

“Mark” Time 345

These studies are based on the readings from the Gospel according to Mark chosen for the revised Common Lectionary for Year B, from chapters 3, 4 and 5, but they can be used at any time of the year and any year.

1. Mark 3:20-35 Family Dynamics and Family Demonic
2. Mark 4:26-34 Defiant Hope
3. Mark 4:35-41 Jesus Weatherman?
4. Mark 5:21-43 Jesus and Women

You can do all four studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from Mark, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Before we start:

Meet Mark!

Like the other gospels, Mark contains no information about the author. When we move beyond what it actually says to ask when it was written and who wrote it, we are on shaky ground. Mark was probably written about 40 years after the death of Jesus, so around 70 CE. Fifty years after it was written a church leader in Greece, called Papias, is reported to have claimed that the gospel was written by Mark and that Mark was Peter's interpreter. Papias wrote about the other gospels, too, but unfortunately some of his information seems to be unreliable. The problem with the claim that Mark was Peter's interpreter is that other gospels tell us things about Peter which differ from what

Mark says. There was a tendency to make claims about the authority of the gospels by linking their authorship to key figures at the beginning of the Christian movement and perhaps that accounts for why we have the reference to Peter. While there was a John Mark who played a minor role in the beginning of the movement, the name Mark was very common – like the name “John” today.

Perhaps it was someone called Mark who wrote the gospel. We simply cannot know.

What we do have is the gospel itself, so that is our starting point.

For further information about Mark, see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/mark.html>

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Session One

Mark 3:20-35 – Family Dynamics and Family Demonic

Our reading has been likened to a sandwich. The top and the bottom layers of the sandwich are about family and in between is something about demons. Mark likes making “sandwiches”. We meet another one in Session Four.

Let’s start with the middle part: 3:22-30.

Welcome to the world of demons and evil spirits!

In the ancient world people believed that demons or evil spirits were to blame for mental illness, but also for sickness generally, and even for the weather!

There was an ancient myth which told of angels coming down to earth and having sex with women, who then gave birth to giants. It is referred to briefly in Genesis 6.



The fuller version of the myth found in the 3rd century BCE Jewish writing, 1 Enoch, tells how the giants fought and killed each other and then out of their corpses came evil spirits, half divine and half human. They were given the names of common illnesses. They were like personalised viruses.

If you lived in that world and wanted to help people, you needed to set people free from their demons. Today we don’t see viruses as personal and we understand mental illness differently, but our goals are the same: to bring healing and freedom.

Jesus was a healer and exorcist, using the various methods of his day – sometimes through touch, sometimes through using substances, sometimes through words. In his opening chapter Mark has John the Baptist announce that Jesus would baptise with the Spirit and so bring God’s rule (1:8, 14-15).

Mark reports that this is what Jesus went on to do: to water, to flood, to baptise his world with God’s Spirit, setting people free from evil spirits and so making sure God and God’s love rule. That’s how people understood what he was doing.

Jesus announced the “kingdom of God” and that meant: liberating people from the powers that oppressed them, so God rules and not destructive and harmful powers. The assumption behind this is that God cares about people and wants them to be free.

So Jesus set about helping people to be free from what bound them. His first action in Mark after calling some disciples to join him was an exorcism, setting a man free from evil spirits. He also had a bigger vision, that, one day people would be free also from the political powers that oppressed them. In the “kingdom of God” God’s ways of love rule.

In the middle of the sandwich Mark reports that some religious authorities from Jerusalem (“scribes”) accused Jesus of casting out demons because he was in league with the chief demon, Beelzebul, who could also be called Satan. It is interesting that they didn’t deny that Jesus cast out demons. Their accusation, however, made no sense, for, as Jesus points out in the story, it would be self-defeating for the forces of evil to be divided against themselves. Jesus then uses the illustration of a burglar. If someone is at home, the burglar first has to tie up that person.

Returning to the scribes’ accusation, Jesus warns of the seriousness of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Resisting and rejecting God’s Spirit which seeks to bring love and forgiveness means cutting yourself off from love and forgiveness. That’s what the scribes were in danger of doing. Some people have read this warning as meaning that they might one day commit such a bad sin that it can never be forgiven. That would hardly make sense.

