Question Marks and Turning Points: Following the Gospel of Mark to Surprising Places

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For a document that intends to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Gospel of Mark seems to pose more questions than it provides answers. There are, in fact, over one hundred questions in the Gospel. Narratively, they function naturally in advancing the dialogue and in shaping characterizations. Rhetorically, however, they function to engage us, the readers or hearers, to cause us to evaluate our responses in light of the disciples in the Gospel, and to help us reflect on Jesus and his ministry as the good news. Many of the questions in Mark do have answers that we, as followers of Christ, have already articulated. On the one hand, then, it seems like a rather simple quiz. When Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” we have the “right” answer on the tip of our tongue. We have confessed our answer in creed, hymn, and prayer. On the other hand, some of the questions in Mark are more difficult to answer. Why are we still afraid sometimes? Why did God forsake Jesus on the cross? Perhaps, then, the challenge of Mark is learning to linger with the questions. Perhaps discerning the right questions is more important than memorizing the right answers. Can we allow the questions to be just that, questions, and not just a means to get to the answer?

The questions in Mark’s Gospel can not only guide our reading, they can serve as an outline for a Bible study or preaching series—whether in Lent or at some other time during the year.
In my senior year at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, I attended a retreat where the first evening was simply devoted to questions. The leader, in fact, would not allow any declarations, any statements, any answers to the questions that were voiced. It was a most difficult exercise for a number of us. Our piety would have us speak up and give assurance to the questions of suffering or injustice or how could it be this way or that. The next day, however, we discovered how our conversation was enriched by the willingness to ponder the questions more deeply. One question led to another question and then another, and we found ourselves asking different questions than we first asked. It brought us to a different place and to richer responses.

With its attention to questions, therefore, the Gospel of Mark is well suited for us who live in a culture that is characterized as postmodern. One characteristic of the move from the certainties of the modern to the openness of the postmodern is to recognize how the exclamation points of our culture have been replaced by question marks. What used to be givens in our society are becoming “whatevers.” In a time when many in the church are seeking to replace questions with answers, ambiguity with certainty, open possibilities with purpose, we are indeed suggesting that we pause to ponder the questions. They could be leading us into new ways of seeing and hearing the good news of Jesus Christ.

In this article we are suggesting a way to read Mark that gives the questions asked a longer hearing—or perhaps space to grow and take hold of us. Do we dare do this without jumping to the end? Appropriately enough, should we try jumping to the end of the Gospel of Mark, it will not bring us to a conclusion but to an open-ended story that sends us back to the “beginning of the good news” in 1:1. Could it be that we could recognize God as one who shepherds us with questions, leading us along with a question-mark-shaped shepherd’s crook?

Looking closely at the texts we will discover that Jesus refuses to let the questions be boxed in with answers. In fact, we may have to become content with the realization that some of the answers, just like in the television game show “Jeopardy,” need to be given in the form of a question. What we offer here, then, are some key questions that guide the reader or hearer through Mark and that also can serve as an outline for a (Lenten) Bible study or preaching series. For each question there is a brief exegetical introduction accompanied by a reflection on how perhaps we too might experience Jesus as the main question rather than the easy answer.

1. “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:36, 51)

In 10:35, James and John come to Jesus and request that Jesus do whatever they ask him to do. Jesus responds in 10:36, “What is it you want me to do for you?”
you?” James and John do have an answer, but the desire to sit in glory with Jesus is the wrong one. Moments later in 10:46–52 Jesus encounters the desperate cries of blind Bartimaeus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks. Bartimaeus responds with the obvious answer that he might see again. Jesus replies, “Go; your faith has made you well [or has saved you],” and Bartimaeus, fully seeing, follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. One’s interaction with Jesus is posed in two other ways in Mark. In 1:24 and again in 5:7, the unclean spirits, recognizing him for who he is, ask Jesus what he is going to do to them. Though the question is never explicitly answered, the unclean spirits’ worst fears are realized. The question is turned around in Mark 15:12 when Pilate asks the crowd, “[W]hat do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” So, which is the more important question?

