



NC  
Synod  
Bible  
reading  
plan  
summer  
2018

# Remarkable Mark

**Welcome to the *Remarkable Mark*, the NC Synod summer Bible reading plan.** This study is brought to you by the synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry. It is the result of efforts from a variety of your fellow Lutherans from across North Carolina both clergy and lay. Many thanks to all those who took time to contribute to this reading plan.

Begin each day's reading by first reading the corresponding text from the Gospel of Mark and then reading the lesson which includes a thought-provoking devotional, some questions, and a prayer.

In her introductory reading, Pastor Mary Shore begins: "The Gospel of Mark begins with a bang and ends with a bang!" That sounds exciting! The Engage the Bible Task Group is excited to share this Bible reading plan with the whole synod—and with you.

**We hope the Holy Spirit will speak to you through *Remarkable Mark* and will bring the Kingdom of God near to you in your journey of faith.**

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 1—The Kingdom of God Has Come Near**

The Gospel of Mark begins with a bang and ends with a bang! It takes just nine verses before we meet Jesus as an adult, and the first thing he says is, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15). The rest of the gospel offers one scene after another of what happens when the kingdom of God, in the person of Jesus, comes near.



For several chapters, nearly everything happens at a breakneck pace. In chapter one alone, the Greek word translated “immediately” or “at once” occurs eleven times. Jesus is the Holy One of God, whom the demons recognize (and submit to) and who heals people, forgives sin, and gathers a redefined family as he gathers a community of brothers and sisters around him.

He also makes enemies, and in chapters 8-10, Jesus begins to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer. Time slows down as he repeats this news three times. Each time the disciples’ reaction betrays their confusion and fear, and their denial of the way of the cross. At the beginning of chapter 11, Jesus enters Jerusalem on what the church observes as Palm Sunday. Chapters 11-15 tell the story of his last week and his crucifixion.

Mark ends as abruptly as it began. The most reliable Greek manuscripts end at Mark 16:8, which pictures the women fleeing from the empty tomb after hearing that Jesus has been raised. The Gospel concludes, “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” In the women’s silence, hearers of the gospel ask themselves, “What will I say about the risen Jesus?”

Mark is the shortest of the gospels. We think it was the earliest to be written, most likely in the late 60s or early 70s, and that Matthew and Luke probably had a copy of Mark when they wrote their gospels. Because of the way Mark explains some Jewish customs and Aramaic phrases, we guess that the first audience for the gospel was a predominately gentile congregation. Regardless of the accuracy of these bits of historical reconstruction, it is surely true that now as when it was first written, it draws readers into the story of a Messiah whose power is most clearly seen where his love is also most evident: in the weakness on the cross and the mystery of the resurrection.

#### **To Consider**

- Jesus transforms the lives of those with whom he interacts. What might he be transforming about your life right now?
- What might the women fleeing from the empty tomb be scared of? Have you ever had the experience of “terror and amazement” at the same time?

*Almighty God, you have enriched your church with Mark’s proclamation of the gospel. Give us grace to believe firmly in the good news of salvation and to walk daily in accord with it, through Jesus Christ our Lord (from Evangelical Lutheran Worship, the prayer for the day of Mark, Evangelist, April 25).*

The Rev. Mary Hinkle Shore is pastor of Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brevard and has taught New Testament courses at the seminary level. She serves on the Engage the Bible Task Group of the NC Synod.

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 2—So It Begins**

[Read Mark 1: 1-45](#)



Taken separately, the brief individual scenes within Mark's first chapter seem thin, with hardly enough detail to make a good story. But try reading Chapter 1 as one continuous narrative, or better yet, read it aloud, and you'll feel the breathless intensity of a story that pulls you into its current.

Mark sets his focus quickly and directly. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark provides no genealogy to establish Jesus' lineage. Nor does he offer angels or shepherds, anxious parents, or guiding dreams—in fact, he offers no birth story at all. Within the first 13 verses of this first chapter the adult Jesus is baptized by John, addressed directly by God, and tempted by Satan.

The message here is “Pay Attention” to these critically important moments, during which Jesus receives firm assurance that he is God's beloved Son, the chosen one, who will not be stopped by hunger, fear, or the temptations of Satan.

Then in the space of a few paragraphs we watch Jesus make John's call to repentance his own, gather his first disciples, deal with demons, heal with his touch and attract a crowd that will not let him rest.

The best news of this chapter's good news may just be its final story. The leper who kneels and begs for healing knows what Jesus can do. And like Jesus, he knows the power of being chosen: “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus replies, “I do choose. Be made clean.” And immediately the leprosy is gone.

So it begins. With this miracle and the leper's bold and widespread proclamation, Jesus' ministry gains such high visibility that there is no turning back. God's Messiah, who will choose over and over to give himself away to a wounded world, does indeed fulfill God's plan and bring the Kingdom near.

#### **To Consider**

- What if you took Mark's opening words literally, that his Gospel is only the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ”? In what ways do you see the church continuing that good news? In what ways could you keep that good news alive in your own life?
- When in your personal, church or professional life have you felt chosen? How did that feeling change the way you approached your daily life or your challenges?

*Holy One, you have chosen us as your beloved children. Through the life and witness of Jesus, fill us with breathless excitement in sharing with others the good news of your love and mercy. Amen.*

## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 3—Are You Hungry or Satisfied?

