marriage, children and money—may reflect issues which were important in the communities which received this gospel.

- Is it significant that they are placed here in the story, on the trip to Jerusalem?
- Are these issues still important today?
- If so, do we have to adapt them, or can we adopt them as is?

Act Four: Jesus Journeys with His Disciples toward Jerusalem

13. A third prediction leads to more misunderstanding (10:32-10:52)

passion predicted – James & John request privilege – blind Bartimaeus healed

Sovereign God, you turn your greatness into goodness for all the peoples on earth. Shape us into willing servants of your kingdom, and make us desire always and only your will, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #171)

Read Mark 10:32-34.

(164) The final stage of the journey “on the road going up to Jerusalem” begins with another prediction that “the son of Adam will. . .” (Note how the details match the events later in the story.)

“be turned over to the ranking priests and scholars” _____

“and they will sentence him to death” _____

“and turn him over to foreigners” _____

“and they will make fun of him” _____

“and spit on him” _____

“and flog him” _____

“and put him to death” _____

“yet after three days he will rise” _____

Do these details spoil the ending of the story for you? Or do they enhance the suspense?

(165) The theme of “the road” or “the way” is mentioned several times in these sections.

8:27 9:33 & 34 10:17 10:32 10:46 & 52 (See also #4)

What does it mean to follow “in the way” of Jesus?

Read Mark 10:35-40.

(166) For a third time Jesus’ passion and resurrection prediction is followed by an inappropriate response on the part of his disciples (see #135 & #150). James and John’s outrageous request to enjoy the two positions of highest honor runs counter to Jesus’ own agenda. Do you know people who are so obviously self-aggrandizing? Are you like that?

(167) Are Jesus’ comments about “the cup I’m drinking” and “the baptism I’m undergoing” veiled references to the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper?

Read Mark 10:41-45.

(168) The other ten disciples’ annoyance with the Zebedee brothers is understandable. Jesus’ reaction spells out an agenda which runs contrary to all normal expectations. Among his people the goal is not to be Number One, but to become servants and slaves. Is this realistic? Are we able to live this out in our communities?

(169) Mark 10:45 may be an editorial comment, rather than Jesus’ quotation. It introduces for the first and only time the idea that the son of Adam will “give his life as a ransom for

many.” A ransom is the price paid to win freedom for a slave or for a prisoner of war. Who normally pays the price? And to whom is it paid? How might this idea play out in the remainder of the story?

Read Mark 10:46-52.

- (170) One more time a blind man confronts Jesus (see #132); this time he gets it right on the first try! Bartimaeus (the only person healed by Jesus who has a name in Mark’s gospel!) introduces a new title, “son of David,” for “the Nazarene” (see #121), a.k.a. the “rabbi” (see #141). Watch how all three of these three titles appear later in the story.
- (171) “Have mercy on me” and “Your faith has saved you” seem to have greater meaning beyond this miraculous healing of a blind beggar. How might you want to use and hear these “religious” phrases in your own experience?

Consider the Characters

Readers who identify with the character role of the disciples may not be satisfied with their performance in these scenes, for they repeatedly misunderstand or even reject Jesus’ own statements. Notice how the same basic idea is presented in several ways:

- the three passion & resurrection predictions
- the “pick up your cross” saying
- the two incidents with children
- the “baptism” and “cup” sayings
- the “ransom for many” saying

Clarify or summarize as best you can Jesus’ agenda for himself and his followers.

- How does this compare with our normal human expectations and goals?
- It is realistically possible to follow Jesus’ praxis today?
- Are there other characters in these stories you would prefer to emulate?

Act Five: Jesus Teaches and Argues in and around the Temple

14. His entrances into Jerusalem challenge the establishment (11:1-12:12)

parade into city – a fig tree cursed – temple desecrated – fig tree & prayer – Jesus' authority questioned
– parable of wicked tenants

Holy God, through your Son you have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes only through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #60)

Read Mark 11:1-11.

- (172) At a village east of Jerusalem Jesus sends two unnamed disciples to obtain an animal on the pretext that “The Lord has need of it.” Does this refer to the Lord God? Or is Jesus the Lord? (It would be the only time Mark refers to Jesus as “Lord.”) Or does this refer to the animal’s owner? In any case, isn’t this a pretty flimsy excuse for taking the beast?
- (173) Jesus does not walk into Jerusalem, or ride in a chariot as conquering generals often did, but he chooses to ride on a colt or foal “that has never been ridden.” Is it a miracle that Jesus manages to ride an unbroken animal? Or does this detail have greater significance?
- (174) The crowds accompanying this mock-parade quote **Psalm 118:26** and add unusual phrases about “the coming kingdom” of “our father David.” “Hosanna in the highest” means “Save us, Lord, [you who are] in the highest [heights of heaven].” Does this sound familiar? Are these words chanted in your worship liturgies? And if so, what do they mean for you?
- (175) Jesus enters the temple courts, looks around like a tourist, and then returns to the suburbs. By the way, did you notice that the animal is not called a donkey or an ass, and there no palm branches, and they never return the animal to its owner?

Read Mark 11:12-19.

- (176) The next day, on his way back to the temple, Jesus is hungry and curses a fig tree which does not have any fruit, even though this is the spring of the year, weeks before figs are ripe. Does this surprise you? Has Jesus ever seemed unreasonably angry before?
- (177) Then he kicks out the vendors and their customers, overturns the bankers’ tables and the pigeon sellers’ chairs, prevents the clergy from carrying the sacred vessels, and quotes from **Isaiah 56:7** and **Jeremiah 7:11** to insist that the “house of prayer for all peoples” has been turned into a “hideout for crooks.” Is this a “cleansing” of the temple? Or is it more like a “desecration” of the holy site? Again, have you ever seen Jesus this angry before?
- (178) No wonder “the ranking priests and scholars kept looking for a way to get rid of him.” But then they have been doing that all along, haven’t they (see #45, #54, #91, #110, #134, #149 & #164)?

Read Mark 11:20-25.

- (179) The third day, on their way back to Jerusalem, Peter tells the “rabbi” that the fig tree has “shriveled up” or “withered.” Earlier Jesus had healed a shriveled, withered hand (see #43); here he causes a similar affliction. What do you make of that?

- (180) Then he gives his longest speech on the subject of “trust” or “faith” and “prayer.” Is it your experience that everything you pray for will turn out OK if you have a trusting faith?
- (181) And when you pray you must be ready to forgive if you have something against anyone. Why? Do you yourself pray this way?

Read Mark 11:27-33.

- (182) When Jesus’ opponents challenge him to produce his authorization for messing up their temple, he challenges them to declare whether they are for or against the work of John the Baptist. How would you answer his challenge?
- (183) When his opponents refuse to answer him, Jesus refuses to answer them. Why do you suppose he can’t or won’t give a clear response?

Read Mark 12:1-12.

- (184) Read the love song for the vineyard in **Isaiah 5:1-7** and compare it to Jesus’ vineyard parable here. What are the similarities? What are some differences?
- (185) Does the slave who was wounded in the head remind you of the fate of John the Baptist? How about the “beloved son”? If we interpret the parable allegorically, who is the owner of the vineyard? Who are the tenant farmers? What is the point of the story?
- (186) Jesus quotes **Psalms 118:22-23** (see #174) to squelch his opponents. If he is the “son” (*ben* in Hebrew), is he also the stone (*eben*)? And if so, what is the point?
- (187) Jesus has effectively rebuffed his opponents, and they slink away to figure out how to get him arrested (see #178). Will they succeed?

Consider the Structure

The events in this scene (11:1-12:12) and the next (12:13-13:2) are carefully structured. In the first case they are arranged in parallel, according to three trips into Jerusalem and the temple. In the second case they are arranged in a concentric sequence:

	<u>1st Day</u>	<u>2nd Day</u>	<u>3rd Day</u>
<u>Jerusalem</u>	Entrance on colt	Cursing fig tree	Sighting withered tree Teaching about prayer
<u>Temple</u>	Looking around	Expelling traders	Debating authorities Vineyard parable

- A¹ – practical argument about paying taxes
- B¹ – theoretical argument about the resurrection
- C – sympathetic discussion of the commandments to love God and one’s neighbor
- B² – theoretical riddle about the Christ being David’s son
- A² – practical warning against the scribes’ avarice

- Does this arrangement help you appreciate the flow of the story?
- Are there any surprises here?