Many people have resisted and rejected love and forgiveness, but then later ceased doing so and opened themselves to God’s Spirit. We can block ourselves off from forgiveness or open ourselves to it. The meat in the sandwich is: what Jesus is doing is indeed what God’s Spirit is doing and we need to let God rule and be free.

In the middle of the sandwich Jesus has been talking about demonic power. For us that’s a strange way of explaining people’s needs. We use other explanations. But we share the same concern to show love and compassion and help set people free.

The top and bottom layer of the sandwich are about a different kind of power, a power closer to home, the power of the family. Mark does not have the stories we find in the other gospels which paint a very positive picture of Jesus’ family and especially his mother, Mary. Instead he paints them as lacking understanding of what Jesus was trying to do. His family “went out to restrain him, for they were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind’” (3:21). They thought he was deranged. That was another way of saying that they, too, like the authorities, thought an evil spirit had taken control of him.

It is possible to read “for they were saying” as referring not to the family but to others, so some translations add the word, “people”: “People were saying”. It makes it sound a little less shocking to say that the family didn’t say Jesus was possessed, but the more likely reference is to Jesus’ family. They certainly think he needs restraining.

The bottom layer then has the family, “his mother and his brothers”, coming to restrain him (3:31-36). The story has the crowd refer also to his sisters, which is then taken up in Jesus’ response. This passage has been an embarrassment for those who believe that Mary remained a virgin, because it clearly contradicts that view. Attempts to explain brothers and sister as cousins and not siblings are unconvincing.

It is much more important to recognise in this anecdote a serious challenge to the power of the family. In Jesus’ day family was very powerful and the firstborn male was expected to marry and produce offspring and so keep the household going for the future. Households were the key to the economy, the basis for health, welfare and survival. Stability was paramount. Family was the top

priority. This made change difficult, for it meant protecting the family's interests over against others and not much sharing beyond the family.

Jesus put his commitment to radical change ahead of family priorities. He challenged some to join him in demonstrably stepping away from their families but challenged others to stay in their families but with a very different set of priorities. Compassion for the needy must take priority over protection of family interests. That is God's will and people who come together to share these values are a new kind of family.

It is quite shocking that Mark puts Jesus' own family alongside the authorities and effectively depicts both as blaspheming against God. Mark echoes the story in 6:4 where he has Jesus refer to prophets being rejected by their own family as similar to what is happening to him.

In our communities we know about mental and other forms of illness, but describe them differently. This means that what we take out of our cross-cultural encounter with Mark's text is not belief in demons, much as there are still some cultures today who share such assumptions. It is rather that the will of God is for people to be brought to health. We do not demonise illness. We do not personalise viruses, but they are nonetheless real. We observe out of character manifestations of mental illness, but understand the forces at work differently. Some of these we might recognise as the impact of families and see healing as liberation from that impact.

Family power continues to be a challenge, especially where it leads to greed and accumulation of wealth at the expense of making others poor. Family power can also be something in the mind, where real or perceived put-downs by parents keep undermining people until they face up to them and set them aside. In the name of family and family values good and evil can be done. To be a follower of Jesus means to commit to a higher priority.

For reflection and sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What connections can you make between this passage and your own experience of family or observations of the experience of others?
3. How do you think insights from this passage might influence or shape how you do things in your community?

Mark 4:26-34 – Defiant Hope

Jesus told parables. So Mark has put some of them together in Mark 4 as a sample of Jesus' teaching. All the parables in Mark 4 are about seeds. That was probably why they were told together even before Mark – easier to remember.

In a similar way in chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 he tells five stories about when people challenged what Jesus was doing. These stories, too, probably came to him as a collection. Mark did not have a c.v. of Jesus, nor did the other gospel writers, so they had to weave all the material they had into a narrative sequence which needed to be made up. This is why the gospel writers felt free sometimes to change things about.

