

SESSION FOUR The Wisdom and the Power (4:1-6:33)

Mark gives literary coherence to this part of his narrative when the people in Nazareth ask Jesus "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands?" (6:2) In 4:1-34, Mark writes about the wisdom; in 4:35-5:43, he writes about the power. Jesus demonstrates his wisdom by teaching in parables; his power by stilling a storm, casting out evil, healing physical illness, and giving life to a little girl thought dead. His disciples having experienced both the wisdom and power are now ready to be sent out on their first missionary journey (6:7-33).

Questions for reflection as you read:

1. Why did Jesus choose telling parables as his favorite way to teach?
2. What were Jesus and Mark saying about those whose faith was like the seed broadcast on rocky ground that quickly sprouted but, when the sun came out, quickly "withered away"? What is the deep soil that makes the plants grow?
3. How would Mark's first audience have heard his description of Jesus's "deeds of power"? God had not saved their sisters and brothers from the violence of the emperor, Nero. Moreover, they would have suffered through natural catastrophe, illness, and premature death like any other people.
4. As a literary technique, Mark often tells a story within a story. Here he frames the inside story of the healing of the woman with the twelve-year vaginal bleeding with the outside story of the raising of Jairus's daughter. What is the relationship between the outer story and the inner story?
5. Why can Jesus perform no "deed of power" in Nazareth? What is he able to do there?
6. How exactly do the disciples try to minister on their first missionary journey?

I. THE WISDOM OF JESUS (4:1-34)

1. Introduction In chapter 4, Jesus tells and explains the Parable of the Sower (1-20), offers his sayings about the lamp that cannot be hid (21-23) and "the one who has" (24 and 25), and then he tells the Parables of the Productive Earth (26-29) and the Mustard Seed (30-32). In the Gospel Message of St. Mark, the long-esteemed R. H. Lightfoot has written of the parables and sayings in this chapter of Mark: "These parables all seem intended to give the Lord's own explanation of the meaning of his ministry. Varied as the parables and the sayings are, they all strike one note: ultimate success in spite of manifold hindrances." This is exactly what the disciples need to learn before they move out to serve in a world often hostile to them. It is also what Mark's audience needs to learn as they spread the faith in a similarly hostile world. In spite of many hindrances, they will succeed! This blazing optimism gives the sleepiest

churches hope!

In its broad meaning, a parable is a story that points to the truth, participates in the truth, but is not a straightforward statement of the truth. Rabbis at the time of Jesus told parables primarily to clarify or prove a point of Mosaic Law. Jesus, however, uses his parables to tell how the kingdom of God (or more exactly "the reign of God") is breaking into the world. The parables point to how God acts in the world and how God expects disciples to walk in the Way, on their journey. The parables call for repentance, faith, love, and obedience.

Jesus takes his stories from what we would call secular life, the one exception being The Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The implications of this are enormous. It meant for later Christians, as well as for Jesus's disciples, that they should look for the reign of God breaking in, in places quite outside of religious circles, as well as inside.

Matthew and Luke record most of the parables; only five are in Mark (the three in Chapter 4 and 12:1-12 and 13:32-37). In the interconnected Mediterranean world, it is hard to believe that Mark did not have access to the other parables of Jesus, at least many of them. He evidently omits those parables either because he believes they would interrupt the hurried movement of his narrative or because he was trying to supplement with his narrative a handbook of the teachings and sayings of Jesus. Scholars speculate that such a handbook was in use in the early church, although no copies of it have survived. They have named this hypothetical handbook Q (for *Quelle*, the German word for "source"). If such a handbook did exist at the time of Mark, it would have contained the parables of Jesus common to Luke and Matthew and such teachings as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke).

Jesus used parables as his favorite way of teaching in order that people think long and hard about what he was saying and discuss at length what he meant by each of the stories. From the reflection and discussion would come great insights on how one might change one's life and so claim for oneself the Kingdom of God. If Jesus had wanted his followers to think only one thing in response to his parables, he would have spoken that one thing directly and concisely, as he did elsewhere, such as in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). We discuss the parables further in Session #12.