Act Five: Jesus Teaches and Argues in and around the Temple

15. Controversies in the temple stymie the leaders (12:13-13:2)

discussions re: paying taxes – the resurrection – greatest commandment – David’s son – scribes’ avarice
– widow’s mite – temple’s destruction

Almighty God, you have taught us in your Son that love fulfills the law. Inspire us to love you with all our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength, and teach us how to love our neighbor as ourselves, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #177)

Read Mark 12:13-17.

- (188) In the *first* of five confrontations, Pharisees (who opposed cooperating with the Romans) and Herod’s minions (who were pro-Roman) approach Jesus with a bit of flattery (see #45). Have you ever been addressed with insincere flattery? How did you feel?
- (189) Their question—“Are Jews allowed to pay the imperial poll-tax?”—is a trap. If he says Yes, he’s a religious traitor; if he says No, he’s a political traitor. Have you ever been caught in a no-win situation like that? How did it make you feel?
- (190) When they hold out a Roman denarius (normally used to pay the tax) with the emperor’s “graven image” and royal slogan, Jesus tells them to give imperial things to the emperor and divine things to God. But that doesn’t exactly answer their question, does it?
- (191) Because he never actually explains what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God! You still have to figure that out for yourself. So what do you think? Is it OK to pay the IRS?

Read Mark 12:18-27.

- (192) *Second*, some Sadducees (pro-Roman members of the conservative priestly family in charge of the temple) challenge Jesus on the doctrine of the resurrection (which is not actually taught in the Pentateuch). If, according to the Mosaic law of levirate marriage (see **Deuteronomy 25:5** and **Genesis 38:8**), seven brothers in turn marry the same woman and all eventually die childless, who gets her in heaven? They intend that this absurd scenario will make the doctrine of the resurrection look ridiculous. Do people use equally silly arguments to try to undermine your beliefs?
- (193) Jesus counters with a two-point accusation: “You underestimate both (a¹) the Scriptures and (b¹) the power of God.” And he backs it up by asserting (b²) that there’s no marriage in heaven and (a²) that at the burning bush Moses encountered “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (see **Exodus 3:6**). So, Jesus concludes, if God is still the God of the long-dead patriarchs, then patriarchs must still be alive. Do you buy this logic? Does it “prove” the doctrine of the resurrection?

Read Mark 12:28-34.

- (194) *Third*, a scribe asks Jesus to name the most important of all the commandments. And Jesus responds by quoting the great *shema* about loving God with everything you’ve got (**Deuteronomy 6:4-5**), which all pious Jews recited twice a day. But then he immediately adds a second (**Leviticus 19:18**) about loving one’s neighbor. Do you think he means we should love God *and also* our neighbor? Or should we love God *by* loving our neighbor?

- (195) The scribe's positive response, with allusions to **Deuteronomy 4:35** and **1 Samuel 15:22** or **Hosea 6:6**, means he is "not far from God's domain." Is this a compliment?

Read Mark 12:35-37.

- (196) *Fourth*, Jesus goes on the offensive and challenges the scribal teaching that the Messiah (a.k.a. the Christ, the Anointed) is a descendant of King David. Quoting **Psalm 110:1** he assumes that David is speaking: "The Lord God says to my (i.e. David's) lord (i.e. the Messiah), You are my son, etc." If the Messiah is David's "lord," he can't be his descendant. Or can he? Is this logic persuasive?

Read Mark 12:38-40 & 41-44.

- (197) *Fifth*, Jesus attacks the scribes by warning people to avoid them because they like to be honored but they also swindle poor widows out of their homes. Check the newspapers. Have people like this been in the press lately?
- (198) Speaking of widows, Jesus remarks on one such widow who contributes her entire livelihood to the temple treasury. Is this a good thing, that she is so generous? Or is this not so good, as though she has been "swindled" by her religious devotion?
- (199) Would the story of the widow's mite make a good text for your pastor's next sermon on financial stewardship?

Read Mark 13:1-2.

- (200) *Finally*, as they leave the temple, Jesus prophesies that it will be torn down stone from stone. Contrast this with his remark earlier in the day about a rejected stone becoming the cornerstone (see #186). Is there any connection? Did his prediction ever come true?
- (201) Did you notice that each of these six episodes specifically refers to Jesus as a "teacher"? Compare these with his other extended teachings, especially Mark 4 & 10. Which of the half-dozen teachings in this chapter do you find most helpful? Most challenging?

Consider the Character of Jesus

In these two scenes Jesus has acted in a challenging, even strident fashion. Do you like him?

- He commandeers a colt, and then "parades" into Jerusalem.
- He curses a fruitless fig tree, and it shrivels up.
- He desecrates the temple courts by disrupting the vendors.
- He defies the priests' demand to know where he gets his authority.
- He antagonizes them with a parable about a vineyard's wicked tenants.
- He sidesteps their attempts to trap him with questions about taxes and the resurrection.
- He refutes the scribes' teaching about the Messiah, and warns against their avarice.
- He announces the destruction of the temple itself.

On the other hand, two characters are portrayed more positively. Do you like them?

- the scribe who appreciated Jesus' teaching, and
- the widow who gave her all.

Act Five: Jesus Teaches and Argues in and around the Temple

16. Final instructions prepare the disciples for his absence (13:3-37)

apocalyptic warnings re: rumors of wars – persecution – desolating sacrilege – Son of Man – fig tree
– watchfulness

Almighty God, your sovereign purpose brings salvation to birth. Give us faith to be steadfast amid the tumults of this world, trusting that your kingdom comes and your will is done through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW #183)

Read Mark 13:3-4.

(202) Jesus' original four disciples (see #14), including the trio which witnessed the resuscitation of Jairus' daughter (#84) and Jesus' transformation on the mountain (#139), anticipate a private explanation of his prediction of the temple's destruction. Jesus, seated as a teacher, delivers the five-part monologue which follows. Does it actually answer their questions?

Read Mark 13:5-8.

(203) **“Watch out,”** says Jesus, (a) for imposters who will try to mislead you, and (b) for wars, earthquakes and famines which will inaugurate the end-time “birth pangs.” Would Mark's readers have thought these had occurred in their time? Do present-day readers think they are occurring in our own time?

(204) Nevertheless, says Jesus, when you hear threatening rumors “don't be afraid; these are inevitable, but it is not yet the end.” Does this sound encouraging to you?

Read Mark 13:9-13.

(205) **“Watch out,”** says Jesus, because (a¹) you will be hassled by the authorities and (b¹) betrayed by your family. In short, “you will be universally hated because of me.” Now it gets personal; does this sound threatening to you?

(206) Nevertheless, says Jesus, the gospel will be proclaimed to all peoples. Furthermore, (a²) the Holy Spirit will tell you what to say to the authorities, and (b²) “those who hold out to the end will be saved.” Does this sound encouraging to you?

Read Mark 13:14-22.

(207) At his point the author of Mark interrupts the narrative to speak directly to the reader (i.e. the person who is reading the story out loud to an audience; see #31) and warns of the appearance of an enigmatic “wasting horror” or “devastating desecration.” What do you suppose this could refer to? Idolatrous sacrifices in the temple (see **Daniel 9:27, 11:31& 12:11, and 1 Maccabees 1:54**)? What?

(208) Flight (not fight) is the only possible reaction to such terror. Does this sound like a military invasion? Does this remind you of the plight of refugees fleeing civil war in the Mideast?

(209) Nevertheless, says Jesus, the Lord has “cut short the days” of terror for the sake of “the chosen people whom he selected.” Does this sound encouraging to you? Are you among the elect? How can you be sure?

(210) And by the way, ignore the “counterfeit messiahs and phony prophets” who will try to delude you. Do we have people like that in our circles today? What do they look like?

Read Mark 13:23-32.

