



Hearing the Good News: The Message of the Kingdom in Mark

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Perhaps the special character of the stories in the New Testament lies in the fact that they are not told for themselves, that they are not only about other people, but that they are always about us. They locate us in the very midst of the great story and plot of all time and space, and therefore relate us to the great dramatist and storyteller, God himself.¹

ENTERING MARK'S STORY

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”² With these words, at the same time unique title and beginning of the story, the gospel writer Mark launches his narrative with language that clearly seeks to engage and persuade the hearer and reader. The story into which Mark invites the hearer, as suggested by the quote from Amos Wilder above, consists of a new manner of existence that is described again and again as faith. Such faith is not a matter of information but of being persuaded into a new existence shaped by confidence in the promises of the one who engages and meets us in this story.

¹Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) 57.

²Translations throughout are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

Mark presents the message of the kingdom in a story that invites us in and seeks to persuade us to enter a new existence. Now we are called and sent with the message of God's transformative and healing power.

Martin Luther provocatively argues for this persuasive power of the gospel witness:

I believe that it has now become clear that it is not enough or in any sense Christian to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice for the conduct of life....Far less is it sufficient or Christian to say nothing at all about Christ and to teach instead the laws of men and the decrees of the fathers....Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him.³

Both Luther and Wilder argue for the formative power of faith shaped by the hearing of the gospel to comprehend God at work in a new way, breaking down barriers, calling into new existence. A key related insight is to see that this calling is always tied to particular stories and particular language. To borrow Luther's distinction of the "two kingdoms," even as word of God these stories belong nevertheless to the kingdom on the left. They address people in the historicity of life in this world, in the midst of community, in the midst of ambiguity, and precisely there hearers are opened to the promise of the living and changing power of the word of God as it takes new shapes in human words appropriate for each new occasion.⁴

Significant then for the hearers of Mark is that in his first public words in the Gospel Jesus calls us to "enter into a new manner of existence shaped by repentance and faith in this good news" (1:15).⁵ To be called and invited as hearers into this story is to experience other possibilities for life than the status quo. Such possibilities of faith will again and again be heard in the story.⁶ In one of the early episodes Jesus heals a paralytic on the basis of the faith of his bearers (2:5). Repeatedly faith is juxtaposed to an existence marked by fear. The disciples do not yet have faith as they are fearful on the sea (4:40). Faith has the power to overcome the fear and trembling of the woman so that she is healed from her hemorrhages (5:33–34). Jesus calls upon the father whose daughter has just died to stop fearing and just believe (5:36). Another father cries in desperation for his son, "I believe,

³Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 357. In language that sounds very similar Donald Juel writes: "A prominent New Testament scholar put it this way: 'The task of biblical scholarship is to understand what the original author intended for the original audience.' One might propose, on the contrary, that the task of biblical scholars is to help a contemporary audience understand the Bible, and that the task of a contemporary audience is to experience the force of the narrative's argument in the present. Historical information may be important for such an enterprise, but it is neither the beginning nor the end of the task"; Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 31–32.

⁴For further reflections on these aspects of the word of God, see my essay, "Rhetoric and the Word of God: Treasure in Earthen Vessels," in *To Teach, to Delight, and to Move: Theological Education in a Post-Christian World*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004) 201–222.

⁵The translation seeks to bring out the implications of the present tense of the Greek verbs here, and hence of the ongoing reality of the invitation and call of Jesus.

⁶The word "faith," as noun or verb almost equally, occurs in strategic stories throughout Mark: 1:15; 2:5; 4:40; 5:34, 36; 9:23, 24, 42; 10:42; 11:23, 24, 31; 13:21; 15:32.

help my unbelief,” and the son is healed (9:23–24). And in what certainly functions as a kind of paradigm of discipleship, coming just prior to the story of Jesus’ passion and crucifixion, blind Bartimaeus is “completely healed” (saved! perfect tense in the original Greek) from his blindness and “follows” Jesus on the way (10:46–52).

Accordingly, it seems more than just interesting—indeed, this seems to be part of the shaping of the hearers of this story—to note how references to faith change in the Gospel. However promising the images of faith, in opposition to fear, in the opening sections of the Gospel—people with faith are healed; people cling to faith to lead them from fear—as the story nears its conclusion, the only references to faith are negative. Jesus charges his followers not to “believe” false messiahs (13:21); talk of faith is only to be heard on the lips of those who mock Jesus on the cross (15:32). One soon understands that experiencing this faith, or entering into the new existence that is somehow tied to this story and to this Jesus, is not a foregone conclusion. There are alternative calls and other competing claims in the world of Mark’s readers.⁷ From the very beginning Mark makes clear to the reader that to enter into this story is to be called into a world in which competing claims to authority and rule have direct implications for how we as readers will imagine our existence. This is a story about “the kingdom” in which God will rule and so a story about the nature of God’s kingly rule and of a call to us and our stories to take up residence in it.

