

## **Lectionary 5 B 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

February 7, 2021

Mark 1:29-39

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

It's one chapter of the Bible. Chapter one of the Gospel According to Mark. On about half of the Sundays this winter, we've been involved in this one chapter. On December 6, on January 10, on January 24, on January 31. Today, February 7, and again on February 21. Six Sundays on this one single chapter of the Bible. You know, if you came to church every Sunday this year, more than one in ten of your Sundays would include a gospel passage from the first chapter of Mark. This whole chapter is about one eighth of one percent of the Bible. And yet we give it six full Sundays this winter. If Ash Wednesday came a week later this year, it would be seven Sundays.

The reason we can spend six full Sundays with one chapter of Mark's gospel is that Mark's gospel is extraordinarily condensed. Over in Luke's gospel, by the time we get to the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, we are at the end of chapter four. Mark's gospel is extraordinarily condensed. It's barely sixteen chapters long. You can read the whole thing in about an hour, 90 minutes at the most. It moves fast. The trademark word in this gospel is "immediately." The word "immediately" occurs four times in chapter one, 40 times in the gospel as a whole. There's a sense of urgency. Jesus is in a hurry. The Gospel of Mark is in a hurry.

Seminarians usually have to study Greek. It's a requirement for educated pastors to study the language of the New Testament. Which is Greek. Most pastors have spent a lot of time staring at the Greek New Testament, at the pages of Mark's Gospel. Mark's Gospel is written in such blunt, simple Greek that his Gospel is the teaching tool for seminarians. *See Spot run. What is your favorite fruit? Lucy is in the library.* Mark has a simpler vocabulary, and simpler grammar, and so it is traditionally the teaching tool for those who are studying New Testament Greek.

So Mark's Gospel is a great entry point into Christianity. It's short and accessible. If you want to renew your relationship with Jesus or with the Christian religion, I recommend that you do a straight-through reading of Mark's gospel. Make a pot of tea, and spend sixty or ninety minutes reading it from the first word to the last. If you can figure out which is the last word. There are three different ways that Mark might end. Check your Bible and you'll see what I mean. The symbol for John is the eagle, the symbol for Luke is the ox. The symbol for Mark is the lion. It's the gospel that roars. It paces around. It's impatient. The lion.

But precisely because Mark is so short, so simple, so condensed, Mark was dismissed by the Church for over a thousand years. It was Saint Augustine who made famous the idea that Matthew wrote his gospel first, and Mark edited and reduced and condensed Matthew down to Mark. The *real* book is Matthew. Mark is the abridged version of Matthew, according to Augustine. It's useful for young students, maybe, but anyone who takes Jesus seriously will turn to Matthew, not Mark. That's why the books are in the order that they are. Matthew is first in the New Testament, because it was traditionally considered to be the oldest and most important gospel. Mark stood right behind it, as an abridged version of Matthew. And then came Luke. And then came John. Mark was not taken seriously. In the annals of Christianity, for well over a millenium, you will barely find any sermons on Mark, any commentaries on Mark. In music, you'll find a lot of Passions According to John and Passions According to Matthew, but you'll scarcely find a Saint Mark Passion. Bach wrote a Saint Mark Passion, and it got lost, even though his others survived. So from about the year 400 until about the 1830's, Mark's gospel was dismissed and ignored.

And then, after 1400 years, in the 1800's, scholars took a fresh look at Mark. And they reversed the long-standing opinion. Instead of Mark being the abridged version of Matthew, it seemed clear that Mark was the original, and that Matthew and Luke both used Mark, and added to it. So rather than Mark being a diminished version of the original Matthew, the New Testament scholars began to think that Matthew and Luke are augmented versions of the original Mark. And now it seems clear to just about everybody that Mark is the original. Mark should be the first book of the New Testament. That's universally taught and universally accepted. I have here the 1971 and 1986 commentaries on Matthew and Mark by C.S. Mann, a scholar who insisted that the old way was right. This man is widely regarded as a kook because in the twentieth century, he held to be true what the Church held to be true for 1400 years.

There are a couple of lessons for you even if you are not a Bible student. First of all, there is something marvelously Christian about this. The story of the ugly duckling. The story of Cinderella. Mark's gospel was treated like the unwanted step-sister, a misfit and an embarrassment. But for the last century and a half, Mark has been elevated to the top of the heap. At least in terms of historical perspective. "*Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*" Mark chapter ten, verse 31.

But I think there's also a lesson about received wisdom. Saint Augustine was arguably the smartest Christian who ever lived, but because of that, no one every really questioned him on this idea. He was right. He was Augustine after all. No need to think twice. Institutions and universities, Sunday School classes and worship traditions, are all prone to accepting the received wisdom without question. There's something about the spirit of the and frankly, the spirit of its sister, the that asks, "Yes, but is that *really* the case?" "Yes, that's what people say, but does the book really say that?" "Did Jesus really say that?" "Is that was Paul actually meant, or has he been distorted?" Asking questions. Reading things with fresh eyes. I think that's always good. And I think your own opinion, your own reading, matters. Especially in matters of the received wisdom is often wr Or the received wisdom was the right wisdom in another time

and place, but now the Holy Spirit wants us to turn the page and read what else the Bible has to say, what else Jesus has to say.

In today's Simon Peter's mother-in-law is sick, and Jesus heals her. In the history of Christianity, it's sometimes significant that Peter has a mother-in-law, which means that Peter was married at some point, but we never meet Peter's wife. Of all of the apostles, this is the only clue we have that any of them were ever married. In the Church's long, ongoing discussions and debates about celibacy and marriage, and about priestly celibacy and marriage, this little detail has played a big part. The Holy Spirit draws us to certain parts of the story.

For a long time, most clergy were men, most preachers were men. When women became preachers, and pastors, and New Testament scholars, they paid a lot more attention to the role of women. That Peter's mother-in-law immediately sets to work serving the men—presumably cooking and doing other acts of hospitality— that she jumps up and does this, what does it say? Is this meaningful work, or is it menial work? Different women read this different ways. The Holy Spirit draws us to certain parts of the story.

Today, we are in a pandemic. As we read stories like this one, we can't help but notice the social context. People with demons, people who are lepers, people who are bleeding, are outcasts and marginalized. When Jesus heals these individuals, he restores them to the community of which they are a part. And sometimes when he restores people to community, there's a backlash. Sometimes Jesus heals on the sabbath. And there's a backlash. With our pandemic, we are acutely aware of the social context of illness. The isolation of people dying alone in the ICU. The isolation of most of us who are in various levels of quarantine. And we're seeing and learning a great deal about what is wrong with our society. We're learning about the corrosion of trust. We're learning about the inequities of the health care system. And more. So now, when we read a story like this one, when we the Holy Spirit draws us to certain parts of the story.

Mark chapter one. One chapter of the Bible. Six Sundays of the year. Six Sundays this winter. The Spirit is constantly stirring. Opening our ears and our eyes to God's message for us now. Amen.