

## “WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE? - II: THE GOSPEL OF MARK”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
May 31, 2015

### Mark 1:1-20

I think many of you know by now that if you want to talk to me for any length of time on Sunday mornings you can find me in my office between services. I go there after I finish shaking hands at the 8:30 service and stay there until it's time to come upstairs for the 11:00 service. And it's not unusual for there to be a line of people there waiting to talk to me. I love it! I've always said that it's one of the best hours of the week for me.

Well, a few years ago, I was sitting in my office getting ready to come up for the second service, and by that time, the line was gone, and I was momentarily alone. All of a sudden, out of the blue, around the corner comes a little child, breathlessly waiting to tell me something. I looked up at him, and he said, “Mommy got stopped for speeding on the way to church!”

I tried not to crack up, as I waited for Mommy to come around the corner. He just couldn't wait to tell me! “Mommy got stopped for speeding on the way to church!”

Now, he was just a little kid and the reasons why Mommy might have been speeding that morning probably never occurred to him, or even if they did, he didn't need to report them. He just cut right to the chase, and made his announcement – “Mommy got stopped for speeding on the way to church!”

I don't remember my follow-up conversation with his mommy. But I can well imagine some of the reasons why she might have been speeding on the way to church. Like the fact that she had put another load of laundry in the washer before she left, or cleaned up from breakfast after the family went to get dressed, or had to spend time rousing a child or spouse from bed when they didn't want to go to church, or had to lure someone away from the TV or computer screen. Or maybe she was madly scrambling to finish Sunday School lesson plans. There could have been a million reasons why she was running late and driving too fast, and suddenly found herself with flashing lights in her rear view mirror, pulling over for a meeting with the police.

But none of that mattered to that little boy – he cut to the chase and delivered the news straight out – “Mommy got stopped for speeding on the way to church!”

Now, let me tell you why I shared that story with you. Because it so reminds me of the way the Gospel of Mark begins. Today, as you know, is the second sermon in the “What’s the Difference?” sermon series, looking at the four different gospels. A couple of weeks ago, we began with Matthew, and we learned that Matthew was written by one of Jesus’ disciples, a tax collector. It was written to the Jews to prove to them that Jesus was the Messiah who had been foretold by the prophets in the Old Testament. It began with a genealogy showing Jesus’ connection to the Jews, and it was filled with Old Testament quotations and references. Matthew laid out Jesus’ birth and life slowly and carefully, so as to prove who he was.

In Matthew, not only was there the genealogy, but also the account of the angel appearing to Joseph to convince him not to divorce Mary when she was found to be pregnant. In Matthew, the three wise men make their trek to see the newborn King. In Matthew, Joseph and Mary take Jesus home after his birth by another way to spare his life from Herod, who was killing baby boys. Matthew spends a lot of time early in his gospel talking about the beginning of Jesus’ life.

Now, let’s get back to Mark, and consider how he starts his gospel. Well, it’s not unlike how that little boy told me about his mother. Mark cuts right to the chase. Notice, there is no mention of Jesus’ birth – no angels, no star in the sky, no “there’s no room in the inn” – nothing about Jesus’ birth. He goes right to the moment of his baptism as an adult.

Why? Because all of the background information doesn’t matter to Mark. He’s not out to prove who Jesus is. He has another reason for writing altogether, and he writes to a whole different audience than did Matthew.

Before I get into that, let me tell you a few facts about the Gospel of Mark. It was the first gospel written, probably around 65-70 AD. There is widespread disagreement on who the author actually is. Most scholars today say they don’t know. But back in the early centuries, a Pope speculated that the author was a man named John Mark, who was a disciple of the Apostle Peter. Many people still hold to that belief today.

So Peter was the eyewitness to Jesus’ life and ministry, and John Mark recorded his words and memories. It was likely written in Rome, where Peter was living, and probably written in Greek.

It was, most assuredly, written to Gentiles, to the Christians living in Rome, those who were the first church, if you will. One of the reasons we know it was written to Gentiles, is that all along the way Mark takes pains to explain Jewish customs and traditions, as opposed to Matthew who, of course, didn’t have to.

And what was the reason he wrote the gospel? Well, of course, he wanted to record Peter's eyewitness account, but there was an even more urgent reason. Think about the timing of the writing, and remember the Roman persecution of Christians that was taking place around that time. The early church was struggling, really struggling, because of the persecution and because of one other very significant thing.

You see, these men and women knew that Jesus had said he would return, and they fully expected that it would be in their lifetime. Now, time has passed, and they are beginning to get discouraged – he hasn't returned, and their faith is fading. Put on top of that the persecution they are facing, and you can see they needed words of encouragement and certainty – and that's exactly what Mark gave them.