- (211) “*Watch out,*” says Jesus, for the astrological disasters (see **Isaiah 13:10 & 34:4**) which will precede the arrival of the son of Adam (see #134), who will send the angels to rescue the elect. Does this sound like a warning? Or a promise?
- (212) The parable of the fig tree (see #176 & #179) suggests that you should be able to predict when the End will arrive. But Jesus’ warning that only the Father knows the time seems to contradict this. Which is it?
- (213) Did all these things occur within the lifetime of “this generation”?
- (214) How do these ideas relate to bestselling books like *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series of novels?
- (215) The entire universe could disappear, but not Jesus’ words. What does this imply for us?

Read Mark 13:33-37.

- (216) “*Watch out,*” says Jesus, because you do not know when the *kairos*, that is, the opportune moment, the crucial time will arrive. What are we talking about here?
- (217) Jesus’ final word—not just to those four disciples, but to all of them (and to all of us?)—is “Stay awake!” Two thousand year later, what exactly are we keeping on the alert for?

Consider the Plot

Some call this Jesus’ “apocalyptic discourse” because it includes predictions of the future and a few esoteric images, such as heavenly portents and angelic messengers. Others call it a “farewell address” because it is Jesus’ final teaching. Still others refer to it as a “temple dialogue” patterned on the way Greek philosophers instructed their students in temple courtyards.

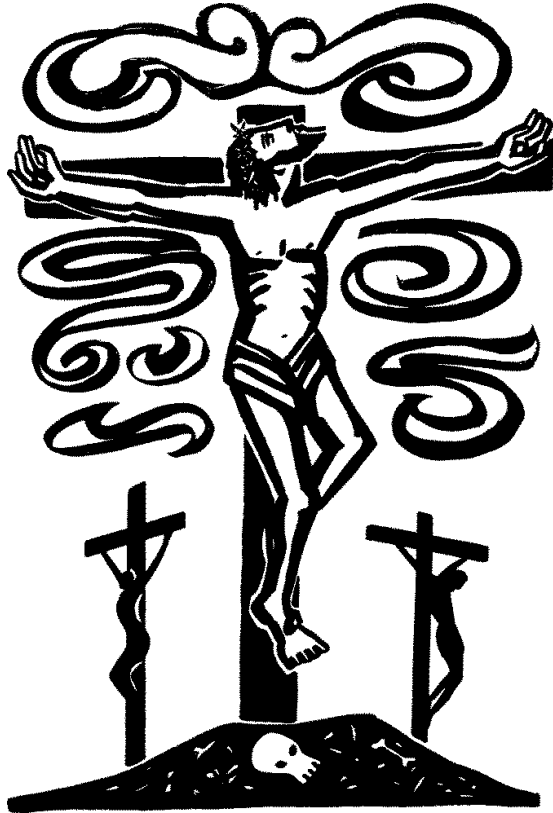
Up to this point we have been able to appreciate Mark’s story from two complementary angles, either (a) as the story of Jesus, or (b) as the story of the disciples, which is our own story. Jesus’ predictions in Act 4 indicated (a) how his part of the story will end. But he has only dropped hints about (b) how the disciple/readers’ role will continue.

Both story lines will follow the same pattern of suffering followed by vindication. In Jesus’ case (a) it will take the form of crucifixion and resurrection; in the disciple/readers’ case (b) it will take the form of persecution and parousia. In the central portion of the address the figures of the “wasting horror” and the arrival of the “son of Adam” personify both aspects of the disciple/ readers’ experience; the latter, of course, will more than compensate for the effects of the former.

	<u>Jesus</u>	<u>Apocalyptic Figure</u>	<u>Disciples/Us</u>
<u>Suffering</u>	Crucifixion	Wasting Horror	Persecution
<u>Vindication</u>	Resurrection	Son of Man	Parousia

- Does this help make sense of Mark’s plot?
- Does this help make sense of the plotting of your own life?

THE ACCOUNT OF JESUS' FINAL DAYS



The execution of Jesus with his cry of despair, “My God, why did you desert me?” is the climax of the gospel of Mark, the point toward which its plot has been directed, the moment at which readers confront the full impact of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

The so-called “passion narrative” (Mark 14:21-15:41) is the longest clearly connected sequence in the gospel. Every incident, emotionally charged and vividly told, contributes to the flow of the story so that each segment leads logically into the next.

This is also the densest section. An abundance of themes and motifs introduced previously now come back into play in the details, sometimes overtly and sometimes more subtly. Readers’ expectations often come to fulfillment in surprising ways. The overarching literary impression is highly dramatic and deeply tragic as readers who identify with the disciples participate in the experience of deserting Jesus and suffering the alienation of death.

The events fit broadly into an eight-day week:

Sunday	Entrance into Jerusalem	(11:1-11)
Monday	Fig tree, temple disruption	(11:12-19)
Tuesday	Temple teachings, Mount of Olives	(11:20-13:37)
Wednesday	Plot, anointing at Bethany	(14:1-11)
Thursday	Supper, arrest, Jewish trial	(14:12-72)
Friday	Roman trial, crucifixion, burial	(15:1-47)
Saturday	Sabbath	
Sunday	Empty tomb	(16:1-8)

Furthermore, the events in the last 24 hours of Jesus’ life can be divided into eight precise three-hour segments:

Evening	(6:00 pm)	Last Supper	(14:17-25)
Night	(9:00 pm)	Gethsemane	(14:26-42)
Midnight	(12:00)	Jewish trial	(14:43-65)
Cockcrow	(3:00 am)	Peter’s denials	(14:66-72)
Dawn	(6:00 am)	Roman trial	(15:1-20)
Third Hour	(9:00 am)	Crucifixion	(15:21-32)
Sixth Hour	(12:00 noon)	Darkness	(15:33)
Ninth Hour	(3:00 pm)	Death	(15:34-41)
Evening	(6:00 pm)	Burial	(15:42-47)

We gain the impression that this is a coherent, connected, historically plausible narrative. However, the narrative does not adequately explain many of the more interesting details:

the motive of the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3)

the motive for Judas' betrayal	(14:10)
how Jesus knew about the upper room	(14:15)
where "it is written" that the Son of Man must be betrayed	(14:21)
whether the last supper was a genuine Passover Seder	(14:22)
the precise relationship of Gethsemane to the Mount of Olives	(14:26 & 32)
the reason for the disciples' sleepiness so early in the evening	(14:37 & 50)
when Judas left the company of the twelve	(14:43)
the identity of the person who severed the servant's ear	(14:52)
the identity of the young man who fled naked	(14:52)
how the Sanhedrin could conduct a night-time trial	(14:53)
why planted perjurers could not agree	(14:56 & 59)
the precise content of Jesus' alleged blasphemy	(14:64)
whether Peter cursed the bystanders, himself or Jesus	(14:71)
why Jewish authorities sent Jesus to a Roman governor	(15:1)
why the text does not identify Pilate as a procurator	(15:1)
who originated the charge that Jesus was "King of the Jews"	(15:2)
historical evidence for the custom of releasing a prisoner	(15:6)
how Pilate knew of the priests' envy	(15:10)
the identity of Alexander and Rufus	(15:21)
why Jesus refused the wine-and-myrrh mixture	(15:23)
how passers-by would know the temple-wrecking charge	(14:58, 15:29)
whether the inner or outer temple curtain ripped	(15:38)
whether the Mary mentioned was really Jesus' own other	(15:40)

Yet although Mark does not clearly outline the stages of the passion narrative, and the story is shot through with inconsistent and implausible details, nevertheless readers do not find the narrative confusing or disjointed. It reads smoothly. The action flows convincingly from one episode to another, and readers have no difficulty accessing the story line as it moves through a handful of stages:

<u>First Sequence</u> – a movement toward Betrayal	(14:1-26)
six episodes alternating between conspiracies and meals	
<u>Second Sequence</u> – a movement toward Desertion	(14:27-52)
three episodes in a series of prediction – prayer – arrest	
<u>Third Sequence</u> – a movement toward Rejection	(14:53-76)
two episodes contrasting the priests and Peter	
<u>Fourth Sequence</u> – a movement toward Execution	(15:1-20a)
three episodes in a series of interrogation – conviction – intimidation	
<u>Fifth Sequence</u> – a movement toward Death	(15:20b-39)
three episodes in a series of crucifixion – derision – death	
with a transitional addendum	(15:40-41)

The sections are not discrete. The action moves smoothly from one to the next, and themes generated in the earlier sections are continued in later sections. Thus the narrative flows easily and convincingly from start to finish.