2. The Sower of the Seed (4:1-20) Mark wants to make sure that the Word of God that brings in the Kingdom not fall on rocky ground, where the soil is thin, where no deep root can grow. If his church was going to outlast Nero and his successors and their whimsical cruelty, its members had to be strong and thoroughly committed, like seed growing in rich, deep soil. Just in case his congregations missed the point, Mark quotes Jesus as interpreting the parable this way: "And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away." Mark's church in Rome and churches elsewhere cannot consist of fair-weather, hesitant Christians, who quickly sprout but when the going gets rough quickly wither away.

When the Jesus of St. Mark says that he doesn't want outsiders to turn and be forgiven, he means he doesn't want them to turn and be forgiven too soon. No cheap grace here! He does indeed want them to turn and to be forgiven, accepting the Good News of the kingdom when the time is right. Later in the same chapter (just nine verses later), he says, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lamp stand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Suddenly a lamp is lit! One of the reasons for the secrecy and for certain mysterious sayings, such as the paraphrase from Isaiah (in verse 4:12) is that Jesus and Mark want the followers in the Way to develop their faith slowly but firmly, one step at a time. Becoming a Christian is a process, a journey; it is not something that happens all at once. Just as Jesus reveals the great secret of the kingdom gradually, his followers must respond gradually. This way they will grow like seeds sown in rich, deep soil. No Roman emperor or anyone or anything else in all creation will then be able to interfere with their growth and separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (See Romans 8:37-39.)

3. The Productive Earth and the Mustard Seed (4:26-34) It is helpful to ask how Mark's first audience would have heard these two parables. Some thoughts: First, they would probably have heard that it is not all up to us. Their congregations seemed so small, so powerless before the grandeur and the massive power of Rome. They knew that they, by themselves, were quite helpless to bring in the kingdom of God. Jesus, however, was teaching them to believe in a big God, whose power far exceeded even that of Nero. Our job is to plant the seed of God's love the best way we can. God will make the seed grow in spite of

manifold hindrances, in spite of the persecutions-maybe even because of them. In the words of one early church leader: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

As the Christian sisters and brothers heard these parables retold in someone's home or maybe underground in the Catacombs, many must have thought and maybe said aloud, "You know, right now my faith is about the size of a mustard seed. How am I going to remain true to this congregation of believers if the Roman soldiers break into my home and question me?" Later in the evening or perhaps the next day as people discussed this parable with family members, they may have concluded: "But maybe it's all right that my faith seems so small. You have to begin somewhere. What is most important is that the seed has been planted, and we know that it can and will grow, that God will make it grow."

Those in the churches St. Mark was writing to must also have thought about their beloved Simon Peter, the late Bishop of Rome. To hear him described by Brother Mark, he didn't seem any better off at his sowing than they were. Peter's faith at its sowing was also about the size of a mustard seed. He was the disciple who missed the point most and then went on to deny Jesus three times. And yet, he became the first bishop of Rome, and he also died a most courageous death, unflinching in his faith as he was nailed to a cross-head-down. If Peter could become what he was, an inspiration to all of the early Christians, maybe there was hope for all those who were trying to follow in the Way and had so far to go!

II. THE POWER OF JESUS (Mark 4:35-6:6)

1. Introduction Having been instructed in the wisdom of Jesus (the parables), the twelve disciples are now ready to be shown his power, even more than he has shown so far. In this section, Jesus stills a storm (showing power over destructive forces of nature), casts a legion of demons out of a man (showing power over evil), heals a woman who touches his garment (showing power over physical illness), and raises a little girl from a sleep of death (showing power over death itself).

Mark's readers could learn from this section that they need not fear. In the face of natural disaster, the evil persecutions of Rome, their own physical infirmity, or even death itself, Jesus would be with them through it all giving them strength and deep healing (salvation) that would see them through. The section concludes at Nazareth, where Jesus can perform no miracle.