The most famous parable in Mark 4 comes in the first half: the parable of the sower (4:3-9). It is optimistic: despite all the difficulties, some seeds will germinate and there will be a harvest. In some ways it is a defiant statement of hope. The sower sows. Birds gobble up the seed. Some falls on shallow soil or among too many weeds. Hopeless? But it's not. The grain harvest was so important. Around Galilee there are lots of wheat farms. Harvest became a symbol of life and hope.

Our reading begins with a parable (4:26-29), which also echoes this theme of hope. People back then, hearing Mark's gospel read out loud, would have had the earlier parable of the sower in their minds as they heard this one. We understand a good deal more than they did about how and why seeds germinate and grow, but it doesn't change our sense of wonder.

In many cultures and religions the miracle of new growth out of what seems dead is a symbol of hope. In the story of Jesus, himself, it reminds us of his death followed by his resurrection. Our Easter celebrations pick up traditional imagery about new life: Easter eggs, Easter bunnies, and in the northern hemisphere: spring following winter.

If Jesus' message was that when the kingdom of God comes, love rules, then what we have here is faith and hope. In faith we believe that God loves. In hope we trust that love is always worthwhile, even when all we see seems to say the opposite.

The parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32) is full of the exaggerations of story-telling. There are, of course, much smaller seeds and much bigger shrubs, but the point is clear: from little things big things grow.

The reference to birds nesting under the mustard bush probably reminded people of how some Old Testament writers spoke of Gentiles (other nations) as birds.



We know that Jesus shared the hope of many of his fellow Jews that one day there would be peace in the world and all the nations would come together and be as one. They would beat their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning hooks and come to Jerusalem to learn the ways of God.

The parable of the mustard seed appears also in Matthew and Luke. They seem to have known a version where the mustard bush gets turned into a tree for the birds to build their nests in.

The message of God's love is a message of hope. It's believing that even when it is hard and nothing seems to change, love is worth it. It is alive. It will bear fruit. We can trust this. We never need to give up and choose defeat or worse still, anger and hate.

In 4:33-34 Mark suggests that the parables worked like riddles or jokes. Some people got them; some people didn't. The disciples were given explanations, but in the rest of Mark we read that they often didn't understand what Jesus was about. It's like that with love. It's not about intellectual understanding and explanations. It's about openness to learn and change. When we are open to it, we will have those penny-dropped experiences, where we can really hear things, those "Ah ha!" moments of revelation.

For reflection and sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Have you had experiences where hope seemed to flounder? What helped you recover hope?
3. How do we recognize the kingdom of God when we see it? What makes the Kingdom real for you?

Mark 4:35-41 – Jesus Weatherman?

Mark's world was a world of demons. Viruses were personified and treated as personal beings. Diseases had personal names. Mental illness was demon possession. And the weather? Also conjured up by demons. So when people heard this story about Jesus rebuking the wind and telling the sea, "Peace! Be still!", they knew what it meant. In their terms Jesus was demonstrating his power over the demons.

We understand weather quite differently. I have been on a boat on the sea of Galilee on a trip sailing calmly to Capernaum on the northern shore from Tiberias on the west, when quite suddenly we had a sea breeze sweeping in from the Mediterranean Sea barely 30 km away. It was no storm, but it rocked the boat.

Of course, I jumped up and told the wind to stop (but it didn't!).



Whatever actual experience may lie behind this anecdote, it soon became a story designed to promote adulation of Jesus, and from there a story rich in symbolism.

For some, to change the weather was sheer miracle, a kind of magic to change the weather, and some still see it that way, even though they may not share the storyteller's belief in demons in the same way. Magic makes the story a one-off wonder with no lasting importance other than as something told to impress and to win admirers for Jesus.

Using such one-off wonders like that soon became problematic because it reduced the message about Jesus to the level of stories told in the market places of propaganda. People told such stories about competing teachers and even emperors. Who could do the best miracle?

As a person of his time Paul, for instance, did not question such miracles, but he certainly criticised miracle-based faith, because it pushed love out of the centre of the gospel. His famous chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13 makes this clear. "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (13:2).

Similarly Matthew has Jesus confront this kind of faith with the words:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" ²³Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

Matt 7:21-23.