In the end, Mark's story compels us readers to reassess our own expectations for self-preservation and to determine whether the tragedy of Jesus' experience rings true to the realities of our own experiences. The narrative invites sympathetic readers to reject the disciples' propensities for self-aggrandizement and to adopt Jesus' agenda of self-giving service for others even in the face of death. It enables our own lives to be shaped into a "cruciformed" pattern not unlike Jesus' own life.

Act Six: Jesus Is Arrested, Tried, and Executed

17. The disciples flee the night Jesus is arrested (14:1-52)

plot to kill Jesus – anointing at Bethany – Judas’ betrayal – Passover Seder & Lord’s Supper
– desertion predicted – prayer in Gethsemane – arrest

Lord Jesus, you have called us to follow you. Grant that our love may not grow cold in your service, and that we may not fail or deny you in the time of trial, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW #71)

Read Mark 14:1-2 & 10-11.

(218) As many as 100,000 pilgrims might descend on Jerusalem for the annual Passover freedom festival and the week-long observance of Unleavened Bread. No wonder the leaders’ plot to assassinate Jesus (see #178) is stymied by their fear of fomenting a riot! But their plans are facilitated by the offer of Judas, “one of the twelve,” to hand him over (see #50). Note that Mark does not give any motive for Judas’ action or a specific price for the transaction.

Read Mark 14:3-9.

(219) Notice the ironies in this fourth “sandwiched” story: A named man takes money to betray Jesus; and unnamed woman spends money to anoint him. Why do you think she did that?

(220) Jesus befriended a leper near the beginning of his ministry (see #26); here near the end a leper befriends him. His name is Simon. Hmm....

(221) Three hundred denarii, a year’s wages for a laborer, would have made a generous donation for some poor people, don’t you think? And isn’t Jesus supposed to befriend the poor?

(222) Jesus insists her generous action—anointing him for burial—will be retold whenever the gospel is proclaimed (see #206). Is that your experience? Have you ever heard of her before?

Read Mark 14:12-26.

(223) Once again, two unnamed disciples follow Jesus’ directions (see #172) to secure “my guestroom” for their Passover Seder. Had “the teacher” made previous arrangements?

(224) As their evening meal begins, Jesus insists that “one of the twelve” (see #218) will betray their intimate table fellowship and hand him over. Each fretfully asks, “I’m not the one, am I?” How about you? Have you ever betrayed anyone? Have you ever been betrayed?

(225) Woe “to the one responsible for turning the son of Adam in!” If Jesus’ fate is set in the scriptures (where exactly we don’t know) why this curse for Judas who makes it happen?

(226) Jewish meals begin when the host breaks bread, and a Seder concludes with a final cup of wine. Jesus says they are “my body” and “my blood of the covenant, poured out for many (see #169).” How would his men have understood this? How do you understand it?

(227) This account of “the Last Supper” has been shaped by the early church’s observance of “the Lord’s Supper” (see **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**). How does it compare with the rituals in your church? Do you break a real loaf of bread? Do you all drink from a single cup? Does it make a difference?

(228) Jesus vows not to drink wine again “until that day when I drink it for the first time in God’s domain.” Is that how things turned out?

Read Mark 14:27-42.

(229) Near the Mount of Olives (a) Jesus quotes **Zechariah 13:7** and says all will be “scandalized,” but after he is raised he will precede them (or lead them?) back to Galilee. (b) Peter vows that he will never desert Jesus, even if he gets killed. (c) All the others agree with Peter. But Jesus predicts (d) that Peter will deny him three times before a rooster crows twice at daybreak. Is that how things turned out?

(230) At Gethsemane (an oil press on or near the Mount of Olives) Jesus takes his three closest friends aside (see #202) while he prays, “apprehensive and full of anguish,” that “Abba” (that is, “papa”) would “take this cup away from me.” Compare this with his previous teachings about prayer (see #180) and about a cup (#167). What is happening here?

(231) Note the irony: Earlier on the Mount of Olives Jesus told these three to stay awake (see #217). Here in nearly the same spot they can’t keep their eyes open! “Though the spirit is willing,” says Jesus, “the flesh is weak.” Have you ever heard the proverb before?

(232) Nevertheless, Jesus gives in to what his “papa” wants. “It’s all over!” he says. “Here comes the one who is going to turn me in.” When exactly did Judas leave the group?

Read Mark 14:43-52.

(233) The Greek term *paradidomi* can be translated as “handed over” or as “betrayed.” Does it make a difference? Did Judas “hand Jesus over”? Or did he “betray him”?

(234) The armed crowd sent by the religious authorities quickly arrests Jesus as soon as Judas identifies the “Rabbi” (see #141, #170 & #179) with a kiss of friendship. Sweet, huh?

(235) Who exactly slices off the ear of the high priest’s slave? Do either of them have a name?

(236) And who is the young man who drops his linen shroud to run away naked?

(237) If the role of the twelve is “to be with” Jesus (see #49), how are they doing at this point in the story? How well are you doing at this point in your own story?

Consider Some Surprises in the Plot

Dozens of themes and ideas introduced earlier in the narrative return in the “passion narrative,” but in a surprising way, often with ironic overtones.

- Meals are for nourishment, but the Last Supper leads to death.
- Intimate disciples are to keep awake, but Peter, James and John fall asleep.
- Prayers will be answered for true believers, but Jesus’ prayer to escape is denied.
- “Rabbi” is a title of honor, but here it is a sign of betrayal.
- Followers are to “be with” Jesus and stay close, but here they run away and desert him.

Can you think of any other ironic or unexpected twists in the plot? Are you anticipating more surprising reversals before the story ends?

Act Six: Jesus Is Arrested, Tried, and Executed

18. In the morning he is tried by priests and the governor (14:53-15:20a)

priests' interrogation – Peter's denials – Pilate's interrogation – Barabbas released & Jesus condemned
– soldiers' mocking

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, bless the public servants in the government of this nation, that they may do their work in a spirit of wisdom, charity, and justice. Help them use their authority to serve faithfully and to promote our common life; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW #291)

Read Mark 14:53-54.

- (238) Two strands of the story, which occur simultaneously, are introduced here. Look for contrasts between the way the priests treat Jesus and the way Peter treats him. By the way, the Greek text says Peter was warming himself before the “light” (*phos*), not before a “fire” (*pyr*). Does this add a surreal tone to the proceedings?

Read Mark 14:55-65.

- (239) An official convening of the Sanhedrin at night is historically improbable; perhaps Mark is picturing a preliminary interrogation. In any event, it is apparent that this kangaroo court has determined the outcome in advance. Even planted witnesses cannot agree. Have you ever witnessed a prejudiced court proceeding with perjured witnesses? What did you do about it?
- (240) Although Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple (see #200), he refuses to refute the false charge that he himself will knock down the “handmade” temple and miraculously build a “non-handmade” replica within three days. Is this charge credible?
- (241) When challenged directly, however, he acknowledges that he is “the Anointed” and “the son of the Blessed One” (i.e. God), but then he switches the subject to “the son of Adam” (as he did before, see #134), who will be seated “at the right hand of the Power” (i.e. God) and “coming (or going?) with the clouds of the sky.” Is he telling the truth? And if so, how exactly does this qualify as blasphemy worthy of a death sentence?

Read Mark 14:66-72.

- (242) Meanwhile, in the back of the courtyard another scenario is playing out. Note the progression:

<u>in the courtyard</u>	<u>at the gate</u>	<u>outside the gate</u>
a servant girl	the same girl	bystanders
calls Peter a companion	says “he is one	identify him as
of “that Nazarene, Jesus”	of “them”	“a Galilean”
Peter denies knowing anything	Peter denies being a disciple	Peter denies knowing Jesus

- (243) Whom did Peter curse? Himself? The bystanders? Jesus?
And did Peter “break down,” or “go out,” or “throw up,” or what?
By the way, when did the rooster crow the first time?
- (244) The priests lie about Jesus and manhandle him. Peter denies him and backs away. Which is worse, do you think? Have you ever acted that way?