[Read Mark 2:1-28](#)

*“David ... when he and his companions were hungry and in need ... entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” (Mk 2:25-26)*



Jesus, our great high priest in the order of Melchizedek, Son of David and Son of God, when he and his companions hungered, also shared his Father’s food with his companions, even as they picked the grains from the fields on the Sabbath when the Pharisees said it was unlawful for them to do so. (Mk 2:22-23)

Earlier in this passage, some fellows lowered their paralytic friend through an opening they made in the roof. They could not get their friend to Jesus for his healing any other way. Jesus healed the man when he saw their faith, saying to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” In doing so, the teachers of the law thought to themselves that Jesus was blaspheming God. They believed God alone could forgive sins, but still did not believe Jesus was the Son of God.

But Mark says Jesus immediately knew in his spirit what they were thinking in their hearts, telling them he just as easily could have healed the paralytic by commanding he get up, take his mat and walk. This he did, to show them “... the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” (Mk 2:10) Everyone was amazed and astonished.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, as he did Levi, he does so full knowing we sinners are unbelieving, unhealthy, and dying. Fortunately, in the power of free will, some of us choose to do what is right, and Jesus heals us with mercy and compassion. Is not what Jesus is doing his Father’s will for us on earth?

#### To Consider

- How does the faith Mark addresses in this chapter compare with the faith Jesus mentions in Luke 18:8?
- What will you do, follow Jesus or wait until he is on social media so you can follow him with your friends?

*Heavenly Father, all glory and honor and praise with thanksgiving to you forever. Open our hearts to your call that we might listen to Jesus as he listens to you. Heal us, Lord, that we may walk humbly in the Light of your Truth—able to see Jesus even in the neighbors around us. Yea, Lord, strengthen the weakness of our flesh by your Spirit. Help us to seek always your kingdom and your righteousness. Amen.*

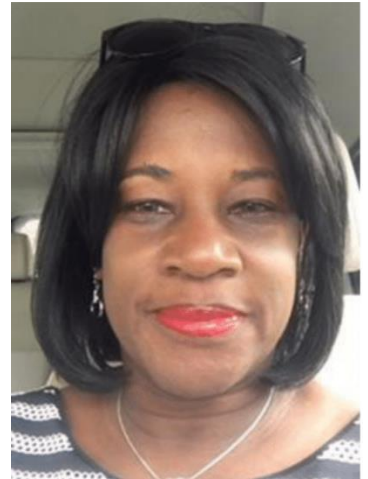
R. Carlos Cavazos of Advent, Spindale, writes: I was born and raised a Roman Catholic. I became Lutheran after my Swedish-American girlfriend dumped me, although, like Luther, I am more Christian than Lutheran. I have always enjoyed the great outdoors because I have always found Him there more easily, though more often it seems that’s when He finds me.

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 4—Blessed and Highly Favored!**

[Read Mark 3:1-35](#)

In the Pentecostal and/or Evangelical traditions, people speak of being “anointed” or having an “anointing” on their lives. Those blessed enough to be perceived to have an anointing, are assumed to be favored, and very special in the eyes of God. Special circumstances surround them; they stand out in a crowd; they exude a certain aura; they are CHOSEN. These folks are “blessed and highly favored.”



From the selection of his parents, the circumstances of his birth, recognition and baptism by John the Baptist, we see that Jesus is chosen and blessed with something that others do not have, when he preaches and teaches, his words burn within the soul of his listeners. He is favored by God and very special. Jesus exuded an aura, he stood out in a crowd. Jesus was “blessed and highly favored” by God, his father. The events throughout his short time in ministry, each story he tells, each person he heals, each miracle that he performs, all point to him as anointed, chosen, special.

Eventually, some are enlightened to who he is, but many are not. Jesus’ family was not always “all in” with his preaching either. They went to get him when they heard about what he was doing, saying that he was “out of his mind.” Jesus, however, continued with his teaching in spite of his family because he was anointed by God and the Holy one.

Today, when we read the words of the Gospel, our eyes and hearts are opened to accept Jesus as our anointed Savior because we know the rest of the story.

#### **To Consider**

- Am I living the type of spiritual life that makes me feel blessed, highly favored and anointed through God’s love?

*Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your son, who was blessed and highly favored by you to save us from our sin. Give us wisdom to understand your teaching and to do your will. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Felicia Eybl writes: I am a native North Carolinian. Originally, Methodist, I came to Cross and Crown, Matthews, and the ELCA through my German husband, who was Lutheran. I have two children and five of the most adorable grandchildren in the world. My husband and I attended “Luther’s Hochzeit” (wedding), a Renaissance Fest type event one summer in Wittenberg and had dinner with Martin and Katie!

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 5—Seeds and Storms**

[Read Mark 4: 1-41](#)



As a gardener, the thrill begins during the dark days of winter when the first seed catalogs arrive in the mail. In today's reading from Mark, Jesus uses seeds, agricultural practices, light, and the humble mustard plant to teach about the reign and rule of God. Jesus used these common, everyday objects and stories which form the first and largest section of teaching found in Mark's Gospel. These parables, which in Jesus' day included proverbs, riddles, and stories allowed for multiple, open-ended interpretations.

At the heart of these parables is the mystery of the Kingdom of God. This mystery, referring back to Mark 1:14-15, proclaims that "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news." The kingdom of God, Jesus teaches is mysterious, hidden, like a seed pregnant with possibility. In this kingdom, God can accomplish great things from even small, humble beginnings, like a mustard seed.

The reign of God has come near in the person of Jesus; the second portion of this reading showing Jesus' power over all creation. The boat, which was a teaching platform, becomes a mode of transportation. A terrible windstorm swamps the boat so that the disciples are terrified. In Jesus' day, the sea was the abode of demons and chaos, a place of fear. The disciples wake Jesus, who rebukes the wind and waves, and a dead calm comes over the water. The disciples are filled with awe—and wonder "who is this that even the winds and waves obey him?" Jesus, God's Son, shows the mystery of the kingdom of God, as small as a mustard seed, and powerful as a word that calms the storm.