CALLED INTO THE KINGDOM

Invited to enter Mark’s story, many readers have called attention to the swift way in which the narrative gets to its essential claim, foregoing all kinds of possible details about its chief character, Jesus of Nazareth. Within a few verses, one has the sensation of having been fairly swept along in a crescendo of excitement. John the Baptist has appeared on the scene and gathered crowds who respond to his persuasive preaching. We hear about “forgiveness of sins” (1:4), but are teased along—perhaps being expected to know what this forgiveness should look like, or perhaps by the promise of what is yet to come. John promises that “there is one who is coming” (1:7). Yet when this someone does “come” in the very next verse, instead of inaugurating something new, this Jesus is also baptized, seemingly along with the rest. But it is soon clear that he is not like the rest. At his baptism a “voice happens from the heavens” and announces (however secretly within the narrative, though not a secret to the reader) divine favor and pleasure in the events that are taking place (“*you* are my beloved son,” 1:11). Then within a few verses this same one upon whom divine favor rests “comes” into Galilee and “preaches,” like John, but

⁷Witness the now famous contemporary inscription that imitates strikingly the language of Mark’s introduction in its reference to the “beginning” of the “good news”: “The birthday of this god was the beginning of the good news that came about for the world because of him”; *Oriens Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, 458; an inscription from Priene, as cited under “εὐαγγέλιον” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 402.

with a whole new content. He preaches about the “good news” of God and, as he calls to repentance and faith in this good news, announces that such is possible because “the right moment” has come to fulfillment and the “kingdom of God” has already arrived (1:14–15).

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We may not yet comprehend what the character of this “kingdom” might be. However, the compelling movement and language of this opening narrative have elicited excitement in us as readers. This may be the “beginning” of the story (1:1), but perhaps more importantly it is the beginning of new existence that will come about in the hearing of this story. In its very first word the story announces the “beginning” of the good news in a word deliberately reminiscent of the “beginning” of the whole story of God’s creative power familiar from the Genesis account: in the beginning God created (Gen 1:1). Then the theme of the creative presence and activity of God in this Jesus is impressed on the hearer in the narrative’s frequent repetition of the word “become/happen.” If in this story the kingdom of God has come near, then it is no accident when John the Baptizer “appears/happens” in the wilderness where God’s work of preparation will take place according to divine prophecy and precedent (1:4). It is further no accident when Jesus fulfills the promise of God’s preacher in the wilderness and “happens” to show up from Nazareth to be baptized by John (1:19). No accident when at this baptism a voice “happens” from heaven to pronounce a benediction on this agent and proclaimer of God’s kingdom (1:11). And no accident that, after calling all to a new life of repentance and faith, the first act of this preacher who suddenly appears alongside the Sea of Galilee is to call some brothers to follow him with the promise that something will “happen” to them also—they will “become,” “be made into,” ones who will be fishing for people (1:17).

DISCIPLESHIP: THE KINGDOM AT RISK—WILL THERE BE FOLLOWERS?

At Jesus’ call these new recruits immediately and impressively abandon their whole lives, even their father in the midst of mending nets, and then are ushered into a whirlwind ministry of healing. They are not even put off when they find that this ministry soon allies them with one whose authority for calling traditions into question is challenged by the religious leaders, or with one whose own relatives join the crowds who are beginning to say that his successful ministry is a sign that he is in league with the powers of Satan and darkness rather than a sign of God’s presence (Mark 1:21–3:35).

For, in spite of these challenges, this Jesus “begins to teach” in parables of

promise. He speaks about sowing seed—and then in private he explains to the disciples that the sowing has to do with the sowing of the word, a sowing that, in spite of appearances, will lead to a bountiful harvest (4:1–20). He further makes clear that this bountiful harvest is a picture of the kingdom of God, and that, however secret or hidden the nature of this kingdom might be, it is a “secret” of the kingdom of God that has been given to these disciples (4:10–12). In language reminiscent of the “happenings” of chapter one, Jesus now promises that “there is nothing hidden, except for the purpose of bringing it to light” (4:21–23). Much as it “happened” that Jesus came into Galilee, was baptized, and then called these disciples, now again to these ones who have “ears to hear” (4:23–25) the promise is given in a manner underscoring the power of Jesus’ call and promise that they would become a new community of fishers.

