

## Hear the Good News! A Public Reading of the Gospel of Mark

Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary (which begins November 27, 2011) features readings from the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the earliest and shortest of the four gospels – compact, concise, and compelling in its presentation of “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). It takes less than two hours to read the entirety of Mark’s gospel out loud. Why not host a public reading of Mark in your congregation?

The potential opportunities and benefits are many:

- hearing the gospel of Mark out loud allows us to rediscover the good news of Jesus as the biblical writer intended – as the *story* of our salvation, unfolding in an intentional and dramatic way, received in community;
- hearing the entire story in *context* gives us a chance to experience the “big picture” of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, not as isolated scenes and individual stories, but as a unified account of God’s saving work;
- hearing the whole gospel story in *community* presents an opportunity for discernment and dialogue about its implications, and creates a situation in which we become accountable to one another for how we will respond;
- hearing the gospel as a congregation provides an occasion for us to evaluate the faithfulness of our mission and ministry in light of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ;
- hearing all of the gospel in one sitting helps to fill in the gaps between the lectionary readings, and compensates for places where the lectionary readings are out of sequence with the chronology of Mark’s gospel;
- hearing a year’s worth of gospel readings together can be a way for preachers, church musicians, and other worship planners to think systematically and strategically about the year ahead;
- most importantly, hearing the gospel can be – by the power of the Holy Spirit – a life-changing, faith-shaping, disciple-making encounter with the living Word of God.

When you have determined a time and place for the reading of Mark’s gospel, spread the good news! You can use or adapt the paragraph below to create an announcement for your church newsletter or website. You might find ways to publicize this event to the larger community as well, as an opportunity for outreach and evangelism. Or you might consider hosting a reading in partnership with another congregation in your community (Presbyterian or otherwise) as a collaborative project and witness to Christian unity.

Have you heard the good news? Join us for public reading of the Gospel of Mark [insert date, time, and location]. The earliest and shortest of the four gospels, Mark offers a compact, concise, and compelling account of “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). It takes less than two hours to read the whole Gospel of Mark out loud. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, this can be a life-changing, faith-shaping, disciple-making encounter with the living Word of God.

## Hear the Good News! A Public Reading of the Gospel of Mark

### GREETING

Jesus said: The time is fulfilled, Mark 1:15  
and the kingdom of God has come near;  
**repent, and believe in the good news.**

**HYMN** Blessed Jesus, at Your Word PH 454

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Eternal, living God,  
by the power of your Holy Spirit  
prepare the way in our hearts  
for the coming of your Word;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

*After a time of silent preparation, the reading begins.*

### THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Prologue	Mark 1:1-15
Part One	Mark 1:16—3:12
Part Two	Mark 3:13—6:6
Part Three	Mark 6:7—8:21

**HYMN** Break Thou the Bread of Life PH 329

*A brief intermission may follow the hymn. Participants may wish to keep silence during this time, reflecting on the gospel story and remaining in a spirit of listening and prayer.*

Part Four	Mark 8:22—10:52
Part Five	Mark 11:1—13:37
Part Six	Mark 14:1—15:47

*After a time of silent reflection, the reading continues.*

Conclusion	Mark 16:1-8, 9-20
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### CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, we give you thanks  
for the good news we have received  
in the life, death, and resurrection  
of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior.  
By the power of your Holy Spirit,  
keep us faithful in our calling  
to take up our cross and follow him  
for the sake of the gospel. **Amen.**

**HYMN** Lift High the Cross PH 371

### DISMISSAL

Truly this man was God's Son! Mark 15:39  
**Amen. Thanks be to God.**

## Guidelines for Reading

This suggestion for dividing up the readings is based on the literary structure of Mark's gospel. Each unit has a certain shape and integrity in the way the biblical story is presented (see the study guide below for more information).

You'll need four to eight good readers (with four readers, just start over again with the first reader at part four). Use a group of readers that is representative of your congregation – younger, older; female, male; people of different cultures, backgrounds, and professions. Encourage deacons and elders in the congregation to read; don't rely too much on pastors. Be sure each reader rehearses his or her part *out loud*, in the presence of others who can offer constructive feedback. For more guidelines on reading Scripture in public worship, see this resource: <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/reading-scripture-public-worship/>

Begin with a prayer for illumination, and end with a concluding collect that ties together the themes of the gospel. Examples are provided. You may have the first and last readers lead these prayers, or ask someone else to lead them.