#### **To Consider**

- Where do you see the seeds of the rule of Christ being planted—in your life, in your community, in the world?
- Where do you experience the power of God's Word bringing calm to the storms that rage—in your life, in your community, in the world?

*Jesus, who plants seeds and calms storms, help me trust the way you work in my life and in the world—in hidden and mysterious ways and by bringing peace to life's turbulent seas. Amen.*

Pastor Laura Wind has worked in various settings including Campus Ministry at both Wake Forest University and Duke University. A musician, she plays rhythm piano with the Salem Swing band, clarinet with the Salem Wind Ensemble, and various other instruments in venues across the eastern United States. She loves reading, gardening, making art and raising bees with her husband Heath, and keeping up with her teenage daughter Catherine, a rising senior and talented equestrian and horse trainer.

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### **Reading 6—United by a Shared Savior**

[Read Mark 5:1-43](#)

The fifth chapter of Mark's Gospel presents us with three healing miracles that could not be more different from one another. We have, first, the healing of the demon-possessed man in the country of the Gerasenes, a Gentile region on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Next, we have the healing of the daughter of a respected leader of the synagogue, Jairus. Finally, on the way to raise Jairus' daughter, we have the healing of an unnamed woman who had been ritually unclean for twelve years. What do these people have in common? If you were to put them in a room together, what would they talk about? A demon-possessed man living in a cemetery outside a Gentile town, a prominent and respected leader of a synagogue and his twelve-year-old daughter, and a desperate woman who had spent all she had on doctors? That would be a strange group to bring together, wouldn't it? Before they encountered Jesus, it is hard to imagine them finding anything to discuss with each other. But after they have been transformed by Jesus' healing power, they have something incredible in common, and it is easy to imagine them having an animated discussion about their miraculous healings and the man who changed their lives.



Isn't that true of us as well? We might wonder, on any given Sunday morning, what we have in common with those with whom we are worshiping. Churches bring together people from dramatically different backgrounds, and it would be easy to describe all the ways that we are different from one another. But just like the people in this section of Mark's gospel, what we have in common is that we have been touched by the healing love of our Savior. So let's talk about it!

#### **To Consider**

- The demoniac healed by Jesus wants to go with Jesus but is told to "go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you." What might you tell your friends about what the Lord has done for you?
- The woman healed by Jesus has the courage to come through the crowd and touch Jesus' clothes in the hope of being made well. Who in your community might be trying overcome obstacles in order to be touched by Jesus' love?

*Heavenly Father, while we who turn to you in prayer are very different from one another, we have all been brought together by the healing love of your Son. Help us to share that love with all those around us, especially those who long to believe it, but struggle to receive it. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The Rev. James E. Laurence began his ministry as pastor of First Lutheran Church of Albemarle in February 2018, after having served the previous sixteen years in the South Carolina Synod. He and his family are enjoying getting to know the places and the people in Stanly County and around the Tar Heel State. He is married to Karen, and together they have two children, Katie and Matthew.

## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 7—Who Is this Jesus?

[Read Mark 6:1-30](#)



Well, after Mark tells several stories of Jesus power over things like: nature (the sea and the wind); demonic powers (Gerasene demoniac); loss of life blood (woman with hemorrhage); and death (a child) one would think it would be easy to see that there is something up with Jesus of Nazareth. But upon returning home, those closest to Jesus cannot see it. In his first return home after casting out a demon, healing a paralytic and forgiving sins, his family comes to get him because they think he is out of his mind. Now, on this return home, it is the neighbors who cannot believe it is Mary's son (a possible slur implying that no one really knows who his father is) doing these things. It seems that the deeds of power that Jesus does cannot overcome familiarity and relationships Jesus has with people who have known him since birth or at least for the past ten or twenty years. Did not his teachers and classmates see any potential in Jesus for greatness?

Amazed but undeterred, Jesus sends out his disciples giving them authority to heal and cast out demons. While the disciples' mission trip is going on, Mark provides an update on the fate of John the Baptist, whose arrest signals the beginning of Jesus' ministry. If anything, this account is a stark reminder of what happens to God's prophets. Not only are they unwelcome in their hometown, they are likely to be killed.

Mark then reports the disciples return from a very successful mission trip, after which Jesus invites them to have some alone time with him.

#### To Consider

- Has familiarity with an individual, (i.e. family member, neighbor, someone you have known since school days) ever blinded you to the power of God at work in them or God doing a new thing in their lives? How can a return to baptism (dying and rising each day) give us new eyes to see?
- Each Sunday we are sent out with words like: Go in peace, share the Good News. What might worship look like if we then came back the following week and gave a report just as the disciples did on their return to Jesus after he sent them out?

*Holy One, open my eyes to your power at work in the world, my community, those I meet or live among—and in me. Amen.*

Phil Thorsen has been a pastor in the NC Synod since 2000 and currently serves at St. Mark's, China Grove. He and his wife Meg reside in Salisbury. In his free-time he plays guitar in the Salisbury Swing Band, Rev It Up or with anyone who is interested.



## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 8—No Down Time**

[Read Mark 6: 31-53](#)

Does this sound familiar: “Ugh! If I could just get some time for myself!” There are times in our lives when we feel overwhelmed with all our responsibilities. When that overwhelming feeling rears its head, all I want to do is be alone, to get away, and have no disruptions.



In our reading from Mark today, I believe the disciples are overwhelmed. They have been on a non-stop journey since answering Jesus’ discipleship call. Now is the time for them to get some much-needed rest.