Read Mark 15:1-5.

(245) Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea from 26 to 36 CE, introduces a new accusation: “*You are the ‘king of the Judeans’?*” If true, this political charge would be a capital offense. But it is as blatantly false as was the priests’ religious charge of blasphemy. Note how often it is repeated: 15:1, 12, 18, 26, 32

(246) On the other hand, if Jesus called for the arrival of “the kingdom of God” or “God’s imperial rule” (see #11 & #228), perhaps there is some truth to the charge. What do you think?

Read Mark 15:6-15.

(247) The custom of releasing a prisoner chosen by the crowd is historically improbable, of course. But in Mark’s narrative this incident contrasts Jesus and Barabbas (i.e. “son of the father”). In the end the brigand or assassin is freed, and the innocent man is executed. Is that fair?

(248) The crowds which had previously been on Jesus’ side (see #218) now are on the priests’ side. Are crowds usually that fickle and easily manipulated?

(249) By the way, ancient historians described Pontius Pilate as a ruthless governor who crucified thousands of Jews. Here he is pictured as a weakling who gives in to popular pressure. Which would be worse? Do you know of other rulers who were tyrants and/or pushovers?

Read Mark 15:16-20a.

(250) A flogging was usually administered before a condemned criminal was executed. Here the two are interrupted by a strange scene in which an entire cohort (some 500 soldiers) removes Jesus from public view and ridicules him, dressing him in royal purple, crowning him with an acanthus wreath, saluting him as king, striking his head with a reed (a parody of a scepter), spitting at him (a parody of a royal kiss), and genuflecting. Which hurts more, the whipping or the sarcasm?

Consider the Viewpoint of the Reader

Through most of the story we readers have been able to identify with the role of the disciples. Sometimes we do well, sometimes not. But at this point all the disciples have betrayed, deserted or denied Jesus. They have left the narrative, never to return.

- Now where is our place?
- Are we still in the story?
- Or are we outside observers?

Act Six: Jesus Is Arrested, Tried, and Executed

19. That afternoon he dies, abandoned by all (15:20b-41)

cross carried by Cyrenean – Jesus crucified – ridiculed – abandoned in death – observed by women

Almighty God, look with loving mercy on your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, to be given over into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death on the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen. (ELW #76)

Read Mark 15:20b-27.

- (251) Death by crucifixion was excruciatingly painful and shamefully degrading. Victims were strung up naked a foot or two off the ground, perhaps for days, until they succumbed to hunger, thirst, insects and exposure. Their corpses were often left hanging to decompose and be devoured by carrion birds and feral animals. This punishment was reserved mostly for slaves, bandits and insurrectionists; and was never to be inflicted on a Roman citizen.

Notice how often the terms “cross” or “crucify” or “crucifixion” appear in the narrative. Notice also that Mark does not describe the torture and method of execution in any detail.

15:11, 14 & 15 15:20, 24, 25 & 27 15:30 & 32 16:6

- (252) This is the second time a man named Simon befriends Jesus (see #219), this time by carrying his cross. Isn't this the role of a true disciple (see #136)? Like Simon Peter? Like us?
- (253) Would Alexander and Rufus (both Greek names) have been known to Mark's audience? What does the mention of their names imply about the outcome of this story?
- (254) Myrrh-spiced wine could have been a mild narcotic or a tasty drink fit for a king. Either way, why do you suppose Jesus refused a drink? Has the kingdom not yet arrived (see #228)?
- (255) He loses his clothes, is derided as a king, and gets strung up with bandits. How bad can it get? By the way, is this what it means for disciples to end up at his right and at his left (see #166)?

Read Mark 15:29-32

- (256) Public ridicule was part of the punishment. In Jesus' case it comes from three directions:
- Passers-by bring up the charge about destroying and rebuilding the temple.
 - The priests' group challenges “the King of Israel” to free himself so they can believe.
 - Even the two other crucified victims abuse him verbally.

The one who saved others couldn't save himself. Or could he?

Read Mark 15:33-38.

- (257) Three hours of darkness—what do you suppose this signifies (see #211)?
- That this is a day of judgment? For Jesus? For the people? For whom?
 - That this is a time of mourning for a “beloved son”?
 - That this is a prodigy, a sign of the importance of Jesus' death?

Have you ever experienced a time of darkness in your life? What was it like?

- (258) Jesus' cry of despair is also a desperate prayer: "My God, why did you abandon me?" Although these are the opening words of **Psalm 22:1**, Mark does not suggest the source of this quotation. The words stand alone as an expression of divine dereliction; they cannot be construed as an expression of trust, much less as a hint of victory. Are you OK with this?
- (259) Can you recall an event which was so terrible that all you could say was "Why?"
- (260) In Aramaic, *Eloi* (that is, "my God") sounds somewhat like *Helias* (that is, "Elijah"). So other bystanders wonder whether Jesus is calling for Elijah to come and rescue him. But Elijah has already come and gone, hasn't he (see #143)?
- (261) A refreshing drink of water mixed with sour wine (somewhat like lemonade?) might prolong Jesus' life, long enough to see whether Elijah will arrive. But again Jesus apparently does not take a drink. Why do you suppose they put the sponge on a reed?
- (262) Instead he hollers once more and dies. Previously, only demons had uttered "loud cries" (see #21, #79 & #147) when Jesus expelled them. Here Jesus sounds similarly defeated as he dies alone and forsaken. How sad is that?
- (263) Significantly, Mark says that he "expired" (*ekpneo*)—not that he "died" or was "killed" or "completed" or "ended" his life—and immediately a curtain in the temple was ripped in two from top to bottom! Compare this with the details of his baptism (see #7 & #8).
- Then (A¹) the sky ripped (*schizo*) open and (B¹) the spirit (*pneuma*) descended into him and (C¹) God's voice declared that he was "my beloved son."
 - Here (C²) a centurion calls him "G/god's son" when (B²) Jesus' breath goes *out of him* (*ekpneo*) and (A²) the temple curtain is ripped (*schizo*) apart.
- (264) The centurion's unexpected reaction is ambiguous. Is it a genuine confession of faith? Or is it just another sarcastic taunt?
- "This man really was a god's son."
 - "This man really was God's Son."
 - "Really? This man was a god's son?"

Read Mark 15:40-41.

- (265) This is the first we learn of the Galilean women who had been following Jesus and serving him (as female disciples?). Note that the three named here are watching from a distance, not up close. By the way, do you think the second Mary is Jesus' mother (see #90)?

Consider the Plot

Mark' "Passion Narrative" does not describe the physical pain Jesus must have endured; rather, it emphasizes the emotional or psychological distress he would have experienced.

The religious and civil authorities reject him.	The soldiers mock and humiliate him.
One disciple betrays him, and another denies him.	Passersby and both brigands revile him.
All the disciples flee, and one escapes naked.	God deserts him, and only women watch.

- Does this series of tragic reversals correspond to any of your own experiences?

Epilogue: Jesus' Resurrection Is Announced

20. Women react to his burial and empty tomb (15:42-16:8)

Jesus is buried by Joseph of Arimathea – a messenger confronts the women at an empty tomb
– they flee in silence

God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and has become the Lord of life. Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ, and help us to grow as your people toward the fullness of eternal life with you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW #81)

(266) Notice how the two sequences in this Epilogue are carefully balanced:

- | | |
|---|------------|
| A ¹ – Reaction to Jesus' death | (15:42-45) |
| B ¹ – Joseph of Arimathea's funeral preparations | (15:46-47) |
| B ² – The women's funeral preparations | (16:1-4) |
| A ² – Reactions to Jesus' resurrection | (16:5-8) |

Read Mark 15:42-47.