- What will Jesus do to me?
- What will we do to Jesus?
- What does Jesus want me to do?
- What does Jesus do for me?

Perhaps the answer is simply in getting the questions in the right order.

“What do you want me to do for you?” (10:36, 51). How about that for a leading question? It leads us to ask something of Jesus. Do you see how it taps into our hopes and also our fears? It forces us to acknowledge our expectations of Jesus. How we answer this question perhaps reveals more than we are comfortable expressing. Addressing this question with friends, family, or small study groups could lead to a great discussion of priorities. It is a loaded question as it gets to the heart of what we want. We note how the disciples respond to the questions. Yes, indeed, they seek a place next to Jesus. They name out loud their desire for honor and glory. There is absolutely no doubt that we all have asked such things of our Lord. Is not the “call” process one where we are asking for a sense of place in God’s plan? What we want Jesus to do for us assumes a prior relationship, but let us remember that this Gospel is about beginnings. It is not by accident that the writer of Mark would have us turn to the blind beggar. He is asking for mercy, but when Jesus poses the question to him, he asks to see again. What happens next helps us see the beginning of discipleship. The blind beggar becomes the now-seeing one who follows Jesus. “We are beggars,” Martin Luther is recorded as saying before he died.* Perhaps the beginning of the good news for us who understand ourselves to be beggars is simply to “see.”

2. “With what can we compare the kingdom of God?” (4:30)

Jesus answers his own question in Mark 4:30–32 with the parable of the mustard seed. What sort of paradoxical answer is this? Mustard was not a significant agricultural commodity and, by virtue of its tendency to spread like a weed and

*Luther said, “Wir sein pettler,” in the Table Talk #5677; *D. Martin Luther’s Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, vol. 5 (Weimar: Herman Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1919) 317–318.
contaminate nearby ground, Jewish regulation prohibited it from being planted in one’s garden (mishnah Kelim 3:2). Since mustard is an annual plant, it cannot provide a shady place in the spring for birds to make their nests. If one wanted an example of a plant that demonstrated strength and majesty and could provide suitable shelter, the mighty cedar tree would be the proper choice (Ezek 17:22–23). To talk about the dominion of God as being similar to a mustard seed, therefore, raises more questions than answers, but perhaps it also leads to better understanding about God’s presence in the world. Perhaps the deeper issue is a matter of how one goes about describing the nature of the dominion of God when that reality is so contrary to the usual business of the world.

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“With what can we compare the kingdom of God?” A small-group exercise could be devoted to listing all that we could compare to the kingdom of God. I suspect that we would notice ourselves duplicating the church’s attempt to define its ecclesiology. But, of course, this raises another question that is evident but not always noted. Why do we so often compare our church body in all its earthly forms to the kingdom of God? We put a lot of pressure on ourselves to be and do church in a way that puts God’s best side forth. What are we to make of our culture’s tendency to help so many find their spiritual nest outside of the established foundations of the church? Could Jesus’ question have us take another look? How many of our attempts to make Christ known to the world look more like a cedar tree than a mustard bush? “With what can we compare the kingdom of God?” Expanding on the question posed to the blind beggar, let us attempt to see God’s kingdom present now and fully seen in the future. The dominion of God, as the mustard seed would lead us to believe, is present as a pesky, not-to-be-removed presence. We are not noticing deep roots. It is always growing but not so stately or sightly. Does Jesus answer his own question? Perhaps that is the question we have before us. Are we to compare the kingdom of God to anything? We are often telling our daughters to quit comparing themselves to their friends. We are often preaching on the futility of comparing ourselves to the Joneses. Making comparisons diminishes the possibilities, the unique gifts, the open-endedness of the dominion of God. You get the idea. Maybe that is the parable for us. We leave it as a question.

3. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4:40)

In 4:35–41, Jesus invites his disciples to cross the sea. As they are in the boat, a great windstorm arises, but Jesus is asleep in the stern. As the boat was threatening to sink, the disciples wake Jesus and have their own chiding question: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus does not answer but simply acts and stills the storm. Jesus then poses his questions to the disciples in Mark 4:40: “Why are
you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Note, however, that these questions do not occur during the storm but after Jesus has rebuked the wind and calmed the sea. It is not in the midst of tumult but in the stillness of the aftermath that the disciples, in their continuing obtuseness, ask, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Here is a preaching moment if there ever was one. Why are you afraid? Are you afraid about your financial security? Are you afraid of strangers and violence and terrorists? Are you afraid of the chances and changes of life? Are you afraid of cancer, car accidents, or cruel intentions? Again we have a question that exposes our fears. But notice that Jesus asks, “Why?” He does not ask “When?” or “How?” or “What?” Jesus asks the disciples why they are afraid. In our Stephen Ministry classes we are encouraged not to ask “why” questions. It puts people on the defensive. Why did you lock the keys in the car? Why are you late? Why did you not call? Let us try answering the question, “Why are you afraid?” Do you notice how it causes us to defend ourselves? It is a matter of trust. It is, as Jesus continues, a matter of faith. As noted above, the disciples were not afraid of the storm. They knew about the sea. They knew about storms. They did not know if they could trust Jesus. They had given up their livelihoods, left their lives as they knew them, entered into an unknown relationship, and risked everything to follow this man. Now they put the question to Jesus: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

This question gets to the essence of our faith and how we live into a way of following Jesus in the midst of our fears. The biblical narrative is punctuated with encouragements for people not to fear—to Abraham (Gen 15:1), Isaac (Gen 26:24), Jacob (Gen 46:3), the Israelites before crossing the sea (Exod 14:13)—and it continues on in Mark (5:36; 6:50). Indeed, the Gospel of Mark leaves us dealing with the women at the empty tomb who are afraid. Why are we afraid? It is a question that marks our faith. It turns us around and points us to the cross. It evokes the prayer of the truly desperate: “We believe, help our unbelief” (cf. 9:24).

4. “Who do you say that I am?” (8:29)

In Mark 8:27, Jesus had posed the question broadly to the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Given the cultural and religious setting, the responses reflect likely possibilities. In 8:29, however, Jesus gets personal. “But who do you say that I am?” Peter has the right answer, “You are the Messiah,” and then Jesus “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” In 8:31–33, Jesus talks of his impending suffering and death, and Peter’s rebuke to Jesus indicates that his answer may have been the right words, but it was not accompanied with the right understanding of Jesus’ messiahship. Is this why Jesus had ordered them not to tell anyone about his identity? When is this prohibition, which would certainly hinder evangelistic efforts, lifted? Does the messianic secret apply only within the story, whereas at the level of discourse for readers and hearers everything becomes quite clear? Do we need to avoid focusing on the “Messiah” title and simply watch the story unfold?

“Who do you say that I am?” Let us try to focus on the one posing the ques-
tion rather than the one who gives the answer. I am asking us to refrain from thinking up the answer before we take note of the question and who is asking it. Do you ever find yourself not listening well to another person because you are trying to figure out what to say? Preaching this text at our seminary, I [Kathy] was urging the students to recognize that mission and ministry and following Jesus are, in the end, not about us. Although Peter gets lots of press for his right but wrong answer, we follow this question and see that it really is not about how we declare Jesus as Messiah. Jesus poses this question shortly before we hear his first of three passion predictions. As Jesus hangs on the cross, who he is and what he does for us has nothing to do with what Peter or we say about Jesus. Our declarations are beside the point. We will never be redeemed by our declarations, nor will they turn us to God’s salvation. It is not about us. That is true. It is, however, for us. There begins our proclamation. This question leads us not to Peter’s answer but instead to the foot of the cross and the centurion’s declaration. Peter’s rock-solid confession might have seemed to be the final word, but it now appears to be but the beginning of his life as a follower of Jesus Christ. The question does not mark the end of Peter’s faith formation or ours, but it does surely stand as a significant turning point.

