

WISDOM THAT ASTOUNDS AND OFFENDS

7

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Mark 6:1-6; 7:1-23

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

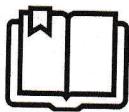
On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? . . . And they took offense at him. (Mark 6:2-3)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

The Gospel of Mark appeared before the other three, and scholars date it to 70 CE, the same year of the Siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by the Roman army. Written to be read aloud in *koiné* Greek, a common form of the language that would have been broadly understood by listeners, this Gospel gives us the most human portrayal of Jesus. It seems he only begins to understand his identity at the time of his baptism in chapter 1. The early chapters of the Gospel show Jesus and his newly-called disciples ministering in Capernaum and the surrounding towns. He tangles with religious leaders, performs dramatic healings, draws huge crowds for his teaching, and raises a young girl from the dead before he makes a trip home to Nazareth in chapter 6.

Mark’s Gospel is intricately composed, with the transfiguration (chapter 9) at its exact center. It is the only time in Mark that his followers see Jesus in a divine form. After that, he asks his most trusted disciples to keep his identity a secret. This Jesus is both a bit esoteric and profoundly down-to-earth. While later editors tacked on an ending combining familiar events from the other Gospels with some more obscure tales, the oldest versions end at 16:8 with the women finding the tomb empty and then running away, too afraid to tell anyone what they have seen. This sense of disbelief and shock seems to mirror the feelings Jesus’ Jewish followers must have experienced after fleeing Jerusalem, as they dwelt in the same kind of in-between space his disciples inhabited before they saw the resurrected Christ.

Holy One, help us to find ourselves in the Gospel story, in our belief and in our disbelief. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Mark 6:1-6

6:1 [Jesus] left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A WORD ABOUT GOING HOME

Jesus goes home to Nazareth in this week's lesson, where he gets the kind of hostile welcome anyone might dread on a return to familiar places. How will our family, old friends, and neighbors respond to us? What will they think of the work we do, or the clothes we wear, or the partner we hope to marry? Jesus' prior encounter with his family in chapter 3 had them wondering, along with a group of religious leaders dispatched from Jerusalem to check on his activities, whether he might be possessed by demons.

You Can't Go Home Again is a novel by Thomas Wolfe about this same problem. His central character, also a writer, has written a successful novel about his hometown. Incensed at their portrayal, the neighbors send him angry letters that include threats on his life. While no one tries to harm Jesus physically in Mark's Gospel, the parallel story in Luke tells us the hometown synagogue crowd tried to throw him off a cliff! Even without a show of violence, their resentment is palpable. That they call him “Son of Mary” in verse 3 shows they intended to insult him, since men were generally called the sons of their fathers. Even though there is no birth narrative in Mark, the implication that there were questions about who fathered Jesus is found here.

Neither Nazareth nor its residents sounds particularly progressive, and it was certainly not cosmopolitan. Jesus came from a small, poor, Jewish town, and like many other small towns, the Gospel suggests it operated with an understanding that people keep to their place. Jesus left them as a regular worker; when he came back and started teaching in the synagogue, he upset the larger family system of the town.

Although the Gospel does not specify the themes of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue, the extended portion of our lesson in chapter 7 unpacks some of the ideas Jesus preached that would have doubtless upset his old neighbors. In chapter 7, the Pharisees question his religious hygiene. Why don't your followers wash according to the rituals we all hold as important? He has a question for them in return: Why can't you see that the real hygiene problem is with what comes out of your mouth, not what goes into it?

Nobody likes to hear that kind of thing. When the identity or beliefs of someone we thought we knew turn out to be different than we assumed, it can shift our relationships and be hard to accept. The people of Nazareth may be more like us than not.

 **Have you been through a shift of identity or purpose? How did others respond?**

GUT REACTION

Sometimes even the people who grew up with us, who went to school with us, who had the same Sunday School teachers, who lived under the same roof with us, who were born from the same mothers or who were raised by us do not believe what we know to be the truth. Whether it is the team we cheer, the party we support, or the diet we follow, we can sometimes get hot under the collar about our differences of opinion, even and perhaps especially with the people we know best.

When Jesus sat down in the synagogue and started teaching in Mark 6, he found himself in that kind of situation. People started "roasting" or trash-talking him, as a middle school student might say, using some classic forms of the takedown genre. Who does he think he is? What makes him think he is so great? They knew him, and all his family. He was nothing special. He had a mother, and four brothers, and some sisters not even worth naming. After all, they had watched him grow up, right there in town.