But the people are not going to give Jesus and the disciples a break. As the crowds continue to seek Jesus’ company and attention, the disciples begin to show impatience. Jesus gets back to work. The disciples? They want to clock out. They want their precious down time. Jesus, however, shows them that their call does not go by any clock. The call for mission is 24/7, and that means there will be moments that the down time has to wait.

After the people are fed, the disciples finally get some alone time. But then they encounter a strong wind which sends them into a panic. They need Jesus to save them. Just a few verses before the disciples were the ones telling others seeking Jesus to go away. Imagine if Jesus had “passed them by” like the disciples wanted him to do in verse 36.

The good news is that Jesus does not pass them by. He gets to work and assures them of his presence with the sweet and tender “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

There are no disruptions that can keep God away from us. God does not take time off when it comes to us. God gives us time. His time. All the time.

#### **To Consider**

- Take out your calendar. Look at your watch. When is God NOT available when you need him?
- How can you learn to believe and find hope in God’s constant attention?

*God of Time and Calendars, thank you for being present in our times of need. We thank you for never passing us by, instead stopping and calming all our storms. Put the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds so we can be more aware of our call as your servants, but also our title as your children. Amen.*

The Rev. Jonathan P. Conrad is the senior pastor at St. Paul’s, Wilmington. He enjoys reading mysteries and playing golf. He is the proud husband of Kristen, the joyful father of Paul and Madelyn, and the blessed son of Paul and Kay Conrad.

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 9—“He has done everything well”**

[Read Mark 7:1-37](#)

In this chapter of Mark, we see a lot of dissonance between Jesus’ ministry and the traditions or social norms of the society in which he lives. The Jewish traditions required a ceremonial hand washing before a meal, but Jesus allows his disciples to eat with unwashed hands. The Greek mother was seen as an outsider, and yet Jesus took the time to heal her daughter of an impure spirit. The stories reveal to us that Jesus is the kind of Messiah that transcends human understanding in His work to bring the love of God to a broken world.



And yet, by the end of the chapter, Jesus has left quite an impression on the people, as they exclaim “He has done everything well.” If they are uncomfortable with the ways Jesus is breaking down the laws and rules they have been taught, they are even more overcome by the good works of this Messiah, the light and love he is bringing to the world around them.

It’s easy, in our world today, for our good intentions to get tangled up with and obscured by the norms of the world around us, the ways we are told to live our lives. But the gospel reminds us that Jesus is a force of good that surpasses the comfort of tradition. I have faith that, through this tangle of life we live, Jesus has done everything well, and longs to do well through each and every one of us. What a new, beautiful kind of comfort that brings!

### **To Consider**

- What are some ways you have seen the love of God transcend human understanding in your life?
- Are there ways in which you let tradition and social norms obscure your view of God’s loving presence in the world?

*Surprising Messiah, thank you for surpassing our understanding with your light and love!  
Amen.*

Barbara Ramsdell is a rising junior at UNC Chapel Hill studying environmental science. She is active in the Lutheran Campus Ministry at Chapel Hill and is a counselor at Lutheridge over the summer. In her free time, she enjoys gardening and reading.

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 10—Well Fed**

[Read: Mark 8:1-26](#)

I was supposed to be asleep like the other kids at the day care center. It was naptime and one of the leaders was placing suckers on each cot as a tasty wake-up treat for us. Only I had no sucker on my cot! She must have missed me. So, I did what any resourceful four-year-old boy might do, I stole one from my neighbor. I placed it next to me as if they had missed him instead. I was satisfied even though this sucker was of the least desirable lemon-flavored variety. But it was better than nothing.



I didn't realize however that the leaders weren't finished handing out all the suckers. The kid I stole from received a highly-coveted cherry-flavored sucker in place of the one I took! The lesson for me was vivid with every sour lick. I had become anxious while feeling left-out and without. I grasped for a solution even if it may have hurt someone else.

The message of the eighth chapter of Mark is not unlike this. The disciples were seemingly anxious while without food in the wilderness, even though Jesus had already fed not only the four thousand but also the famous five thousand before that. The one who had always provided was standing right there in their midst, yet they worried about not having enough of what they needed.

The Pharisees were also anxious, but their issue was authority not scarcity. They demanded a sign, even though Jesus had miraculously fed so many with so little. Jesus gives a cautious warning to his disciples, "Beware the yeast of the Pharisees." Or perhaps put another way, don't worry about what you think you don't have and grasp for that which somebody else has or what somebody other than the Messiah offers!

#### **To Consider:**

- When do you get anxious and feel like God has "missed you?"
- What helps you to center yourself and trust that "God will provide?"

*God our provider, help us to trust that we will not be without. Feed us with your Spirit and nourish our hearts and minds. Lead us to serve you by feeding others. Amen.*

The Rev. Jeff Lindsay is pastor of Redeemer, Gastonia. He currently lives in McAdenville (Christmas Town) with his wife and two high school boys. His passions include music, family and teaching.

## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 11—The Turning Point

[Read Mark 8: 27-38](#)

Near the middle of Mark's Gospel, Jesus, far from home in Caesarea Philippi, turns to his disciples and asks them two tough questions. First, "Who do people say that I am?" to which they respond with a list of possibilities: John the Baptist; Elijah; or one of the prophets. Then Jesus says, "Never mind what the others say—who do YOU say that I am?"



This time, Peter speaks up and answers him, saying "You are the Messiah." So far, so good. But when Jesus goes on to explain that he will suffer and die and then be raised again, Peter objects, and finds himself being soundly rebuked.

Like us, Peter sees the world through human eyes and expectations, and cannot understand why the Messiah must suffer. Like others of his time, Peter had glorious expectation for the arrival of the long-promised Messiah.