John's gospel similarly reports that many believed in the name of Jesus because of his miracles but quite bluntly declares that Jesus did not believe in them (2:23-25), and then goes on to tell of Nicodemus as a prime example. He needs to be completely changed, to be born again, born from above, if he really wants to see (3:1-3).

The miracle-propaganda approach created the image of a golden age and set Jesus back in history as a mythical hero of old. Of course, it would be great to be able to change the weather. Imagine a course on weather control for ministers and lay preachers! Even in New Testament times no one expected believers to have such powers or, at least, we have no reports that they did. So the trend was to try to find something more in the stories than simply the wonder element. Thus the story became symbolic of the great struggle between the forces of evil and the force of love and this may have been what generated such stories in the first place.

Land-locked peoples often saw the sea as a serious source of danger. In mythology and legend it was seen as the source of evil powers. Israel had legends about crossing the sea on dry land and crossing the Jordan similarly. So the sea was more than dangerous in a literal sense. It was the deep abyss where monsters and evil forces lived. The writer of the Book of Revelation even hopes for a day when "the sea shall be no more" (21:1). The story of the Gerasene demoniac, next to come in Mark, has the demons enter the pigs and rush headlong into the sea – because that is where demons belong. The anecdote about Jesus walking over the sea also served a highly symbolic purpose: to show Jesus' power over the deep. Matthew's creativity has Peter told he can do this, too. He and the church are to have such power.

In this sense the story of calming the storm is a story asserting that love will overcome all that is launched against it. In reality storms and turbulence don't cease when you share God's life and love. At most there is the sense of peace which comes through confidence and trust, but that is more like what we read in Psalm 23 about God as a shepherd. "Though I walk through the shadow of death, I shall fear no ill. Your rod and staff are my comfort". Jesus experienced the distress of Gethsemane and the cross. There was no magical escape.

"We're all in the same boat" is a common image of solidarity. Our story has helped the church reflect on oneness and so the boat became part of the symbol of the World Council of Churches and is also an element in the symbol of the Uniting Church. We don't believe in demons controlling the weather nor in our being able to control it through some spiritual power. That is the language of myth. But we do believe in hope and trust and that love is always greater than hate.

For reflection and sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why was miracle-based faith a problem in the ancient world and what problems might it pose today?
3. Weather provides us with a wide range of images: which ones work for you?

Session Four

Mark 5:21-43 – Jesus and Women

Here is another of Mark's sandwiches. We had one in Mark 3. This one starts with the story of a 12 year old girl who is very ill (5:21-24) and returns to her at the end (5:35-43). In between – the meat in the sandwich – is the story of the woman who touched Jesus (5:25-34).

Like many of Mark's stories, these stories are much more than reports of miracles, whatever might have happened in the history behind them. They are also rich with themes that go far beyond history.

Both are stories about women. People hearing these stories would have been aware of some things which gave these stories special meaning, but which we no longer share. They have to do with Jewish purity laws, which are nothing to do with purity in a moral sense. Rather they are about ritual or ceremonial cleanness, which people needed in order to participate in worship activities.

Traditionally, a woman after childbirth or during menstruation or bleeding (such as the woman in the story) is considered "unclean" and she can make other things or people unclean if she touches them. This was just part of the cycle of life in a family, but it becomes a problem if there is ongoing bleeding. That would have made her an outcast. The story assumes this and so enters forbidden territory when the unclean woman touches Jesus, or at least his clothes.



The story also assumes that instead of the contamination passing from the woman to Jesus, the opposite happened and he was aware of it. Her haemorrhaging ceased. Whether something like this really happened and how it happened we cannot know. Faith that one will be healed does sometimes fulfil itself. Ordinarily the woman would still be required to undergo ritual washing, as the leper had to, whom Jesus healed according to 1:40-45, but that detail is missing. The main focus is that she was made well and so restored to society.

Enabling people to belong and no longer be outcasts was a key element of caring and played a significant role in Jesus' ministry. Some have suggested that the story was told especially to celebrate Jesus' generous and caring attitude towards women. While Jesus' choice of males to be the core disciples reflected the norms of the day, it is also clear that he had female disciples. Their regular days of being "unclean" were never a barrier to some of them belonging in his travelling group and some went on to become significant leaders.

