

February 6, 2022 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:1, 16-27

"Mark: A Portrait of Jesus"

Douglas T. King

Today is the second in a sermon series on the four distinct portraits of Jesus created by the gospels. Clearly all four gospels discuss Jesus in similar terms but each also has their own perspective and emphasis. Last week we heard about Matthew's Jesus as the brilliant teacher who has high expectations for us because he believes we are capable of great things. Today we turn to how Jesus is portrayed in the gospel of Mark.

Our text presents us with the very beginning of the gospel and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The beginning of the gospel, the very first verse, provides us with two titles for Jesus. He is named the Christ, which means the messiah. And he is named the Son of God. The title Christ, or messiah, acknowledges the power Jesus has to restore all that is broken, to save. The title Son of God signifies the obedience Jesus has to the will of God.

Jesus' ministry begins with him passing along the Sea of Galilee. He calls Simon and Andrew. "And immediately they left their nets and followed him" and then when he sees James and John, "Immediately, he called them." In the brief sixteen chapters of Mark he uses the word "immediately" twenty-seven

times. In Mark, everything Jesus does is done with great urgency. What he must do cannot wait.

Jesus and his newly found disciples head to Capernaum and the synagogue. We are told that Jesus taught "as one having authority." In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is large and in charge. Right away he is going to need to prove how strong he is as he faces this unclean spirit. The spirit recognizes who is adversary truly is, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus demonstrates his power, commanding the unclean spirit, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the spirit is indeed defeated and driven from the man. There is not a moment of doubt that Jesus has the power to heal us, the power to save us. In all capital letters, he is the Christ, the messiah.

Although the unclean spirit recognizes who Jesus is right away, all of those present in the synagogue have no clue who he is. Even in the aftermath of this dramatic healing they do not see who Jesus is. They are flummoxed, saying, "What is this? A new teaching-with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." In Mark, people are consistently confused about who Jesus is, particularly his disciples. Last week, in Matthew, we heard how Jesus was this amazing teacher and the disciples were his promising students. This is not the case in Mark. In Mark, Jesus' disciples are so far from comprehension that teaching them is quite a challenge. Even to the very end of the gospel and the resurrection, they still do not quite get it. In my own befuddlement, these are disciples to whom I can easily relate.

Mark's Jesus speaks fewer words than the Jesus presented in any of the other gospels. There are none of the long discourses we hear in Matthew or the extended conversations in John. In Mark, Jesus is a man of action. He puts all of our problems on his broad back. He carries our failings, our bumps and bruises, and battles everything that torments and harms us. In Mark, the reality that sometimes our problems are bigger than ourselves and our abilities to solve is writ large. Jesus is like a wrestler in the ring, battling the powers of darkness. He is the Christ, the messiah, the one who saves.

Every time one of the gospel writers created a portrait of Jesus they were seeking to reveal a glimpse of part of who God is. This portrait of Jesus in Mark is a vivid representation of the power God possesses; the urgent desire of God to intervene on our behalf; the promise that God will indeed be victorious regardless of how unlikely that may seem at times.

Sometimes we are in particular need of a specific portrait of Jesus. I think of the Jesus described in Mark as the one we need at 4 AM in the morning. You know when an ambulance siren goes by your house and you are roused from sleep. And then you begin to think about how one of your kids does not like their third grade teacher. Before you know it you are worrying about the future, and the effects of climate change, a shaky stock market, and what will happen on the border of Russia and the Ukraine. And sometimes when we are awake at 4 AM it is for a very specific reason; because we or someone we love are in a hospital bed awaiting surgery; or we have just lost a job; or realized our marriage is really over.

The world can be a scary place. The world is beyond our ability to control no matter how much we struggle to the contrary. We would dearly love to know that there was someone in charge who loved and cared for us.

I have a vivid memory from my childhood. It was Christmas time and I was curled up in the backseat of the car, do you remember when we let kids rattle around in the back without a child's safety seat? Christmas carols were playing on the radio. I remember this incredibly concrete feeling that all was right with the world and that the people in the front seat of the car were in charge of all that would happen.

Not all of us have memories like this from our childhood but many of us do. Memories of a time and place when we were enveloped in love and security; when we felt protected by someone powerful. It was a wonderful thing to have even a brief moment of trust so deep. This is especially a gift when we are young and so clearly vulnerable; when there is still so much of the world we do not understand. When we become adults and make our way in the world we learn much of how the world works. We strive and achieve. We gain a sense of independence and power. Maybe we own a house, and have some money in the bank. And we like to think, we want to think, we are the masters of our fate. But a part of us knows this is not true. Deep down inside, we know, there are still things beyond our comprehension. And life, regardless of our achievements is still beyond our absolute control. But we never outgrow the desire to have that level of trust. We need a messiah who is in charge, who saves.

As I said before, the gospel of Mark portrays Jesus' disciples as having huge challenges with comprehension. In fact they come across as a rather dim-witted lot. They hardly ever understand what Jesus is talking about or who he is. The Jesus found in the gospel of Mark speaks to us when we feel overwhelmed by the world; when we cannot quite figure out all that is going on; when we doubt we have the strength and understanding to move ahead. Jesus in Mark is clearly the Christ, the messiah, full of power and urgency. He is the one ready to bring us safely to where we need to be, the ever-loving arms of our Creator. Mark opens the gospel, giving Jesus this title for a reason, he emphasizes its reality on every page.

But what of the second title he is given at the beginning of the gospel? The Son of God? Mark, like the gospel of John, is rife with irony. While the demons know who he is, those closest to Jesus do not understand him. And, this man of great power achieves his ultimate victory by surrendering to the full fragility of our mortality and dying on the cross. The title, Son of God, connotes one who offers complete obedience to God's intentions, even to the point of death. Jesus power in Mark is beyond worldly but he achieves his ultimate ends through owning our weakness beside us.

Last week, in Matthew, we heard how much Jesus believes in our ability to do extraordinary things. We were told that Jesus' teaching and grace can lift us to remarkable heights of faithfulness and ethical standards. We need to encounter the Jesus found in the gospel of Matthew when we are on cruise

control with how we are living our lives and need to be uplifted to a new and challenging way of being.

When we are feeling as if the world has us by the tail; when our problems are deeper than our abilities to solve; that is when we need to encounter the Jesus found in Mark; a Jesus who is urgent; a Jesus who is powerful; a Jesus who reaches through and beyond our weaknesses to overcome all that we fear.

On this Sunday as we prepare to come to the table to be fed, trust that the one beckoning us to the table is powerful enough to save us, the Christ, and obedient enough in his love to die for us, the Son of God. Approach with confidence, knowing the victory is indeed well in hand. The man with feet dusty from the road he walked, surrounded by friends who could barely begin to comprehend who he was, is indeed the Messiah, the one who heals all our broken-ness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.