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The promise seems so clear. And yet, just when we hearers might be drawn with confidence into the promise, the story of these disciples seems to take a dark turn, not into the promised light but into hiddenness. Almost immediately we find the disciples at sea in the dark and in a storm (4:35–41). The “master” is tellingly asleep, and they are perishing. The master awakes only to state the ominous and obvious implications of their predicament. Even with the master at their side, they still languish in the dark, full of fear; he questions them painfully: “Are you not yet holding on in faith?” (4:40).

In the succeeding chapters (5–6), Jesus continues his healing career, casting out demons from a man among the tombs of death, delivering a woman from years of hemorrhaging, and even raising a young girl from the dead. His disciples follow along (6:1), and Jesus sends them out to imitate his own ministry with the power to proclaim repentance, to cast out demons, and to heal the sick (6:7–13). Even with the shadow of the death and burial of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod as their backdrop (6:14–29),⁸ the disciples still return to tell the master of their successful campaign, the cryptic narrative underscoring the hyperbole of their success in “everything” that they had done (6:30).

These disciples are at risk, but they do not yet know it. The mention of “an opportune time” for Herod’s revenge on John slips by their notice. They cannot anticipate that in much the same way an “opportune time” will occasion the death

⁸The story here is one of the longest in Mark, and certainly its intimations of ominous foreboding precisely at this stage of the story are intentional. Five times in this passage Herod is described as a “king” in a way anticipating the six times that Jesus will be so described in his way to the cross in chapter 15. And we are to be reminded that the way of this king (Jesus) will not be the way of the kings of the nations, but this king will take the way of suffering and death, the way of the servant (10:41–45).

of the son of the master of the vineyard (12:2)⁹ and will provide the sinister plotting in the story of the “opportune moment” for Jesus’ own betrayal and death (14:11).

In fact, “not knowing” seems to be more and more the main characteristic of this disciple band. In a strange irony, as readers now drawn into this story, we watch helplessly while those who are called in power and granted the secret of the kingdom seem more and more to miss the import of what is going on around them. They seem more and more to be losing their grip; it is as if the kingdom is slipping away. Though they are called to hear and to understand (4:10–12) and even promised that the hidden will be made known, they fail in what is for the narrative a significant requirement of discipleship: they fail to “understand.”¹⁰ Even though present when Jesus twice miraculously feeds the multitudes (6:31–44; 8:1–10), we hear that their hearts are hardened. In 6:52, at risk in the boat, their lack of understanding and their hardness of heart are specifically associated. Finally, in 8:17–21, as if a logjam has burst, Jesus floods them with talk not only of their lack of understanding, but of their lack of perception, of their hardened hearts, of eyes that do not see, of ears that do not hear, and then leaves them with one last desperate question: “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21).

HEARING THE PROMISE

Yes, in the hearing of this story, for these disciples and for all of us as hearers the matter of the “kingdom” is at risk. But as Donald Juel writes, it is not enough to know or hear that this is the case:

The solution to their problem is not reprimand, education or encouragement. They will require healing. Like demoniacs they are bound by a power beyond themselves. Someone will have to set them free.¹¹

The question is whether that occurs within the hearing of the story. Clearly at this point in the Gospel we experience both a crisis and a climax of the hearing of the good news. If there is to be a transformation of these disciples and us, it will be connected with the suffering and death of Jesus Messiah, the direction toward which the story now turns. Readers of Mark have long noted how the author has carefully and intentionally sandwiched three passion announcements by Jesus, now identified as the Son of Man, between two uniquely structured stories of the healing of a blind man (cf. 8:22–26; 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34; 10:46–52). In the verbal symmetry of Jesus’ question to the blind man in 8:23 (“he asked him”) to his question to the disciples in 8:27 (“he asked his disciples”), the questions “Do you see

⁹Mark’s story is replete with the image and symbolism of the “opportune time” of discipleship and of the way of the kingdom: it is there at its first announcement, and seems to dog the disciples’ story throughout: 1:15; 6:21; 6:31; 10:30; 11:13; 12:2; 13:23; 14:11.

¹⁰Five times in this section from chapter 4 through 8 the same verb is used (4:12; 6:52; 7:14; 8:17, 19) and never again in the rest of the Gospel. The verb (συνίημι) usually translated to “understand” more literally means to “put it all together” or to “comprehend.” The disciples seem unable to put all of these kingdom matters together; instead the reality of this new life of faith seems to slip between their fingers.