(267) A new character is introduced into the story. Joseph of Arimathea is (a¹) “a respected council member,” who presumably had joined in condemning Jesus (see #241), and (b¹) someone who was also “anticipating God's imperial rule,” as Jesus had proclaimed (see #11). Do you think his daring action was intended to be (b²) a respectful burial to honor Jesus, or (a²) a hasty disposal of his remains to avoid profaning the Sabbath?

(268) Joseph asks for Jesus' “body.” Pilate gives him Jesus' “corpse.” Is there a difference?

(269) In any event, the burial is hasty—no embalming, just a linen shroud (see #236), and interment in a rock-hewn tomb, while women watch. Compare this with burials you have observed.

Read Mark 16:1-8.

(270) At this point the story includes a series of near contradictions and improbabilities.

- The captain of the execution squad calls Jesus a “god's son.”
- One of the jurists who convicted him rescues his corpse.
- The women intend to embalm Jesus, although he was anointed for burial a week before (see #221).
- They come to the cemetery early in the morning, but the sun has already risen.
- They have seen the tomb blocked with a boulder, but do not ask how it can be removed until they are almost there.

Which of these do you find most interesting? Most disconcerting? Most encouraging?

(271) When the women enter the tomb they discover a “young man” (not called an “angel”!) “sitting on the right, wearing a white robe.”

- Another “young man” in a linen shroud had fled naked when Jesus was arrested (see #236).
- Jesus' body had been wrapped in a linen shroud (see #269).
- “Sitting on the right” is a symbol of authority (see #241).
- White garments symbolize transforming glory (see #139).

What do you make of these coincidences?

- (272) The young man has messages: (a) Jesus is raised, and (b) the disciples are restored. Which of these is most encouraging?
- (273) The messenger says that “Jesus, the Nazarene, the crucified one, was raised.” Suppose he had said that “Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, is risen.” Would that make a difference?
- (274) And he singles out Peter for special mention. How neat is that?
- (275) Previously Jesus had predicted (a) that he would be killed and his men dispersed, but also (b) that he would be raised and precede them to Galilee (see especially #229). Now both of these promises are to come true, but we will never actually see it happen, will we?
- (276) The women were to deliver this message to the men. But they never did, did they? They ran away and “did not say nothing to nobody, ‘cause they were scared...” And that’s where the story ends! How do you like that? Tragic, isn’t it?
- (277) Of course, if the entire story is but “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus” (see #1), where will it end? Only you can answer that, of course. Somebody has to share it, and if not you, who? And if not now, when?

Reconsider a Tragic Plot

Mark’s gospel is tragic in the sense that Jesus, who started out as an astonishingly successful healer and teacher, ended up executed as a criminal, as an enemy of both “church and state.” Several of his predictions make his death seem inevitable, of course, but the closing chapters thwart any hope for escape.

- Judas could have remained loyal.
- Jesus’ prayer could have been granted.
- The disciples could have defended him.
- Peter could have testified on his behalf.
- Pilate could have released him.
- Elijah could have rescued him.
- The women could have delivered the message.

As sympathetic readers of this story, who identify with the role of the disciples, we may experience what it means to desert someone in their time of need. At the same time, if we are also admirers of Jesus, we too may experience what it feels like to be abandoned by those who are closest to us.

- Which is worse, to desert someone else, or to be abandoned by others?

Furthermore, we may be frustrated by the abrupt ending, which may not even seem like a fitting conclusion. And we will have to choose between Jesus’ agenda for self-giving service and the disciples’ penchant for self-aggrandizement.

- Which will it be?

The final scene, with its promises of resurrection and restoration, may yet be our best hope for continuing the story in our own lives—by living out Jesus’ style of “cruciformed” service for others even in the face of our own mortality.

- What do you think?

CRUCIFORMED READERS IN TODAY'S WORLD

Our goal is to explore a literary reading of Mark's gospel in order to appreciate the impact which the story of Jesus and his disciples can have upon those of us who are sympathetic readers.

This means paying special attention to the rhetorical and narrative devices inherent within the text to understand how the story continues to function and affect us today. The focus is on the world "in front of" the text, between text and reader, rather than on the biography of Jesus or the history of the early church "behind" the text.

This type of study—which scholars would call "reader response" or "narrative criticism"—holds us readers responsible for interacting with the text and to some degree for constructing the story's meaning. It requires us to use our imaginations both to anticipate the direction the story will take and also to reflect on changes in its development.

In the case of Mark's gospel, which does not give clear indications of its structure or outline, we must decide how the narrative shall flow.

This study divides it into six acts of roughly equal length, bracketed by a brief prologue and epilogue. This is a helpful device for following the surface of the story and appreciating its dramatic action, for it enables us to appreciate Mark's oral-aural character and track the flow of the narrative.

Furthermore, this six-act structure highlights the fact that Mark is a piece of performance literature. Although the gospel most closely approximates the genre of an ancient biography, this study treats it as dramatic history in the tragic mode. This choice enables us to focus on its continuing narrative impact.

Literary analysis includes considering such factors as the story's setting and atmosphere, its implied author and implied reader, and its tone and ideology. However, this study concentrates on the two most basic elements of any story, its characters and plot.

Mark's story pits its protagonist, Jesus, and his companion disciples against their antagonists, the religious leaders. Jesus, his followers, and his opponents interact around his dealings with a series of lesser characters, most of whom are beneficiaries of his healing and teaching ministry.

In most stories readers naturally identify with the role of the protagonist. But in this case

the figure of Jesus is too exalted and removed for easy identification. Instead, we will choose to identify with the disciples, for these characters are depicted in realistic terms with both positive and negative traits.

Thus we who are readers of the story, like the disciples who are in the story, are in a position to respond to its central character.

In this gospel Jesus is a man of mystery and strength, ambiguous yet compelling. His provocative teachings, especially his parabolic riddles which invite us to experience life in the dominion of God, his miraculous healings which are powerful expressions of kindness and care for marginalized people, and his various titles, especially his enigmatic designation as "the Son of Man," combine to make Jesus a hard-to-define character.

The impression that we cannot easily assess Jesus' role provokes us into becoming involved in the story as we continually reassess our reaction to his personality.

More importantly, both disciples and readers must decide whether they will adopt Jesus' agenda of self-sacrificial service for others. For us modern readers, our natural inclination is to promote our own well-being and to live in ways that we can call successful.

Although Jesus begins his ministry with successful miracles and a style of teaching that attracts fame, the first half of the narrative is studded with numerous counter indicators that all is not well and that he is not satisfied with merely enhancing his reputation.

The second half of the story explicitly refutes any expectations of success by recounting Jesus' determination to travel to Jerusalem where he will suffer an ignominious death by crucifixion.

Along the way his disciples receive fuller instructions in the ethical implications of his method and purpose, but these they either misunderstand or repudiate; in the end they completely desert their mentor.

Thus readers who identify with the disciples through most of the story stand challenged at its end: either we must adopt the attitude of the disciples and reject Jesus' agenda, or we must recognize that the disciples' response is inappropriate and then in effect resolve to improve on their behavior.

Ultimately Mark's story enables us to find pardon for our own failures, provokes us into

rejecting the disciples' attitude, and encourages us into affirming Jesus' program.

MARK'S CRUCIFORMED NARRATIVE

The Prologue (Mark 1:1-13), with its title that suggests this will be but the "beginning" of the gospel, disorients us by setting the story in the wasteland. Scriptural quotations which predict the arrival of John plus his own prediction that someone greater will supersede him raise high expectations for Jesus.

But his arrival and baptism lead to conflicting results. He is proclaimed "God's son" but is immediately subjected to satanic testings. Thus we are caught in an uncomfortable situation as the story begins.

Act One (Mark 1:14-3:6) opens abruptly in Galilee where Jesus initiates his ministry by enlisting his first followers. We immediately have an entry into the narrative in the role of these disciples who promptly follow him.

A series of healings of a demoniac, Simon's mother-in-law and a leper in and around Capernaum establish Jesus' reputation as a powerful and compassionate healer.

But then a concentric series of controversies involving healing and forgiving a paralytic, enlisting a toll collector and dining with sinners, refusing to fast, allowing his men to pluck grain on the Sabbath, and restoring a shriveled hand on the Sabbath all places him at odds with the religious leaders.