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5. “What were you arguing about on the way?” (9:33)

In 9:30–31 Jesus tells his disciples for a second time about his impending death and resurrection. In 9:32, we are told that the disciples “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” For the first time in Mark, someone is afraid to ask a question! We discover, however, in 9:33, that the disciples still did have something to talk about, and Jesus is not afraid to ask them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” To the disciples’ credit, they realize that the answer to this question is not a good one—they were arguing about who was greatest—and so they keep quiet. Jesus will give an answer in 9:35 that they would never have expected: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

What do we argue about, anyway? Sports? Politics? Tastes great or less filling? The marriage experts say that money is the source of a great amount of marital discord. Like the other questions posed before us, what we argue about has much to say about what we think is important. Perhaps we ought to call attention to what we are arguing about. How many of our arguments really make a difference? Are we arguing about things that are really important or only about things that validate our own sense of self-importance? The disciples did recognize that they were arguing about something stupid. It was not worthy of attention and only took their eyes off the important matters. So, what do you argue about? Again, our response to this question forces us to recognize that we are concerned about ourselves and our place in the world. It is amazing how these questions lead us to the same place. We
want to take root in the deep soil, we want the largest branches, we want to perch where we are steady and secure. We want Jesus to do for us whatever will provide us the most gain. Maybe we should pose the question differently. Not “What do we argue about?” but “What is worth arguing about?” Or perhaps, even better, watching and listening to Jesus, we ought to be thinking about those matters concerning which there should be no arguing at all.

6. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34)

By now it should not come as much of a surprise that the last recorded words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark are in the form of a question. What is surprising, however, is that this sounds like a cry of desperation. Did not Jesus already indicate that it was going to come to this? Can he really feel that he has been abandoned by God? Generations of commentators have tried to soften the scandal of Jesus’ question by noting that he is quoting Ps 22:1 and that this lament psalm eventually ends up in praise of God’s deliverance. True enough, but the Gospel of Mark is not making this suggestion. We cannot easily skirt past this stark question and slide into the comfort of some future deliverance. Instead, we are forced to deal with the reality of Jesus’ suffering and death. We are forced to keep our eye on him hanging upon the cross. We end up having to ask if this is what the love of God looks like, and if so, what it means for our lives.

The final question Jesus asks is not posed to us. It really is not about us. This is a question Jesus poses to God. It is a “why” question, the type of question that we use to put God on the defensive. “Why, God, do you let bad things happen to good people? Why do you let the wicked prosper?” So how does God answer? The observers on that day were watching for an answer. Would God send Elijah? Would God deliver Jesus from the cross? God did answer, and the answer is present in the very question itself. The question has us “see” the one who suffers and is abandoned and who dies. It was the question itself that prompted the centurion’s response, a response that came after Jesus cried out, after Jesus breathed his last, and, finally, after Jesus died. Then the centurion said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Here is the exclamation point for a question that haunts our world. Everyone else wanted Jesus to get down off the cross, and then they would believe. Instead Jesus stayed on the cross, and the centurion believed.

There is a wonderful space of possibility between the question asked and the reality that is revealed. We would call it the now and not yet reality of our present lives. We discover that there is lots of space between what we know and what we do not know yet. As the people of God we find ourselves living the tension between what grounds us and what extends us. Note, however, that all these questions are asked within the story. When this story of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection become part of our own story, then paying attention to these questions as questions causes us to interact with them differently. We explore the many textured layers that open us up to God’s way of being in the world. As we have attempted to emphasize, taking up these questions does not allow us to dwell on
ourselves. In fact, these questions lead us out of ourselves and into the world. As we look at the way we live, I think that we often lead diminished lives not by the decisions we make but by the questions we refuse to ask. Notice how the questions bring about new ways of being. Pay attention to the way Jesus responds to the questions within the questions. Stay alert to the way you find yourself leaning when a question is asked. Our attention to the texts in Mark will have us see that Jesus is present in the question marks and that they become the significant turning points for those who have been marked with the cross of Christ forever.

We must return, then, to Jesus’ final question that hangs over the whole Gospel: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In the silence of what seemed to be no answer, let us not fill in our answers. God did not save Jesus from that death, a death that often seems far more real than any possible, future resurrection. It is simply a recognition of how far God would go. It is in this space that questions abound—and perhaps it is not the question that is left hanging there but the truth. And perhaps the final question in Mark 16:3—“Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”—is reason not for consternation but celebration.

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