In Mark's view the miracles did happen. In the first-century world, they were regarded as great, unusual, awe-inspiring events but not as impossible, in our understanding of that word. With our still-popular Newtonian view that the universe operates on unchanging principles, it is hard for many of us to understand and appreciate the miracles. (Some schooled in the so-called "new physics," such as quantum physics, do not have this problem.) How could Jesus calm a storm with a word? How could he drive two thousand demons into a herd of swine, or heal a woman who touched his cloak? Or raise a little girl from the dead? For Mark and other writers of the Christian Scripture, however, the most important thing about the miracles was that they testified to the power of God in Jesus and challenged his disciples and disciples of any age to claim that power as their own. (See the "personal connections" examples in Supplement C.)

2. Jesus stills a storm (4:35-41) After a full day of teaching by the Sea of the Galilee, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." The Sea of Galilee, although only a few miles across, is known for storms that arise suddenly and catch sailors unaware. Now the disciples had to ask themselves if they were willing to leave a place where they felt secure and go out into the potentially treacherous waters of Galilee at night, into predominantly Gentile territory.

Jesus and his disciples will cross the Sea of Galilee many times. For them and for Mark the Sea of Galilee becomes a symbol of that which separates the insiders (the Jews) from the outsiders (the Gentiles). Each crossing brings its own danger. Jesus, however, does not hesitate to move out into potentially hostile places through potentially treacherous waters.

Even though it meant leaving a place where they felt secure, the disciples heeded Jesus's command and followed him. Exhausted from the day's work, Jesus lay down in the boat and went to sleep. Suddenly a terrible squall hurled itself at the boat. Waves beat upon the bow, water poured in over the gunwales. Frantic, the disciples roused Jesus from his sleep. "Master," they said, "we are sinking! Do you not care?" (New English Bible) Jesus stood up, rebuked the wind (much as he had rebuked the evil spirits), and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" The wind dropped, and there was a dead calm.

To the disciples at this point in the narrative, Jesus is only a man. He has called them to be a special inner circle, has taught them his wisdom and is now showing them his power, and yet they still have no idea who he really is. "Who is this?" they ask. The woman who touches his garment will tremble with fear when she grasps what is happening to her (5:35). The people who witness the raising of the dead child will be overcome with amazement (5:42). "Where did this man get all this?" the people at Nazareth will ask. "What is this wisdom that has been given to him? . . . Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?" (6:2, 3) Jesus does not fit into any category. People simply do not know how to respond to him. In Jesus Christ, Superstar, Mary Magdalene speaks for most who knew Jesus: "I don't know how to love him."

3. Jesus casts out demons from Legion (5:1-20) The non-Jews (or Gentiles) who live on the other side of the Sea of Galilee in this story come from the inland city of Gerasa. Somewhat cryptically, Mark further develops his theme of universality. Jesus has come to be with all people-lepers, tax collectors, sinners, the 'Am ha' aretz, and now the Gentiles. Crossing the lake back and forth symbolizes the universal mission of Jesus-so important for the audience to whom Mark wrote. (See also 5:21, 6:45, and 8:31.) The feuding Gentiles and Jews in the early church needed to know what Jesus was up to. His crisscrossed journeys from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other were like thread stitching fabric together.

Arriving on the other side of the lake, Jesus and his disciples stepped ashore. Right away they encountered a man possessed by many demons. He could no longer be controlled; even chains were useless. The destructive power that possessed him was so strong that no one could master him. Unceasingly, day and night he would cry aloud among the tombs and on the hillsides and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus in the distance, he ran and flung himself down before him, shouting loudly, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." We see in the man possessed the extent of the power of evil in the world, the devil who has "come down" (Revelation 12:12) to vent his fury, knowing that his time is short. The evil is too powerful for chains to subdue; it is also self-destructive-it cuts itself with stones.