Jesus begins to explain not only what it means to be the Messiah, but also what it really means to be one of his followers. God's plan is not what we might expect, but instead involves giving of ourselves in order to gain the life that God wants to give.

This is a turning point in the Gospel, because until now, Jesus has been travelling from place to place with no discernible pattern; teaching, preaching, and healing. Now he turns in a deliberate way toward Jerusalem and the cross.

Like the disciples gathered around Jesus, we are called to follow Jesus on the way. As Tom Wright tells us in his book, *Mark for Everyone*, this is Mark's definition of being a Christian "and Jesus is not leading us on a pleasant afternoon hike, but a walk into danger and risk."<sup>1</sup> Yet we know that we will never be alone on this journey, and that a life spent following Jesus leads into the future that God has planned for us.

#### To Consider:

How might we answer those same two questions today?

- Who do others say that Jesus is? And who do we—through our words and our actions—say that Jesus is?
- When have you reached a turning point in your life? What has it been like to turn and follow Jesus?

*Gracious God, you have called us to follow Jesus in the way of the cross. Strengthen and sustain us in faith as we loosen our grip on the things of this life, so that we may instead reach for the fullness of life with you. Amen.*

The Rev. Ruth Ann Sipe is a second career pastor serving both Mt. Zion in Richfield and St. Stephen's Gold Hill, with one foot in Stanly County and the other in Cabarrus County. She and her husband, the Rev. Ray Sipe, will celebrate the tenth anniversary of their ordination this fall.

<sup>1</sup>Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pg. 112

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### Reading 12—The Ups and Downs of Following Jesus

[Read Mark 9:1-49](#)



This chapter offers a witness that even when God makes everything clear to us about his work in saving us (as is revealed to the disciples in these verses), there will still be a lot of misunderstandings and weak faith among his followers. The account starts with Jesus proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near (v.1). Then follows an account of the transfiguration, when Jesus in all his glory and divinity is revealed, but it terrifies the faithful who were present (vv.2-8). Jesus adds a reference to his resurrection and suffering, and again his disciples do not understand (vv.9-13). He immediately heals an epileptic child, whose father confesses his own weak faith at the time. Jesus' disciples wonder why they could not do such a miracle (vv.14-29). He then foretells his Passion again, and the disciples still do not understand (vv.30-32).

Jesus next learns of a squabble among the disciples over who is greatest in God's kingdom. He declares that greatness comes by serving, by welcoming the child in his name (vv.33-37). Clearly the faithful (and oftentimes we, his modern disciples) are not understanding much of what Jesus says, even as he reveals himself. This becomes apparent in a discussion about an unknown exorcist. The disciples tried to stop him, since he is not a follower of Jesus [undue pride of the faithful, it seems]. Jesus responds that anyone who is not against him is with him (vv.38-41). Seeming to sense his followers' misunderstanding, he offers warnings about the punishments of hell for those who get in the way of the faith of others (vv.42-48). Jesus closes with a reinterpretation of the suffering and lostness they may feel, comparing it to salting which will preserve them [perhaps like grace], and will give them peace (vv.49-50). Even when we know Jesus, Christian life is confusing and heightens our doubts, but we may nevertheless be assured that it is all part of God's great plan for us, purging our doubts and accepting us anyway.

#### To Consider

- Why are we often still so confused about the ways of God and his plans for us?
- Since Jesus has died and has risen, what are we now to make of Jesus' comments about the coming of God's kingdom? Does God still accept us despite our weak faith? (See Jesus' reaction to the father of the epileptic child.)

*Almighty God, who by the death of thy Son has brought to naught sin and death and by his resurrection has brought again innocence and everlasting life so that, delivered from the devil's power, we may live in thy kingdom. Grant us that we may believe this with all our heart and be steadfast in this faith, to praise and thank thee always. Amen. (Luther's Works, Vol.53, p.134)*

Mark Ellingsen serves as a professor on the faculty of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, the largest accredited historic African-American seminary in the U.S. He is the author of 21 books (a new one, a book of sermons for Lent and Easter, will be published soon by CSS Publishers), and you can check out the rest of his books just by googling him.

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 13—Hardness of Heart and the Kingdom of God**

[Read Mark 10:1-45](#)

In these verses from Mark, Jesus is constantly calling people out for hardness of heart and inability to see the kingdom of heaven present right in front of them. The transfiguration in chapter 9 revealed Jesus to be the embodiment of the law fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection. Chapter 10 shows this integrity through these encounters with Jesus.



It begins with Jesus being tested on the issue of divorce. He immediately asks them what Moses and the law says. When they respond, he points out that they have twisted the law to fit their lives, rather than molding their life to the way God intended it to be from the beginning.

He then engages children that the disciples wanted to overlook. They could not see what he saw in the children and what the children saw in him. “To them belongs the Kingdom of God.” They do not have hardness of heart, which allows them to look with possibility, rather than limitation.

The rich man could not see beyond his possessions. His possessions hardened his heart to fully entering into relationship with God in Jesus Christ. His inability to release his possessions, kept him limited to the vision of the world and unable to see the possibilities of God. Jesus points out to the disciples that when they lay down their possessions and familiar ties, they share in not only the bounty of the expansive gifts of the community, but ultimately, they receive eternal life.

