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Ministry With Mark's Gospel

MARK MANASSEE

Most ministers turn to the apostle Paul and his Epistles for models of pastoral care and guidance in order to provide spiritual care. However, the Gospel of Mark also provides rich resources not fully explored.¹ While the individual stories of Jesus' words and actions provide guidance, the layout of the Gospel of Mark also provides surprising pastoral resources. Specifically, Mark's theological use of geography in structuring his narrative of Jesus' ministry offers pastoral insight applicable to concrete instances of spiritual care.

One can outline the Gospel of Mark in several different ways.² However, one clear division in the Gospel is between Jesus' Galilean ministry (chapters 1–8) and his ministry in Judea/Jerusalem (chapters 9–16) leading to his passion. Some have even said the Gospel of Mark is a passion narrative with a long introduction. However, there are several distinct dimensions to these two main sections of the Gospel. For our purposes, I want to concentrate on the fact that Mark focuses Jesus' healing ministry in Galilee, while there are no healings or acts of power in his Judean ministry save the cursing of the fig tree.³ The following diagram represents Jesus' healings and acts of power in Mark.

Exorcism of unclean spirit in Capernaum synagogue (1.21–28): Galilee

Healing Peter's mother-in-law (1.29–31): Galilee

Healing of leper (1.40–45): Galilee

Summary of healings (1.32–34): Galilee

Healing of paralytic (2.1–12): Galilee

Healing man with withered hand (3.1–6): Galilee

Stilling of storm (4.35–41): Galilee

Healing Gerasene demonic (5.1–20): Galilee

Raising Jairus' daughter (5.21–24, 35–43): Galilee

Healing woman with hemorrhage (5.25–34): Galilee

Feeding the 5000 (6.34–44): Galilee

Walking on the water (6.45–52): Galilee

Summary of healings (6.53–56): Galilee

Healing of deaf mute (7.31–37): Galilee

Feeding the 4000 (8.1–10): Galilee

Healing blind man at Bethsaida (8.22–26): Galilee

1. See Stuart Love's "Teaching a Theology of Ministry based on the Gospels," *Leaven* 9:2 (2001).

2. See Carl Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), chapter 6; Pheme Perkins, "The Gospel According to Mark," in *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

3. Dr. Fred B. Craddock presented this insight into the structure of Mark's Gospel in a lecture titled "Preaching Mark's Jesus" at Emory University's Institute for Preaching and Pastoral Renewal in January, 2006.

Healing of epileptic boy (9.14–29): Galilee
 Healing blind Bartimaeus (9.46–52): Galilee
 Cursing fig tree (11.12–14, 20–26): Jerusalem

How does one account for this clear division of a ministry of healing in Galilee and its complete absence in Jerusalem? Surely it is not because there were no suffering people in the vicinity of Jerusalem. There is every indication that poor, ill, and marginalized people lived in the urban center of Jerusalem as well as in the rural villages and towns of Galilee. I imagine there was roughly the same level of belief and unbelief in areas around the scattered synagogues of Galilee as there was around the religious center of the temple in Jerusalem.

Theologically, Mark's division raises several further questions. Is this division some pre-Chalcedonian insight into the human and divine natures of Jesus as the Son of God? Does Galilee represent the divine Jesus and Jerusalem the human Jesus? Each interpreter of scripture must decide how to work with this material. However, it seems likely to me that Mark is narrating in a vivid way that Jesus is revealed as Son of God not only through healings and acts of power, but also through suffering, weakness, and vulnerability. If Jesus is God's Son then he certainly reflects the character of God. As a result, God is identified with power, defeating, overcoming, and being in control, and also with grieving, weeping, groaning, suffering. In other words, God is known not just in healing and power but perhaps most poignantly in vulnerability and weakness (i.e., the cross).⁴ As Jesus goes from Galilee to Jerusalem, he goes from doing to being done to.

This dramatic tension can be seen in two crucial events—one in each section. The transfiguration is certainly a climatic event for Mark 1–9. The event comes at the conclusion of an active healing ministry and highlights Jesus as Son of God. This is highlighted by the affirming words of God, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him" (7).