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" In the Biblical world, knowledge of a name gives one some power over the person named. The name often describes the nature of the person and so reveals something of the essence of that person. Sarah laughed when she was told that she would have a child in her old age, but the baby was born and named in Hebrew yishaq (Isaac), which means "child of the laugh" (and is meant to sound like someone laughing). The unfortunate children of Hosea and his adulterous wife Gomer were named Unloved and No-People-of-Mine. The name of Jesus (in Hebrew Joshua) means "God saves." Jesus will later give Simon the name of Peter, which in Greek means "rock," because in spite of his early wavering he will become the cornerstone of the Church. Knowing someone's name is a powerful way of knowing who that person really is.

In this pericope, the possessed man told Jesus that his name was Legion. (A Roman legion consisted of five to six thousand men.) He was saying that he was many people; his mind was scattered like a flock of sheep that has no shepherd. He had lost the power to integrate his thoughts and feelings; the destructive, chaotic power of Satan had taken over. Jesus began the healing process by "naming the demon," by surfacing the particular problem, thus gaining power over it. (A personal note: In a previously life when I served as a pastoral counselor, colleagues would speak of the necessity for a client or patient to "name the demon," come to terms with the underlying problem that was causing a particular difficulty. Then the healing could begin.)

Now there happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside. Jesus gave the unclean spirits leave, and they came out of the man and went into the pigs. Then the herd, two thousand strong, rushed over the edge of the hill into the lake and were drowned. The slaughter of the pigs is much more of a problem for the modern reader than it was for Mark's audience. They would know that for Jews swine are "unclean" animals, their meat a taboo. Besides, it was probably clear to Mark's audience that the story about the pigs was intentionally fanciful. The point is not how many pigs were killed but rather just how powerful a force evil is.

Up to this point in the narrative the scribes have said that Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul; his family has said that he was out of his mind. Now the people who witness the exorcism of Legion are afraid. They beg Jesus to leave. What are they afraid of? Perhaps it is the kind of fear of the unknown, when one suddenly realizes that life has not been written out in advance but is quite unpredictable.

Legion, who lived in the tombs, howling unceasingly like a jackal, must have been viewed as a non-person. Suddenly he appears "clothed and in his right mind." Even though the exorcism is a life-giving one, it scares the people half to death. As the Israelites found out in their forty years' wilderness journey over a thousand years before, there was security in Egypt even though they were slaves. There is also security in living lives that are fixed in predictability, even though earthbound.

After the healing, Jesus asked the man called Legion to speak of what the Lord in his mercy had done. (In the context, "Lord" refers to God, not to Jesus himself.) The man missed the point. He went off instead and spread the news of what Jesus, a man, had done. Mark is showing that the purpose of miracles is to testify to the power of God, a power all followers in the Way can make their own. Here Jesus emphasizes the active, healing nature of God, not himself. He is trying to convince people not to depend on him-he will soon die-but rather to depend on God's power that will never die. The man called Legion is not ready for that. Though healed, Legion is still earthbound.

4. Jesus and Jairus (5:21-24, 35-43) On returning from the other side of the lake, the Sea of Galilee, Jesus once again drew a great crowd. In the crowd was a man named Jairus, who was president of a synagogue, most likely the one at Capernaum. He was probably present to make sure Jesus was not going to cause any trouble. Up till this moment in the narrative, no one with any position of authority has shown Jesus any respect or has asked anything from him. Calling on his own special authority, Jesus is a threat to those in positions of authority. Remember that, at this point in the narrative, Pharisees (leading Jewish authorities) were off with the Herodians (leading Roman authorities) planning how to destroy the peaceful itinerant healer and prophet.

Standing there in the crowd, Jairus looked at Jesus, a man of compassion and power, and he thought of his little daughter back home, at the point of death. He wondered how it would be to have her well again. As he listened to Jesus speak, he became more and more hopeful that Jesus could save her. Finally, he could stand it no longer; he suddenly rushed forward, broke through the crowd, threw himself at Jesus's feet in a most undignified way, and pleaded that Jesus come and lay hands on his daughter to cure her and save her. (Jairus's act is a fine demonstration of what the New Testament calls agape, unconditional love.) The man in authority, Jairus, and the man with no authority, Jesus-the president and the carpenter-are brought together.