Two major themes begin to develop in this act: Jesus and his followers begin a series of journeys "on the way." Also, several of the events occur in the context of "eating food." Neither of these motifs is fully expanded, but they will return in future acts to set the thematic tone.

Readers begin already in this act to experience conflicting tendencies which keep us off balance: on the one hand, Jesus is a caring healer, but on the other hand he displays anger and frustration.

The disciples evidence such positive characteristics as following Jesus without question and practicing his style of living (which invites readers into identifying with them), but they also commit several inappropriate blunders such as trying to direct his itinerary (which makes them "realistic" characters).

Jesus' actions guarantee the spread of his reputation, but they also incite the opposition of the religious leaders. In fact, already at the con-

clusion of this first act his enemies are plotting to destroy him.

Act Two (Mark 3:7-6:6) begins with the appointment of Jesus' twelve closest companions followed by an awkward sequence in which he rejects his family, who try to put him away because they think he is crazy, and replaces them with "those who do God's will."

This movement brackets an incident in which he accuses his opponents of sinning against the Holy Spirit after they accuse him of exorcizing demons with the aid of Beelzebul.

A section of teachings composed of parabolic riddles and sayings about a sower, seed and soils plus its "explanation," a lamp and a measure, the automatic growth of seed, and a mustard grain offer tantalizing samples of the failures and successes of life in God's dominion.

But we, who identify with the disciples and like them are privy to Jesus' private instructions, may be perplexed because the positive impact of Jesus' teaching is countered by a statement that their purpose is to prevent people from understanding!

A series of the most dramatic, even bizarre, events in the entire gospel, including rescuing his boat from shipwreck, exorcizing a demoniac at Gerasa by drowning the neighbors' pigs, raising Jairus' comatose daughter, and healing a woman's menstrual hemorrhage, enhances our appreciation of his power and compassion.

But the act ends with a bewildering development as Jesus' hometown neighbors take offense at his performance and reject him.

The "journey" motif continues to tie together the events in this act, although there is no clear direction or pattern to Jesus' various trips.

More important are the conflicting motives and reactions of the people who approach Jesus: some coming to seek his help, others to impede his work; some responding with faith or trust, others with fear and terror.

The readers' engagement with the role of the disciples becomes more complex, for sometimes they enjoy privileged favors (as with the four who accompanied Jesus into Jairus' bed room) and other times they prove disappointing (as with their fright during the storm at sea).

Their conflicting position corresponds to Jesus' progress: On the one hand, his ministry expands as he fends off opposition, goes public with his teaching, and rescues distressed people.

On the other hand, his alienation also expands as his parabolic riddles thwart understanding and both his family and hometown

associates reject him. Again, the final word in this act is rejection.

Act Three (Mark 6:7-8:26) also begins with Jesus assembling his men and then sending them on a successful healing and preaching mission. A flash-back recounting the beheading of John the baptizer fills in the time of their venture and foreshadows the fate of Jesus and his emissaries.

After their return he takes them across the lake to the wasteland; there he feeds those who followed him on shore, 5,000 men plus women and children, by multiplying two loaves of bread and five fish.

Readers who delight in the miracle will be disturbed by its sequel, where the disciples fail to recognize Jesus as he walks over the water to their boat, quiets a gale, and berates them for their “hardened hearts.”

The next sequence, embodying several random trips by land and sea, includes an argument with the authorities about Jesus’ non-kosher food practices and more miracles, each of which is problematical: Jesus insults a Syro-Phoenecian woman before exorcizing her daughter, resorts to magical manipulations to cure a deaf-mute, and requires two tries at healing a blind man.

Furthermore, his disciples seem as ignorant of his ability to feed a crowd of 4,000 as if they had not been present at the earlier feeding of the 5,000.

More disconcerting is another incident on board the boat where the disciples debate how they can all eat with only one loaf, while Jesus warns against the “leaven of the scribes and Pharisees” and denounces them for their lack of understanding.

The motif of food and bread permeates this scene. Frequently the theme raises positive, nurturing connotations, especially in the case of the two miraculous feedings. There the disciples cooperate with Jesus by providing and distributing the loaves and fish, and the crowds are satiated and collect baskets full of leftovers.

But just as frequently the food-bread-loaf motif signals a disturbingly negative development, as inexplicably the disciples’ hard-heartedness and ignorance provoke Jesus’ exasperated anger.

So the logic of reading collapses under the weight of conflicting signals, and we reach the midpoint of the story frustrated and anxious for some resolution to these narrative tensions.

Act Four (Mark 8:27-10:52) resolves some of the tension of Jesus’ random journeys by recounting his trip with his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem. The three stages of their pilgrimage are signaled by his own predictions that at their destination “the Son of Man” will suffer, die, and rise again.

The first prediction counters Peter’s claim that Jesus is “the Christ” and continues with astonishing calls to “take up your cross” and “lose your life to save it.”

More astonishing are the next events: Jesus’ mountain-top transformation in the presence of Elijah and Moses, a mountainside conversation about the return of Elijah, and a back-on-the-plain healing of an “epileptic” boy whom the disciples have not been able to help.

The second prediction is also followed by strained conversations with the disciples about their respective greatness, about the role of outsiders, and about giving offense.

Subsequent teachings about marriage and divorce, the value of children, and the renunciation of wealth elaborate on the ethical dimensions of living in God’s dominion.

The third prediction is followed by James and John’s opportunistic attempt to gain favored positions in the Kingdom, and the act ends at Jericho with Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus.

Two themes interact to give readers a feeling of apprehension and to goad them into questioning the values of the disciples even as they continue to identify with that character role.

First, the journey motif permeates this act. Continuing on “the way” is a positive experience insofar as it provides progress and the promise of closure to the narrative, but it is a negative experience insofar as its goal is Jesus’ death.

Second, Jesus’ teachings predominate. He treats his disciples to extended discussions of such specific topics as cross-bearing, greatness, scandals, divorce, riches, eternal life, and wielding authority, all of which are intended to change their attitudes.

But his companions largely fail to assimilate these lessons, and even contradict his basic principle of self-giving service. Twice they engineer blatant attempts to secure personal prestige immediately after his clearest calls to renounce self-aggrandizement.

The mixing of such “high” and “low” experiences within this act leaves us feeling that we are wrestling with paradox and contradiction.

Act Five (Mark 11:1-13:37) does not recount Jesus’ death, as might be expected from

the predictions in act four. Instead it makes his impending death credible by showing how he antagonized the religious leaders in a series of confrontations at the site of their temple headquarters.

Three days in a row he enters Jerusalem and invades the temple. Entering the city in a semitriumphal parade, cursing a fig tree, desecrating the temple, refusing to answer the authorities and telling a vineyard story against them are all calculated to provoke the leaders' enmity.

A concentric half dozen teaching episodes in the temple precincts further cement the leaders' animosity toward Jesus.

He parries the Pharisees and Herodians in a practical argument about paying taxes, stymies the Sadducees in a theoretical argument about the resurrection, compliments a sympathetic scribe during a discussion of the commandments to love God and one's neighbor, and squelches the scribes with a theoretical riddle about the Christ being David's son, followed by a practical warning against their avarice.

The last incident contrasts with the generosity of a destitute widow's offering and Jesus' prediction that the temple will be demolished.

Then, in a private "apocalyptic" farewell address to four select disciples on the Mount of Olives, Jesus anticipates that the disciples' story line will continue into the future.

Bizarre predictions about the fate of the temple, international distresses, astrological disruptions and the Parousia of the Son of Man are overshadowed by ethical exhortations for disciples and readers to keep awake and stay alert. This enigmatic mixture of warnings and encouragements provokes us who are Mark's readers into assessing our own continued performance.

Two motifs dovetail in this act to ensure the continuity of the story's thematic background. The "journey" concept comes to an end with Jesus' three forays into Jerusalem, where an "anti-temple" motif takes over and continues to the end of the story.

The anti-temple theme embraces the mutual animosity between Jesus and the religious leaders, which credibly accounts for their enmity and Jesus' eventual death in the next act.

An increased number of allusions to the Jewish scriptures gives his impending demise a sense of inevitability and divine necessity.