¹¹Juel, *Mark*, 186.

anything?” and “Who do people say that I am?”—questions of understanding and sight and of the identity of Jesus—are to be heard as interpreting one another. Thus the story’s presentation of authentic understanding and vision begins to unfold immediately after Peter’s bold and climactic confession: “You are the Messiah” (8:29). Like this first of the promissory announcements of the passion of Jesus, the succeeding sections too revolve around how these disciples will hear and understand and respond to this message. It is ironically disquieting when the hearers note that each of the promises of Jesus’ suffering and death is followed by a failure or misunderstanding of the disciples, coupled with Jesus’ further teaching on discipleship (8:32–38; 9:32–37; 10:35–45). At the end of the first of these sections—in what is in some ways the crucial center of the message of Mark for all hearers—Jesus makes an authoritative announcement to the disciples as he continues to speak the “word” (ὁ λόγος, 8:32)¹² to them, namely, “Truly I tell you there are some of those who are standing here who will never taste death until they see the kingdom of God already having come in power” (9:1). In this emphatic “word,” here at the center of the story, the promise of the kingdom and the question of the hearing of these disciples are brought together.

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The narrative began in 1:1 with the announcement that this story would be the narrative of the good news about this Jesus Messiah. In 1:14–15 Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand and called his hearers to a life of repentance and faith. The power of that message was clear in the immediate response of fisher folk to discipleship. After a dynamic ministry of preaching and healing, Jesus then sent these disciples out to imitate his ministry with the promise that the secret of the kingdom had been given to them and with the promise that even its secrecy was ready to be revealed (4:10–12). Now the Son of Man promises that those in his hearing will indeed soon see the kingdom already having come.¹³ After teaching these disciples about the way of the cross and servanthood on behalf of the other, Jesus heals Bartimaeus of his blindness and, as a new paradigm of both the promise and the reality of discipleship, Bartimaeus’s “faith has been his healing deliverance” and he “follows” Jesus “on the way” (10:52).

Yet it is clear to the hearer that such following will not happen automatically

¹²Many modern versions (NRSV for example) unfortunately miss this important reference to Jesus’ speaking the “word” of good news by omitting λόγος in their translation of 8:32.

¹³Morna Hooker (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999] 211) notes that more words of commentary have been spent on this particular promise of the kingdom in Mark than on any other verse of the Gospel. Apparently among the first to comment are the gospel writers Matthew and Luke, both of whom revise Mark’s story and Jesus’ promise at this point. In some sense they thus underscore its radicality and importance for Mark’s hearers.

or easily. From their call and their promise and their successful mission, the disciples progress to less and less understanding and even to hardness of heart. After the climax of Jesus' promise of the kingdom, the story moves inexorably to servanthood and the way of the cross. Peter will confess Jesus as the Messiah, but he will also immediately challenge the promised way of suffering and ultimately, in the midst of Jesus' trial, will deny the master. These disciples will need a kind of understanding and vision that is described as "thinking" the way of God rather than the way of humanity (8:33).¹⁴ Such is the promise held out to these disciples as to what they will see.

But the apprehension of that promise, at least to judge by the disciples, is always at risk. And so the hearer of this story is invited into the story, but also invited into a story in which discipleship means to live with ambiguity. For disciples the promise of the kingdom is not a matter of control or security but of the persuasive power of a message and a person—the message of the good news about the one who calls, the one who goes to suffering and death and resurrection, the one who then calls all who wait on his return to live in watchful confidence that in him the kingdom has already come to us (13:32–37).

ON BECOMING HEARERS

At the end of Mark's story the charge and promise comes to the women at the tomb who have just heard the announcement of Jesus' resurrection. In their unsettling silence another group of disciples would seem at first glance again to have failed. But precisely in this seeming failure, the story reaches beyond the confines of the Gospel to entrust the good news to the hearing and experience of hearers and readers through the centuries. Through the persuasive power of this story, in the dynamic of hearing the good news, we are called and sent with the message of God's transformative and healing power. Through this story the Spirit once again engages the hearer, makes us to "become" disciples, just like those alongside the sea. We are made disciples through healing, repentance, and faith, that is, not through some power that resides in us, but by the transforming power of this one who comes to suffer and die. By the power of the resurrection God continues to shape us as faithful hearers and to bring to expression the promise of the kingdom in our midst. ⊕

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¹⁴The key Greek word translated as "thinking" is φρόνησις, but the meaning of this word is much more broad than thinking. It is the same word that Paul uses repeatedly in Philipppians (especially 2:5–13) to describe the model of Christ and his role as suffering servant, a kind of model that imagines the whole of one's life—body, soul, and mind—unified, renewed, and transformed into a kind of new creation, in which "willing and doing" are in harmony. For fuller comments on this word and its implications, see my article on the same word in the context of Galatians: "The Poetry of the Spirit: Willing and Doing in Galatians 5 and 6," *Word & World* 20/3 (2000) 290–298.