And he did it succinctly – he got right to the point over and over again. From the get-go, in the very first verse, he calls Jesus "the Son of God" to leave no doubt in their minds. Then he gets right to the moment when God speaks to Jesus at his baptism, and sends him into ministry. And then he tells story after story of what Jesus did – healing, preaching, teaching. Where Matthew spent time recording Jesus' words, Mark spends more time telling about Jesus' actions.

The Gospel moves quickly, and even the language reflects that. There's a sense of urgency, for Mark knows the people need encouragement. Over and over again, you'll read the word "immediately" as Mark stresses the urgency of Jesus' mission and ministry.

In his attempt to reassure the people of who Jesus is and how He will indeed come again, and all will yet be well, Mark does something very unique. Throughout his gospel, he forms groups of three for emphasis – three boat scenes, three predictions of the passion, three commands for the disciples to keep awake and watch as he prays and sadly, three times when he finds them asleep instead, three times that Peter denies knowing Jesus – even three time references in the crucifixion story – the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> hour.

And fully 40% of Mark's gospel is about Jesus' final journey to the cross, his death and resurrection – again reminding the people why Jesus came and who he was – the Savior of the world.

So you see, over and over again, Mark writes to leave no doubt in his readers' minds of who Jesus is, and what he came to do, and what he would yet do. He's short, sweet and to the point, wanting most of all for Jesus' followers to be strengthened in their faith and resolute in the battle about persecution.

Now, you don't have to be a first-century Christian to benefit from the Gospel of Mark. Hardly. Because there has not been a time since then when people of faith have not needed a word of encouragement. The words that Mark wrote for those people in that day speak to us just as pointedly in this day. We still need to be reminded to have hope and stay the course when discouragement and disappointment and fear try to take us down. And as I told you a couple of weeks ago, it seems the forces that want to eliminate faith in Christ from the world are stronger today than ever, and all of it has left more than a few of us discouraged.

So I think we can turn to Mark for encouragement ourselves – for encouragement in the face of the big things happening in our world, the big things that frighten us, and make us wonder what the future holds – like terrorism, rampant crime and violence, addictions of all kinds, an ever-increasing sense of us vs them, and looking out for number one, and cynicism and apathy. Sometimes you wonder where it's all going to end – until Mark reminds us that we know where it's going to end – the same place it started – in God's hands. And we know how it will end, when Christ comes again – and we know that, in the end, all will be made right, and all will be well. So, in the meantime, we have hope, and we go on, and we trust.

And, thanks be to God, all along the way, hard as it is, He gives us glimpses of the coming Kingdom. Mark talks about some of them – the parable of the mustard seed, the feeding of the thousands, and so many more. We've seen signs ourselves, of the glory of God, even in the midst of troubling times.

I was reminded just the other night as a Missions Committee meeting, that, in the midst of our world where so many people are struggling with weather issues and water issues, where so many of the world's people are literally dying for clean water, our church helped make that happen in a little village in Ethiopia. We got some pictures in the mail recently showing the two wells that were dug using our money, and in those pictures were people smiling from ear to ear because their lives have been literally saved by that water. You see, we have reason to hope. God can make all things new – even seemingly impossible situations. We dare never forget that, and dare never give up.

We also can draw encouragement from Mark for our church in these times. Those early Christians were discouraged by forces outside them trying to drag them down, and frankly, so are we, aren't we? How many times do we lament the fact that people are not attending church anymore, and stores are open on Sundays, and sports teams practice and play on Sundays, and band competitions are held on Sundays, and on and on it goes, and it seems like everyone is against us. It is discouraging, and we can throw up our hands, and give up, or we can be encouraged

and know that God is in control, and trust that He will make a way. And we can also celebrate the good things that happen – the signs that all will yet be well. Like people finding a place to belong here at the church, and a place to use their gifts, and a place to work with others to reach out and touch our hurting world. Like young parents bringing their children for baptism, and more and more adults taking part in Christian Education, and choirs growing, and giving growing, and laughter being shared, and burdens being borne with others. There's so much good going on in the church of Jesus Christ – Mark would admonish us not to let the world take away our joy – to keep on keeping on.

And finally, I think Mark is a good place to turn for personal encouragement. For he has a way of letting us know over and over again, that Jesus, the Son of God is with us, and can do amazing things. And that no matter what, in the end, all will be well. So be of good courage – God is in control – and all will yet be well.

The Gospel of Mark – short, sweet, to the point – a book of encouragement and reassurance. As it bolstered the early Christians to stay the course, fight the good fight, have hope and be strong, so may it do the same for you and for me. May it be so.

Amen.