Jesus did not come into the world to dazzle people with his power to perform miracles. In fact, he could not always work his miracles if there was not faith on the part of the people. In Nazareth, where the people knew him as a carpenter and as the son of Joseph and Mary, he was not able to complete a single miracle since faith was lacking. "He could do no deed of power there," Mark tells us. But with Jairus, it was different. He had faith, the kind of faith that views life, even at its worst, with optimism, faith that hopes against hope. "Come," he said, "and lay your hands on [my daughter], so that she may be made well, and live." And later when the others were saying that the daughter had died and were laughing at Jesus (who said she was not dead but asleep), Jairus maintained his faith and stayed with Jesus until his daughter was made well.

Mark uses the Greek word for make well (sometimes translated "save" by the New Revised Standard Version) in different contexts to mean essentially the same thing. The woman with the bleeding who touches the garment of Jesus is made well from her physical illness (5:34). A blind man, Bartimaeus, is given sight and is thus made well by Jesus (10:52). When Jesus tells how hard it is for the rich man to go to heaven, the disciples ask him, "Then who can be saved?" (10:26). Jesus says, "You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (13:13). To make well or to save means for Mark to make whole physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Jesus came to make us whole, at home with ourselves and with God, at home in this dangerous and troubling world.

Jesus took the child by her hand and in his native Aramaic said to her, "Talitha cum," which means "Little girl [literally Lamb], I say to you, arise." (The few uses of Aramaic in the Gospel narrative give special evidence that the account comes from an eyewitness.) Immediately, the girl got up and walked about. At that, the people in the household of Jairus were beside themselves with amazement. The little girl who had been dead or at least sick enough to appear dead was now walking around. "Who is this man? What is going on?" the people were asking themselves.

And then, while they were still speechless in their amazement, Jesus said something that the reader does not expect. He told the people in the household to get the little girl something to eat. All through this section of the Gospel, Jesus has been establishing his power, a power greater than the storms of the natural world, a power greater than the evil that possesses Legion, a power greater than death itself. And now in just a few, quiet words, Jesus lets his disciples and Mark lets his audience know the reason for this power, the reason he came in the first place. It is all there in the last line of chapter 5: "And [he] told them to give her something to eat." A child is hungry. Jesus wants her fed. (See Supplement C for "personal connections" in response to this passage.)

5. The woman with the hemorrhage (5:25b-34) As Jesus was walking toward the home of Jairus, a woman who had suffered vaginal bleeding for twelve years approached him. Like the leper (in 1:40-40), she was breaking the law of Leviticus (15:25-30) because she was ritually unclean. Immediately upon touching Jesus's cloak, the determined woman's bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was healed. Jesus said to her, using the Greek word that means to save, to make whole, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." The woman is healed not only of her illness but also restored to society, for she is no longer "unclean."

Remarkably, Jesus is aware that his healing power is flowing from him before he even sees the woman. Mark is making a highly significant point. God's healing power is given freely and generously to anyone who truly seeks that power. Jesus could not hold it back! Note that once again we have a story within a story. Is it significant that the woman had her illness for twelve years and Jairus's daughter was twelve years old?

III. JESUS AT NAZARETH (6:1-6)

In leaving his family behind, Jesus was preparing himself for his role as a prophet. A Biblical prophet is one who stands outside his people and brings their presuppositions into question; he is no longer bound by their creeds and taboos. While free to look at his people from the outside, he ~~still~~ knows the power of those creeds and taboos, since he himself is from the inside. A prophet can be a grave threat to his people. They know that he knows their weaknesses. They can keep the outside enemy outside, but the prophet

strikes from inside and confuses, hurts, and shakes the foundations. Jesus, as prophet, was not honored in Nazareth, his hometown. He was after all "the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon" with sisters as well.