This leads into Jesus foretelling of his death and resurrection. James and John reveal another failure to see because of their hardness of heart. They believed that they could accomplish what only God in Christ could do. Though they and we are to follow Christ, it is not we who lead the way from death to life. We can only enter the Kingdom of God through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It is no coincidence that this then moves into the story of blind Bartimaeus. Hardness of heart leads to inability to see the fullness of God present among us. Instead, we limit the law to fit our lives. We fail to look with the eyes of children toward the possibilities of God. We allow our possessions to block our way from moving from fear to faith. We falsely assume that we can do this on our own. Thanks be to God, that through the resurrection of Christ, we are invited to engage life as God intended, look upon the world with eyes of possibility, lay down that which stands in our way of moving forward toward the kingdom goal, and follow Christ from death to life.

#### **To Consider**

- What are ways in which our hearts are hardened? How do our hardened hearts affect how we view other people?
- What are the possibilities of God in your life, church, etc.? How can we, as the body of Christ, be childlike and see the full possibilities of God?

*God of possibilities, we know that we have hardened hearts that keep us from seeing the fullness of your kingdom. Help us to become childlike, so that we may experience the fullness of your kingdom. We ask this in the name of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Joshua Lewis Copeland is candidate for rostered ministry in the NC Synod and attends United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, PA. He is currently living out the summer at home in Hickory, NC and completing Clinical Pastoral Education at CaroMont Regional Medical Center in Gastonia.

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 14—Where Do You See Jesus?**

[Mark 10:46-11:33](#)

The healing of a blind man, a parade, an object lesson with a fig tree, a spiritual housecleaning, and a confrontation with authority—these are the ways that Mark lets us see Jesus very shortly before His arrest, trial, and crucifixion.



So, where do we see Jesus? Do we see him as the miracle-working Lord of healing and hope? Do we see him as the triumphant king riding in glory? Do we see him in the simple things of life that speak to our hearts, things such as nature, the unexplained, or the mystical? Perhaps we see him best when we undergo a spiritual reorientation of our lives, when the detritus and clutter is swept out and our preconceived notions and stale ignorance is removed. It may be that we see this King of Kings and Lord of Lords when he stands up to the authorities that perpetuate the oppression and marginalization of the poor and the outcast, when he and his followers are challenged by those who ask, “Hey, who said you could do these things? You’re upsetting the status quo, you know?”

Ask yourself: Where do I see Jesus? If it’s only during Sunday worship, then perhaps your world needs to be expanded—perhaps you don’t get out enough! Where is Jesus’ entry point in your life? Is it when prayers for healing are answered and only then? Does he come only when you are in deep meditation or prayer? Does he appear when you are involved in social justice causes and only those?

Perhaps we all could spend time seeking Jesus where we are least comfortable rather than simply waiting for him to ride into our lives at our convenience.

Where do you see Jesus?

#### **To Consider**

- Where have you seen Jesus when you least expected his appearance?
- What area of your life needs to be more open to Jesus’ arrival?

*Lord, allow me to be open to your coming whenever and wherever that may be. Amen.*

Peter Brown has been a pastor in the ELCA and its predecessor bodies for over 40 years, serving congregations in Michigan, Ohio, North Carolina, and Florida, including an adjunct teaching position at Lenoir-Rhyne University. He is currently serving St. Thomas, Charlotte, having failed at retirement. You can usually find him walking, reading, or plunking out a tune on his guitar, or getting in the way of his long-suffering wife, Ann.

## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 15—At the Master's Feet

[Read Mark 12:1-44](#)

When my grandmother Alice was advanced in years it became increasingly difficult for her to hear during church. We tried various hearing aids, with mixed results. In frustration, we once asked if she wouldn't rather stay home on a Sunday morning. "Oh, no; I need to sit at my Master's feet, even if I can't hear a word."

In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark we find ourselves sitting at our Master's feet. Can we hear his words? He turns earthly wisdom upside down as surely as he overturned the money changers' tables just a chapter earlier. We hear that the rejected stone will become the very foundation. We wonder about what belongs to the state, and what belongs to God. We discover the greatest commandments, and something about the nature of Christ. Finally, we may find ourselves ashamed for our love of honor and piety, and our disregard for the lowest and humblest.

Alice lived a full life, experiencing the joys and sorrows to their fullest. She knew the joy of Jesus saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (12:34). She knew the sorrow of "realiz[ing] that he had told this parable against them" (12:12). As we sit at our Master's feet, we find that "this life is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing" (Luther). As we sit at the feet of Jesus, we learn and grow in the ways of his kingdom, and rest in his endless, wondrous love.

#### To Consider

- How do these teachings challenge you?
- How do they comfort you?

*Holy and gracious Father, in your infinite love you sent your Son to share our human nature, and to reconcile us to you. Grant that we may more perfectly love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

David Anderson is a baptized child of God and a member of St. Mark's, Asheville. He resides four miles east of town with a collection of fountain pens, a longsuffering banjo, and two adoring goldfish.





## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 16—Jesus Foretells the End Times

[Read Mark 13:1-37](#)

The disciples have traveled with Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, where they express awe at the magnificent temple (13:1). Jesus, however, continues teaching them that the glory they keep looking for is not the glory they will find with him. The stones of the temple will be thrown down, he says (13:2), and many terrible things will happen to the disciples (13:9-13) and in their world (13:7-8, 14-18). Mark was writing to an audience that was reeling from the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple around 70 A.D. Jesus the Messiah did not come to overthrow the Roman overlords and then rule himself in earthly glory.



Jesus nevertheless offers reassurance in the midst of worldly upheaval. At a time unknown even to him (13:32), the Son of Man—Jesus—will come in clouds with great power and glory (13:26), and he will gather up his people from around the world (13:27). Jesus has told his disciples everything they need to know so they won't be led astray by false messiahs and false prophets (13:22-23). Even though all other things will someday pass away, the words of Jesus will not pass away (13:31). Jesus the Messiah embodies the persistent saving power of God.