Read the gospel from the church's Bible (the big book on the lectern or pulpit). It may be tempting to print out individual "scripts," with enlarged type or markings for readers; however, this can convey the impression that the Word of God is temporary and disposable. Reading from the church's book shows that this Word is a treasure we share. Using the same translation of Scripture throughout will also help to reveal recurring images and themes.

Don't rush through the readings. Read slowly, clearly, and above all with the conviction that this is *good news* – a life-changing, faith-shaping, disciple-making message from God. Allow brief times of silence between readers (letting one reader be seated before the next stands to read), and provide longer silences for reflection as indicated.

Hymn suggestions are provided. Singing together during the reading is important for a number of reasons: congregational song offers a way to respond to God with praise and gratitude for the grace of Jesus Christ and the gift of the gospel; carefully selected hymns help to reinforce the themes and images of Scripture, deepening our understanding; music provides time and space for personal prayer and reflection on the gospel story; and singing engages the whole body – heart, mind, soul, and strength – in the event of the Word proclaimed.

At the conclusion of the reading, there are a number of possibilities. You might schedule this event in such a way that the reading of Mark's gospel takes place on a Saturday morning, followed by a meal, and then a time for discussion and discernment – ideally in small groups first, then reporting back to the whole. This would be a good format for a congregational retreat. If the reading takes place in the afternoon or evening, you might provide light refreshments and then continue with a shorter time for discussion.

In any case, it's important to find an opportunity for conversation about the gospel, as soon as possible after the reading. Use the questions from the study guide (below) as a way to invite reflection and prompt discussion. It's probably better not to break up the event for discussion *during* the reading, because this may interrupt the flow of the story and disrupt the experience of the gospel as a whole.

The brief study guide that follows offers an overview of the structure of the Gospel of Mark, an orientation to primary themes, and questions for reflection or discussion. You should distribute this study guide (or something like it) *in advance* of the public reading. If participants familiarize themselves with the structure and themes of the gospel before the reading begins, they will be better equipped to understand and appreciate the story. It's preferable that participants not be distracted by the written word during the reading, but that they attend to the Word proclaimed through the voice of the one who is speaking this good news.

## The Gospel of Mark: Structure and Themes

The prologue to the Gospel of Mark (1:1-15) includes Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan (1:2-11) and temptation in the wilderness (1:12-13). The narrator has already revealed to us that Jesus is God's son (1:1), and a voice from heaven confirms this: "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). Jesus' first words proclaim his mission and the message of the gospel: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15).

After this prologue, Mark's gospel unfolds in a pattern of escalating action, like stair steps.<sup>1</sup> You might think of it as consisting of two main "flights of stairs" each with a series of three steps.

I. The first half of the Gospel of Mark (1:16–8:21) takes us through the early part of Jesus' ministry. At each stage, Jesus' action is met with resistance:

A. *Mark 1:16–3:12*. Jesus calls his first disciples (1:16-20); but the religious and political leaders plot against him (3:1-6).

B. *Mark 3:13–6:6*. Jesus names twelve apostles, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel (3:13-19); but his own people reject him (6:1-6).

C. *Mark 6:7–8:21*. Jesus commissions the twelve apostles to ministry (6:7-13); but even his own disciples fail to understand his mission (8:14-21).

II. The second half of Mark's gospel (8:22–15:47) turns toward Jerusalem and the events of the cross. The tension and conflict continue to escalate:

A. *Mark 8:22–10:52*. In chapters eight through ten Jesus makes three predictions about his passion (8:31–9:1, 9:30-32, 10:32-34); this section begins (8:22-26) and ends (10:46-52) with the healing of a person who is blind, symbolic of the disciples' failure to understand.

B. *Mark 11:1–13:37*. Chapters eleven through thirteen follow Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his conflicts with the religious authorities; it begins with Jesus cleansing the temple (11:15-19) and ends with him prophesying the temple's destruction (13:1-2).