Throughout, we readers do not need to disassociate from the disciples, who function largely as passive observers, and consequently

we will anticipate resolving our own desires to preserve life and self-respect with the unfolding drama leading to death and dishonor.

Act Six (Mark 14:1-15:41), divided into five panels, embodies the longest and most emotionally charged sequence in the gospel.

In the initial *movement toward betrayal* Jesus' own disciple Judas collaborates with the authorities to arrest him. In meal scenes an anonymous woman anoints Jesus "for his burial" as he dines with Simon the leper, and his men reserve a hall for their Passover Seder, which becomes their "last supper" together. Thus meals, which previously were supportive and life-affirming events, here anticipate absence and death.

The next panel, a *movement toward desertion* set on the Mount of Olives, contains three incidents contrasting Jesus' action and the disciples' inappropriate reaction.

When Jesus quotes a scripture predicting scattered sheep, Peter protests that he would die before deserting; but when Jesus asks them to stay awake while he prays for release from his impending doom, Peter, James and John repeatedly fall asleep.

Then when Judas arrives with a mob to apprehend Jesus, all the other disciples make their escape, and in the confusion someone's ear is sliced off and one young man flees naked.

The third panel, a *movement toward rejection*, contrasts Jesus' treatment by the Jewish leaders who interrogate him and by Peter who watches the judicial proceedings.

Although perjured charges about demolishing "this handmade temple" are not sustained, Jesus' self-incriminating admissions that he is the "Messiah," the "Son of the Blessed" and the future "Son of Man" are sufficient to convict him of blasphemy.

Peter, who is in a position to testify in Jesus' behalf, thrice disavows any association with him. From this point on no disciples participate in the storyline, and readers must watch the outcome from a more distant, less involved perspective.

In the fourth panel, a *movement toward crucifixion* in the Roman governor's palace, the religious authorities manufacture another indictment, accusing Jesus of pretending to be "King of the Jews."

Although Pilate apparently rejects this sarcastic charge, he fails to acquit Jesus. Instead he allows the crowds to demand the release of Barabbas the assassin and then permits his

solders to humiliate Jesus with a string of “royal” mockings.

The final panel, a *movement toward death*, does not emphasize the physical agony of Jesus’ death by crucifixion but focuses on his growing alienation and despair and thus taps every reader’s experience of having abandoned someone or having been deserted by someone in a time of need.

After the soldiers coerce another Simon, a peasant from Cyrene, into carrying Jesus’ crossbar to “Skull Hill,” they divide up his clothes and unsuccessfully offer him a drink of wine and myrrh.

An inscription labeling him “King of the Jews,” plus public ridicule by priests, scribes, passers-by and even two brigands strung up on either side of him continue the dynamic of sarcastic mocking.

Bystanders mistake Jesus’ final cry, “My God, my God, why did you desert me?” as an appeal to Elijah, but no rescuer comes before he screams once more and expires defeated and forsaken.

Unexpectedly, the captain of the execution squad then declares that he was a “god’s son,” and a drapery in the temple rips in two.

An *addendum* to the scene introduces female followers of Jesus who observe his death from a safe distance.

The narrative impact of this climactic scene involves us in an experience of tragic reversal. The tragic dimension comes not only from the fact that Jesus’ death seems so inevitable throughout the story, but also from the way it thwarts every hope of escape: Judas could have remained loyal; Jesus’ prayer could have been answered; the disciples could have defended him; Peter could have testified on his behalf; Pilate could have released him; Elijah could have rescued him.

As we experience Jesus’ slide into abandonment we realize what it means to be abandoned, and insofar as we identify with the disciples who deserted Jesus we also experience what it means to abandon someone else.

The total experience overturns our normal expectations for affirming life, for surviving and prospering. Because that reversal entails negating our own natural propensities for self-aggrandizement, we can then more realistically confront our own mortality and adopt Jesus’ agenda of self-giving service to others.

The Epilogue (Mark 15:42-16:8), an open-ended conclusion, leaves us in suspense and

challenges us to continue the story in our own lives. Councilman Joseph of Arimathea secures Jesus’ corpse from Pilate and gives it a hasty burial.

But two mornings later some of the women who witnessed Jesus’ death and interment find the tomb open. A white-robed young man inside announces that Jesus has been raised and instructs them to inform his disciples, especially Peter, that they should travel to Galilee to see him.

His message confirms Jesus’ earlier predictions of his resurrection and re-engages the “journey on the way” motif from previous scenes.

However, the women are overcome with terror, and the story stops as they flee without speaking to anyone.

Such an abrupt ending confounds readers, especially those of us who remember other versions with more triumphalistic resurrection stories, and forces us to decide for or against this account: either we must choose *against* Mark’s story and supplement it with fuller assurances of Jesus’ resurrection, or we must choose *for* the story with all its ambiguity and its final hint of resurrection and restoration.

MARK’S CRUCIFORMING IMPACT

For readers who do affirm the story, with its climax on the crucifixion and Jesus’ despairing death and with its suspended ending, the narrative will resonate with our personal experiences of abandonment and our own fear of death, but it will simultaneously encourage us with the prospect of restoration beyond betrayal and with the hope of resurrection beyond death.

As we repudiate the disciples’ self-aggrandizing attitude and reluctance to appropriate Jesus’ teachings, we will resolve to avoid the same mistakes, to adopt Jesus’ agenda of self-giving service for others, and to live more comfortably with a realistic sense of our own limitations as mortals.

In sum, Mark’s story of Jesus and his disciples will function as an antidote to failure by enabling us to live a more “cruciformed” existence.

Post-modern readers living in the 21st century may find that Mark’s narrative strikes a responsive chord with our own experiences of contemporary living.

Our social, political and economic environments pose a bewildering array of options: Elec-

tronic media have shrunk the world to the size of a global village, yet many feel alienated and lonely. Medical science continues to produce striking breakthroughs, yet affordable health care still eludes thousands.

Communist totalitarian systems have crumbled around the world, only to have old nationalistic rivalries surface in bloody confrontations. A generation of middle-class Americans enjoyed unprecedented affluence, only to discover that our children's generation may not be able to sustain the same standard of living.

Agricultural advances enable a smaller percentage of the population to grow surpluses of food, yet millions throughout the world continue to starve. The threat of swift nuclear annihilation has dwindled, while the reality of creeping ecological destruction has escalated. The ability to manage the environment is offset by the discovery of holes in the atmosphere's ozone layer, depletion of the tropical rain forests, and a global warming trend.

In short, contemporary men and women live in a world shaped by unsettling forces which give a tragic dimension to our existence.

Some may bend under the pressures and adopt the defeatist attitude of survivors intent only upon enduring distresses with little hope of relief. Others may defy the pressures and opt for the self-aggrandizing posture of those determined to get all they can at the expense of others.

Mark's narrative encourages a radical alternative. It lures us into interacting with Jesus, whose willingness to give of himself for others climaxes in his execution by crucifixion. Thus his own story has a "cruciformed" shape because it is directed toward the cross.

As Mark's readers interact with Jesus we fill the role of disciples, but because the disciples in the story react in such an unsatisfying manner we feel impelled to improve on their performance.

Mark induces us into continuing the story in our own lives. We must then allow the story to give our own performance a "cruciformed" shape.

We, too, will be enabled to confront the tragic dimensions of contemporary life as well as our own mortality with realistic expectations.

Such a realistic perspective allows women and men today to choose to live more freely and responsibly and joyfully, for we can embrace a world view that includes the possibilities of restoration after alienation and resurrection after death.

This frees us from being caught in the compulsion to act in selfish and self-aggrandizing modes; it enables us to empathize with the needs of others and to work toward goals which will enhance our mutual self-interest and our shared values; and it offers the added benefit of investing life with a more gladsome and gratifying feeling.

To summarize, reading Mark's gospel is a satisfying literary experience which shapes readers in a "cruciformed" pattern with twin effects: first it frees us mentally and spiritually from being stymied by the fears of death and failure; then it empowers us physically and psychologically so we can better follow Jesus' agenda of self-giving service to others.

Pr. Mark I. Wegener