Jesus further cautions and exhorts his disciples. Not only is the time of his return unknown, they need to remain vigilant while they wait, and they need to continue their work (13:32-37). Jesus the Messiah has entrusted responsibilities to them for the sake of the kingdom of God. God's plan is unfolding through Jesus, and the disciples have a role within that plan. This was true for the disciples sitting with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, and it is true for Jesus' disciples today.

#### To Consider

- How does the reassurance that Jesus offers to his disciples speak to you at this moment in your life?
- At this moment in your life, how do you hear and obey the commands of Jesus to beware, learn, keep alert, and keep awake?

*Lord God, only you know the time of the return of your Son. As we continue to wait, keep us alert and watchful and focused on the things that Jesus teaches us. Through his words, continue to give us comfort and support. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Ann Kelly writes: Since Feb. 1, 2018, I've been serving as pastor at Trinity, Sanford. Prior to that, I served at St. John's, Hudson, NC. I love reflecting on the Bible and the multiple layers of meaning that God communicates to us through Scripture.

## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 17—“Long Live God”

[Read Mark 14:1-31](#)



Aside from my immediate love for the musical “Godspell,” the thing I most remember about leaving the theater that first time I saw the movie version was the grumbling of the adults around me.

I must’ve been about 14 years old that evening. And as the movie ended, and as I wandered out alone—more than a little tingly from this depiction of the Gospels that was unlike anything I’d ever seen in Sunday school—all I heard from the grownups around me was complaining.

“Can you believe they left out the resurrection?” they grumbled. “Are they saying that Jesus died, and it all just ended there?” “I thought it was just horrible,” they went on.

True, the musical does not end with a physical reincarnation of the Jesus character. His last, gasping words while hanging on that inner-city, chain-link fence are “Oh, God, I’m dead.” But the story—and the musical—don’t end there.

There’s a pause in the music, tempting you to think it’s all over. Then, a chord. And then the chorus begins to sing again. Quietly, gently: “Long live God.” They repeat it, over and over. And then from underneath their refrain comes another chord progression that sounds familiar to the audience. “What is that?” you wonder. “I know that,” you tell yourself.

And then the sound explodes. That quiet, secondary melody bursts forth with voices and drums joyfully repeating the song we heard in the musical’s very first scene. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!”

He is not dead. He is alive. He told us as much in that meal: “This is my body; this is my blood.”

As the church, we toil now in the long, green season **after** Pentecost. This is our mission. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. He is not dead. He is alive. He is among us. His work remains to be done.

### To Consider

- What “non-traditional” depictions of Jesus—from books, film, TV—have broadened, and maybe challenged, your understanding of the Son of God? How so?
- Where do you sometimes sense the very real presence of the living God in your world? In a certain song? A certain place?

*Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are indeed alive and active in this world around us. Fill us with your joyful presence as we encounter—and share—your love in the most unexpected of places.  
Amen*

Michael Weaver has sought (and sometimes found) God in a variety of non-traditional settings since his ordination 17 years ago. His “calls” have led him three times to southern Africa, to outdoor worship on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and to his most challenging “call” of all: stay-at-home daddy.

## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 18—Speaking Up

[Read Mark 14:43-72](#)

I enjoyed visiting the Art Institute of Chicago while growing up in a nearby suburb. While I loved Impressionism, I was also drawn to the work of Ivan Albright, whose life-size painting, “That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do” (also known as “The Door”), fascinated me. The work features a door with a wreath, and a hand reaching toward the knob, all of which looks decrepit and decaying. Albright’s other work was similarly macabre, but he considered this his most important work.

Something about this painting helped me see, even as a young person, that we sometimes have difficult decisions to make in life, and that some opportunities are fleeting. Even when we spare ourselves stressful situations, we may later deeply regret our decisions.

In this Bible passage, Jesus speaks the truth, even knowing he will be condemned to death. Peter, on the other hand, repeatedly denies knowing Jesus. While he understandably did so out of fear, he is still left to regret his decision.

Like Peter, I often find it hard to speak up. Fear of embarrassing myself or making others angry can be enough to keep me quiet. As I’ve become older, however, I’ve noticed that the regret I feel over not having done something can be more distressing than the thing I was trying to avoid.

While Peter denied Jesus in this reading, we know that he was later given many opportunities to speak up about Jesus, and, with the help of God, he did and was instrumental in the growth of the church. The same can be true for us. Even though we may avoid an opportunity to speak up, with God’s help, we can try again. Speaking up can be hard, but so much good can happen when we do.

#### To Consider

- When has it been hard for you to speak up?
- What would you like to speak up about, and what do you need to make this happen?

*Dear God, thank you for your example of speaking up in difficult situations. When I miss out on an opportunity to speak up, give me the courage to find my voice and try again. Amen.*

Kimberly Dunbar is the Outreach Ministry Coordinator for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Brevard. She will begin the new Religious Leadership program through Lenoir-Rhyne/LTSS in Fall 2018, and hopes to become a deacon. She feels blessed in many ways especially by her nine-year-old daughter, Sophie.



Ivan Albright—American, 1897–1983. *That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do (The Door)*, 1931/41 © The Art Inst. of Chicago

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Reading 19—A Savior who redeems by losing**

[Read Mark 15:1-47](#)



These 47 verses are an important part of the Passion history which follow Peter's threefold denial of his Lord. The following scenes seem to escalate the chaos begun by Peter's faithless denial. With every cluster of seemingly unredeemable bad news that follows Jesus shows his ability to share a good news that redeems and saves us from ourselves.