C. *Mark 14:1–15:47*. Chapters fourteen and fifteen describe Jesus' anointing (14:3-9), his Passover with the disciples (14:12-25), his betrayal and arrest (14:43-52), his trial and denial (14:53–15:15), and finally, his crucifixion and burial (15:21-47).

The conclusion of the Gospel of Mark (16:1-20) takes us to the empty tomb, very early in the morning on the first day of the week (16:1-8). Three women have come to anoint Jesus' body; instead they hear the good news that he is risen from the dead. They flee in terror and amazement. Scholars believe that Mark's gospel originally ended here. Two alternate endings follow; the longer one (16:9-20) includes hints of the post-resurrection events and appearances we find in Matthew, Luke, and John.

There are several significant themes that are woven throughout the story of the Gospel of Mark:

*Son of God, Son of Man*. The central question in Mark's gospel is one of Christology: Who is Jesus? Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus consistently refers to himself as the Son of Man, emphasizing his humanity (see 2:10, e.g.). But at certain key points in the story we glimpse his divinity as well: in the prologue, the narrator introduces Jesus as "Son of God" (1:1) and, at Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11); at the midpoint of the gospel, in the transfiguration of Jesus,

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to Mark in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Michael D. Coogan, ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001) 56.

the voice from heaven repeats, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (9:7); and at the conclusion of the gospel, when Jesus is crucified, a centurion exclaims, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39). Nevertheless, Jesus’ own people, the religious and political leaders, and even his closest companions fail to understand who he is; only the unclean spirits seem to recognize him as “the Holy One of God” (1:24).

*The Kingdom of God.* Jesus announces the coming of the kingdom of God with his first words in Mark’s gospel (1:15). He teaches extensively about this kingdom in parables (4:1-34) and through his example, lifting up the lowly (10:13-16) and turning the rich away empty (10:17-27). He also *inaugurates* it with miraculous deeds of power: healing the sick, casting out demons, feeding the hungry, stilling a storm, and walking on water. When Jesus enters Jerusalem the crowds cry out, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” (11:10). When he shares bread and wine with his disciples on the night before he dies, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (14:25).

*Jews and Gentiles.* The Gospel of Mark demonstrates how Jesus’ ministry comes to cross the divide between Jew and Gentile in the ancient world. There are several pivotal scenes in this development: an argument with the scribes and Pharisees over the laws of purity and the traditions of the elders (7:1-23); the healing of the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, who dares to ask for a “crumb from the table” (7:24-30); and, after the miraculous feeding of 5000 Jews (6:30-44), the feeding of a crowd of 4000 Gentiles (8:1-10). The Roman centurion’s confession of faith (15:39) is the culmination of this dramatic movement.

*Discipleship.* Chapters eight through ten of Mark’s gospel focus particular attention on the theme of discipleship: the significance – as well as the challenge, risk, and cost – of being a follower of Jesus Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus means taking up the cross to follow him (8:34); it means losing our lives for the sake of the gospel (8:35); it means welcoming children, and the last and least who are first in the kingdom of God (9:33-37, 10:13-16); it means abandoning wealth and prosperity for a life of struggle and strife (10:17-28); it means drinking the cup that Jesus drinks, and being baptized with his baptism (10:35-40); it means humble service – not to be served, but to be a servant of all (10:41-45).<sup>2</sup>

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What does Mark’s gospel teach us about who Jesus is? How does it demonstrate the humanity of Jesus? How does it reveal his divinity? What does it mean for us to claim Jesus as Son of Man? What does it mean for us to worship him as Son of God?
- What is the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims and inaugurates in the Gospel of Mark? How have you witnessed that kingdom in the church and world?
- Are there boundaries in our society that correspond with the division between Jews and Gentiles depicted in Mark’s gospel? How might the church be called to cross those divides?
- What does discipleship mean in the Gospel of Mark? Have you experienced the challenge, risk, and cost of discipleship as you have sought to follow Jesus? If so, how so? If not, why not?

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<sup>2</sup> This structural outline and summary of themes is based on the *Interpretation* commentary on *Mark* by Lamar Williamson Jr. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

## **Bibliography**

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