Mark tells us that Jesus could work no miracle ("no deed of power") at Nazareth, except that he put his hands on a few sick people and healed them! God's deep healing will not work when it is rejected. However, Jesus is able to make a few sick people well in the way that a doctor makes them well; the word used here for heal is the one from which our word therapy comes. But he cannot bring people the total healing he brought the woman with the hemorrhage; he cannot "save" them if they do not seek his salvation. It is significant, however, that when total healing is not possible, Jesus does what he can. If making a few sick people physically well is all he can do, he does it. For the time being that is enough.

IV. THE MISSION OF THE TWELVE DISCIPLES (6:7-33)

Having witnessed the wisdom and the power of Jesus, the disciples are now ready to begin their ministry, going out by two, to share with others what they have heard with their own ears and seen with their own eyes. The seed, properly planted, is about to break through the earth and sprout. The Twelve have moved far enough along their journey to offer something to others. They still do not know who Jesus truly is, but they are learning more and more about him each day. Although they have come from diverse backgrounds, they are able at this point in the narrative to pull together well enough to go out on a mission two by two. The first missionary journey is a success. Later in the narrative, however, as the disciples move to a fuller knowledge of Jesus, they seem to fail more and pull apart. The first missionary journey is their golden age.

Mark chooses to tell the story of John the Baptizer and his execution by Herod in this section of the narrative for literary effect: to give the disciples time to come back after they are sent out. The story of Herod is quite a story. One sees just how whimsical and cruel unchecked power can be. We learn from the passage that frames the story of John the Baptizer and Herod just what

Jesus expects of his disciples. (1) They call for repentance; they call people to turn around and walk toward the life that God wants for them. (2) They cast out many demons, attacking evil wherever it exists. (3) They offer a kind of physical healing (like Jesus gave at Nazareth), doing what they can. (4) They teach what Jesus has been teaching them. (5) And finally they set off for a deserted place to "rest a while." Morna Hooker writes: "For Mark himself, the task entrusted to the twelve is now carried on by members of his own community and it is hardly surprising if the details of the instructions given to the Twelve reflect the conditions of his own day." How can the church use these instructions in its ministry today?

V. MARK'S LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Now is perhaps a good time to reflect further on Mark's strengths as a storyteller. He is most careful in his use of words and symbols, in his references to the geography of Palestine, in the way he develops the drama of the narrative and emphasizes his various themes. We have already given a rationale for how Mark carefully divided the sections of the narrative that we have studied so far. We have shown how he developed dramatically the emergence of hostility toward Jesus. We have described his theme of the gradual unfolding of the Gospel message—from secrecy to a revelation as bright as the light of any lamp. We have shown how he sometimes frames in inner story with an outer story. We have commented on key tag words that hold the narrative together, such as: journey or way, immediately, authority, let go, Son of Man, crossing over, wisdom, power, make well.

As we move forward, we will examine other key tag words, words such as: eyes and seeing, ears and hearing, loaves, suffer, cross, handed over, king. We will also hear Mark emphasizing certain numbers: five, seven, four, twelve. In the next session, we will see how Mark cleverly tells two feeding stories (6:34-7:37 and 8:1-26) to make an unspoken point that the bread of Christ is for everyone, even for those who think they are each other's worst enemy. There seems no end to Mark's use of literary techniques, and they work!

Personal Connections:

1. Do you ever feel that your faith is about the size of a mustard seed? How can you, your church, and your God help that seed to grow?
2. How can you and your church remain optimistic that, despite manifold hindrances, God is bringing in the Kingdom?
3. What particular evil are you and your church called on to cast out? How would you name that evil, exactly?
4. Tell of a time when death (or the threat of death) or some other tragedy brought you closer to someone from whom you had been estranged. Did the reconciliation have a miraculous quality for you? (See Supplement C for an example.)
5. Tell of a time when you experienced a "deep healing"-what Mark calls in the narrative "being saved" or "made well."
6. It appears that Jesus was not able to control the flow of love/healing that went forth from him. What does this tell us about him? Are we called to love the way Jesus loved? Can we "love too much"? Explain