In the NRSV, the people take “offense,” and Jesus is “amazed at their unbelief.” The choice of words makes the encounter sound more genteel than raucous, like the cool disdain we might expect in a disagreement at the country club. But in a more recent translation aimed at choosing words in common usage today, the Common English Bible employs more visceral word choices to describe the feelings of the two parties to the disagreement. “They were repulsed by him and fell into sin,” reads this translation, and “He was appalled by their disbelief” (Mark 6:3b and 6:6, emphasis mine). The Greek ἐσκανδαλίζοντο (*eskandalizonto*) is the word for how the townsfolk react. They were scandalized, and they shook up Jesus with their response. We might note that “appalled” is also a strong word. It is more common to translate that word as he “wondered” or “marveled” at their unbelief.

This encounter distressed both Jesus and his lifelong neighbors in a physical sense. There was a gut reaction, a recoil, a denial of who Jesus really was, which could be both the cause and the outcome of their fall into sin, another very physical word. When we react passionately against a person or an idea, we may feel the same way, unable to act the way we prefer or do the things that matter to us. Even Jesus experienced a diminishment of his powers, although he still managed to heal a few sick people before he wisely moved on to teach in other towns.

 **How do you handle yourself when someone gets under your skin?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Shake it off.”

Long before Taylor Swift sang them, those were the mild words of my father, whether I suffered a skinned knee or a disappointed heart or an outraged mind. “Shake it off” was his advice no matter what injury or offense life brought my way. But how could I shake it off when I got the blame for something my little brother did, or the girls in my class picked on me?

If we look ahead to see what happened next in Mark 6, we find Jesus sent out the twelve and shared a key piece of wisdom when he told them what to do if they received the same rejection he faced in Nazareth. He told them to keep moving, to shake the dust off, to focus their efforts where people might actually listen.

“Shake it off,” he must have said to himself too. Shake the dust off your sandals as a witness when people cannot, or will not, hear what you are telling them. If they won’t listen to you, if they can’t offer you the decency of basic hospitality and a fair hearing, shake the dust off and keep moving.

We might picture the disciples and think they only had to shake off the rejection of strangers. It’s harder when we’re trying to tell the truth to people who know us, especially when they have known us all our lives. It’s hard to talk about something that means everything to us when the people who should understand reject us.

That is exactly what the disciples faced and the reason Jesus gave them the advice he did.

He didn’t send them to Egypt or Syria or Asia on their first solo missions to spread the word. He sent them to places that were within walking distance, places where people would recognize them, places where their third cousins, or their wives’ uncles, or their more successful older brothers lived. Those were the people who would close the doors in their faces.

The people following Jesus were not that different from us. We just have more ways to have our feelings hurt by the people who know us best. We can slight each other at home and at church, just like they did, and in the marketplace, but we’ve added email, voicemail, Facebook, and text messages.

If we find ourselves rejected when we know we have good news to share, we can remember the wisdom of Jesus: Shake it off. Then take the message to the next person who needs to hear it.

② How do you know when a determined effort is faithful and when you are just trying to win a fight?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. Whereas Matthew and Mark say that Jesus went to his hometown and began to teach in their synagogue (Matthew 13:54–58; Mark 6:1–6), Luke portrays Jesus as making a formal sermonic presentation in the synagogue, reading from the Book of Isaiah and expounding on the Scripture and its fulfillment in himself (Luke 4:16–29). In all three Gospels the people are both astounded and offended at him.

2. Jesus' teaching and preaching are very sharp and critical especially of religious leaders who have varied from the truth of God. This style reflects what the writer of Hebrews says of the word of God: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow" (Hebrews 4:12-13).
3. The Greek word *tekton* (v. 3) can mean carpenter, woodworker, and also one who builds with stone.
4. "Son of Mary" may be an insult: people were known by their father's name, not their mother's.
5. Verse 4 indicates that Jesus is among the prophets, whose message from God is rejected by their own people.
6. Mark 7:9-13—*korban*. A child could, per the aural Torah, declare possessions to be *korban*, i.e., an offering to God. The commandment to "Honor your father and mother" was interpreted as giving parents a right to a child's possessions. Making possessions *korban* circumvented a child's obligations to his parents under the Law.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Jul. 20	Wisdom, Source of Abundant Life	Proverbs 3:13-18
T	Jul. 21	Jesus Does What the Father Does	John 5:19-24
W	Jul. 22	Love as I Loved You	John 13:31-35
Th	Jul. 23	Spirit of Truth Dwells in You	John 14:15-17
F	Jul. 24	Love Binds Believers to God	John 14:18-24
Sa	Jul. 25	Spirit of Wisdom Promised to All	John 14:25-31