The reason why women were seen by most as inferior to men in the ancient world rests on a male fallacy. The fallacy was maintained because most women were married and were married when they

were young to men who were nearly twice their age. They were therefore less mature and grown up than their husbands and men generally jumped to the conclusion that women are by nature inferior and so leadership was nearly always exercised by men not women. This is despite the fact that there were situations where widows had to manage households and estates, for instance, on their own, often with notable success.

We are still in the process of dismantling male fallacies about women. But impressive stories of success in our own day, especially since contraception added more flexibility for women, are helping us debunk that myth.

Legends told of the prophets, Elijah and Elisha, bringing dead children back to life and there are indications that these stories provided a model for stories of Jesus doing the same. The story here of the girl who was seriously ill and subsequently died is told with drama. The storyteller keeps Jesus' word in his Aramaic language, "Talitha cum", but then translates it. This is a little strange, but reflects a tendency in such stories to depict healers as using magic words. Perhaps the storyteller was thinking of making his story sound like those of other such healers, while clearly knowing it was not a magic formula.

So Jesus is like Elijah and Elisha. He is also like Elisha when he feeds a crowd miraculously. There was a very early trend to depict Jesus as a miracle worker and we are left wondering sometimes what was reality and what was creative imagination. Portraying Jesus as being like one of the great prophets was a way of claiming that the same God who was in them was also in Jesus.

Purity laws play a role also in the story of the girl. She died and so as a corpse was also unclean. It is not a sin to touch someone who is unclean or to be touched by them. Some things had to be done which involved such contact, such as preparing a corpse for burial, but one should normally avoid any unnecessary touching, if one can. Again in this story, instead of Jesus being contaminated – which would mean he would need ritual cleansing – his power transmits to her and she comes back to life.

While there are other stories of Jesus raising people from the dead, clearly based on the stories of the Elijah and Elisha, the story of the raising of Lazarus, told in John's gospel, chapter 11, stands alone. Of course we don't know how long Lazarus survived. He may have died years later or just days later. In telling the story the gospel's author turns attention beyond the miracle itself to a deeper more symbolic meaning: Jesus brought people from death to life in a very different sense, as they came to embrace God's love and start life anew, being born again.

These two stories may well have been in sandwich form before they came to Mark and may well have been stories treasured especially by women disciples. Mark does something in addition with them that points to a wider concern. He has just told a story about Jesus going into foreign territory in the first half of chapter 5, the healing of the mentally ill man at Gerasa, understood as demon possessed. The story has many elements which fitted Jewish attitudes towards the Gentile non-Jewish world: pigs are unclean; cemeteries are unclean places; the man was possessed by an unclean spirit; the sea is where unclean spirits belong. But despite all of that, Jesus goes there and the man is

healed. Mark uses the story to celebrate that the gospel of God's love is there not only for Jews, but also for non-Jews.

The stories sandwiched together in the second half of Mark 5 take place not in Gentile, foreign territory, but in Jewish territory. The girl is the synagogue leader's daughter, already giving the story a very Jewish tone. It may well have been Mark, himself, who then dropped the other clue: the number 12, traditionally used to symbolise Israel with its 12 tribes. For the girl is described as being 12 years old and the woman as having the haemorrhage for 12 years. Mark knew that people hearing his gospel read would hardly miss the point that these two stories celebrate the gospel of God's love going to Israel. So Mark has created two panels in chapter 5. The first panel celebrates the good news of the gospel going to the wider world and the second panel celebrates the good news going to Israel. Later Mark will use two panels like this again when he describes the two stories where crowds are miraculously fed: 5000 in Jewish territory with 12 baskets of loaves left over symbolising Israel and 4000 in Gentile territory with 7 baskets of loaves left over symbolising the wider world. The message, coded in this way, is very clear: the gospel of God's love is there for all, Jew and Gentile, and the reading we have been looking at reminds us that it is also for both women and men.

For reflection and sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What do you think it would have been like to be a woman in Jesus' day?
3. What do you see as the barriers of discrimination in today's world and in your setting?