As Peter later noted in one of his epistles even though we can deny our Lord he cannot deny himself. And so even when a criminal named Barabbas is saved by the will of a confused crowd our Savior willfully gives his life to save and truly set free Barabbas and all of us.

Jesus' quiet non-response to the authority of Pilate is his way of announcing, without a word, that despite the current chaos he is in control and will always have the final authoritative word.

Our Lord as revealed in these verses is utterly forsaken by his closest associates—his friends. He is put at the merciless mercy of the Roman authorities—the state. His very own Jewish religious leaders condemn him with false accusations and deceitful intentions—the church. If we are honest we see ourselves in all of these faithless infidelities from those closest to those furthest from our Lord—us.

To be our true Savior and Redeemer we need one who loses all in order to find us; to be one who is abandoned by all in order to claim us. Not only are our hearts claimed as we turn to this one who gives all to redeem us but he is the one who, by going through betrayal, denial, rejection, and death, gives us the saving knowledge that whatever we face, even death itself, he has been there and will be with us. By the end of this chapter the faithful women are still as clueless as those who came before them and, as we are sometimes, trusting that in the present darkness and death there will arise light and life.

#### **To Consider**

- How in your life do you see your active and passive faithlessness to our Lord?
- Why is it so important to know that our Lord intentionally laid down his life for us and went through all for us? How does such an understanding change us and how we live life and trust him for the future?

*Gracious Lord, as we hear your passion story again we realize that we could not call you gracious if you had not graciously refused to give us what we all deserve. We could not call you Lord if we did not experience your compassion. Thank you for emptying yourself for us that we might know the true fullness of your cross-shaped love. Amen.*

## Remarkable Mark

### Reading 20—A Silent Dawn

[Read Mark 16: 1-8](#)

Early morning is my favorite time of day. Everything seems fresh and new, the air filled with a great variety of birdsong in my little corner of the world, and people sounds have not yet begun. Usually I awaken with an eagerness to see what the day will bring, as well as an overwhelming gratitude for another day of life.



For the three women in this passage from Mark, however, this early morning was likely tear-filled and somber. The sun had not yet risen and after a mournful and likely sleepless night, they were going to the place where their dear friend and teacher, Jesus, had been hastily placed before the Sabbath without proper burial preparation. And so they had taken it upon themselves to perform this last loving deed for one who had meant so much to them.

Though they had been worrying about the large stone at the tomb's entrance, they found it already rolled back. And as they entered the tomb, a young man in white greeted them, telling them that Jesus was no longer there, that he had been raised and was going ahead of them to Galilee. "Tell the disciples" the young man said. And Mark tells us that the women fled in terror and **said nothing to anyone**.

Here is where the earliest versions of this Gospel end. Full stop. No resurrection appearances. Nothing but silence. A very loud silence caused by fear, by the difficulty in believing news so amazing, so out of the ordinary, so unbelievably miraculous that silence was the response of the women. And how well I understand that silence.

#### To Consider

- Have you ever remained silent out of fear when you should have spoken out?
- Why do you think later versions of Mark added verses 9-20? Which ending do you prefer? Why?

*Grant us courage, God of grace and wisdom, to speak truth when it needs to be spoken. Continue to open our minds and hearts to the endless possibilities of life in your beloved world and to new life, in the name of Jesus, the risen Christ. Amen.*

The Rev. Linda Faltin writes: A proud seventy-six, I am blessed to be a retired pastor, the mother of four and grandmother of nine, a friend to many and a newly-reactivated activist. I write (not nearly enough), read (way too much), demonstrate (occasionally), and relish time with family and friends.

## **Remarkable Mark**

### **Wrap-up for Remarkable Mark**

You may know that many scholars contend that Mark's Gospel originally ended quite strangely with 16:8, "and they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." The rest, they say, were later additions to make sure Mark's narrative included the resurrection narrative, so central to the Christian faith. Indeed, the most ancient manuscripts of Mark do not contain verses 9-20. Well, shoot, *somebody* said something to *somebody*, because we have the whole Gospel of Mark before us today! I hope you've enjoyed re-reading it as I have, or perhaps you're just now reading it through for the first time.



Why, do you suppose, looking back now at the whole 16 chapters in which there is a sense of deep urgency (so much so that the word "immediately" is used 64 times in the book), has there been such a "Messianic Secret" in Mark? Though we, the readers, know who this Jesus is in the narrative, it's fairly clear that most, including the disciples, for most of the time, don't. And even after Peter correctly names Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus, in turn, tells them three times in his passion predictions that this means he must suffer and die, the disciples don't get it. Or refuse to get it.

Get what? That for Mark, being the Messiah and following the Messiah are not primarily about power over nature, wind and wave, disease, or even death itself. Being the Messiah means suffering, willingly, for the life of the beloved, and that would mean you and me. Love has a measuring stick, and it is in how much we are willing to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of the beloved. Those who follow Jesus aren't looking for more power or status in worldly terms; we are called to take up our cross and follow, to lose our lives for the sake of finding them. It's the Mark way. It's the Jesus way.

### **To Consider**

- How might Mark's Gospel read differently, from a human nature perspective, if all of the characters from the beginning knew the fullness of who Jesus was? (The demons know, but the people don't?)

*Gracious God, the ways of the world are so very seductive, especially when it comes to power. Help us to realize and give us courage to live out the example of Jesus, who wants to be made known not so much as a miracle worker but as one who lays down his life for the beloved and invites us to follow in that way. Amen.*

Tim Smith has been bishop of the NC Synod for just over three years now! He is, unimaginably, back in Salisbury where he graduated from high school 40 years ago and then left for 37 years. He and wife Wendy have three adult children and four grandchildren who are their "hobbies" and their "joy."