In contrast to the transfiguration, a pivotal moment in Mark 10–16 is Jesus' despair in the Garden of Gethsemane. While the climax of Mark's Gospel as a whole is the crucifixion, the agony in the Garden represents as crucial a moment in Mark 10–16 as the transfiguration did in the first. "He [Jesus] took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake'" (14.33–34). Jesus agonizes over his mission, finally accepting his call, which will surely lead to death. Jesus' announcement of "not my will but yours be done" establishes his final days as the divine course of action. Yet, Jesus only reaches this conclusion through the pain of struggle and wrestling with his Father.

Jesus has a redemptive role during his final week (10.45), finding its fulfillment in his death and resurrection. Yet, Jesus' cry on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") can not be divorced from this redemption. The Roman centurion makes his confession, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15.39), only after witnessing Jesus' final lament.⁵

The Gospel of Mark ends with the young man giving instructions to the women at the tomb, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (16.7). If the disciples do indeed meet Jesus again in Galilee it will only be with a transformed understanding of him in light of his passion.

Throughout Mark's narrative, the hiddenness of God remains. Still, Jesus is revealed as Son of God not only in his acts of power but in vulnerability, suffering, and death.⁶ The brevity of the resurrection narrative

4. Interestingly, Mark's theological use of geography is also apparent as Jesus travels east and west into and out of Gentile territory. Jesus' movements thus indicate the inclusive nature of his ministry.

5. It is possible that the centurion's confession is sarcastic irony, though still bearing witness to the reality of Jesus' identity.

6. There are wonderful parallels between Mark's narrative intent and Martin Luther's "theologian of the cross." See *Theses For Heidelberg Disputation* 19–22 in John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings* (Anchor Books: New York, 1962), 502–503.

in Mark appears to confirm this emphasis on the passion account. Jesus cannot be fully known as Son of God until his Jerusalem experience has been completed.

MINISTRY IN LIGHT OF MARK'S GOSPEL

As I reflect back on my years as a hospital chaplain and my current practice of pastoral ministry, Mark's Gospel provides a valuable resource for ministry. In order to illustrate the possibilities, I offer two pastoral encounters. The first occurred in a children's hospital's neonatal intensive care unit. I was asked to visit twin boys and their parents. Thomas and Timothy⁷ were prematurely born at twenty-five weeks with corresponding complications. As I watched them in their incubators clinging to life, they could easily have fit into the palm of my hand. My prayer with their parents over the next several weeks was a prayer for healing. I could have prayed for comfort and the presence of God to be with these children and their parents, but we all were praying for their healing. We wanted the God made known in Jesus to act in power to bring healing into the lives of these children so they could be made whole and healthy. Any prayer without the request for healing would have seemed inappropriate and a failure to recognize God's power.

The other pastoral encounter occurred in the hospital room of a man in his sixties. I was called to the bedside to be present with this man's wife as life support measures were withdrawn from him. After a prayer for the loving presence of God to be with them both in this moment of suffering, there were no other words to utter. Conversation seemed inappropriate as we sat and waited at the bedside of the man she had been married to for many years. There was nothing to do but to be present as a representative of the hidden God made known in the suffering and vulnerability of Jesus Christ. There was no act of power to be had in those long minutes and hours as life slowly departed. The only comfort I could imagine would be the comfort of the God who meets us in vulnerability and suffering.⁸

The reality is that most pastoral care involves both the hope of healing in its multitude of dimensions, as well as the suffering presence of Jesus experienced in our human frailty and vulnerability. Mark the evangelist would agree with the author of Hebrews, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4.15–16).

This "theology of the cross" as seen in Mark 9–16 provides a helpful paradigm for ministry from pastoral care to leadership to spiritual formation. Theologically, ministers embody and represent both the healing and vulnerability of God. Yet ministers also recognize that though they may be God's representatives, they are not God. In light of this, one important pastoral function is to point others to the suffering God as seen in Jesus, who is truly present. The hiddenness of the God who is present is experienced paradoxically in each pastoral encounter. While we may minister in Galilee or Jerusalem, more often than not we have a foot firmly planted in both places.

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7. Not their real names.

8. On April 17, 2007, the day after the recent tragedy at Virginia Tech, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright wrote in *Newsweek's* On Faith, "...the fact of the incarnation and the cross means that the creator God is with us in the middle of the horror, sharing and bearing the pain and burden. This, clearly, is why so many medieval churches—at a time of endless wars, incurable diseases, social ills, an so on—had (to us) quite graphic and gory pictures and statues of the crucifixion."