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A Markan Epiphany: Lessons from Mark 1

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Interpreting and preaching on these Markan texts in the Epiphany Season requires attention to a series of contexts, including the narrative setting provided for these separate units and the congregational setting within which they will be interpreted.

There are several things to observe about the narrative setting. First is the point of view: “Mark” tells a story about Jesus from a privileged position. The narrator shares none of the characters’ limitations—and neither do we as readers. The story begins with a value judgment: Jesus’ career is “good news,” gospel. Further, we know that Jesus is someone special: the “Christ, the Son of God” (if the variant reading “Son of God” in 1:1 is to be adopted). We know from the outset what virtually no one in the story ever learns, information available only to God and the demons. For us there is no “messianic secret”; we know who Jesus is from the first, and there will be no evaluation to displace what we have learned. The detail is an important one. At no point in the gospel do we as readers operate on the same level as characters in the drama. We do not share their limitations; we know what they do not. The irony that runs through the story depends upon that gulf separating reader from character. If the story is about the “epiphany” of Jesus, the opening verses provide a decisive revelation, at least for the reader.

Another feature of the gospel becomes apparent as we read through the opening chapters: the reader will have to work to make a unity of the story. Imagination is required to tie together the discrete episodes. The narrator provides virtually no transitions; events follow in rapid succession, with little more than their placement in the story to suggest there is some thread that ties them together. There is coherence in Mark—there is a plot with major and minor themes—and detecting that coherence and constructing a plot require effort on the part of readers. And there will be rules of the game we shall have to develop; the author takes them for granted.

And what of the congregational context? The stories will be interpreted for people who probably know at least the rough outline of Jesus’ ministry. Each

pastor must fill in the specifics, but perhaps some generalizations about our congregations are possible.

One powerful force at work in our culture seeks to universalize Christ at the expense of Jesus. In a society uncomfortable with arguing about matters of value, toleration becomes a convenient means of avoidance. Particularity is an embarrassment. The “marketplace of ideas” becomes a smorgasbord, with all dishes of equal value. For such a culture, Jesus will be hard to swallow. God’s epiphany takes on flesh, assuming a specific shape; his revelation is bound up

with a particular history. The “good news” that God has shown himself is tied to Jesus, a young Jewish male. As God’s interpreters to this culture, preachers should expect some tension with prevailing forces.

Another powerful force at work in the culture is the passionate desire for clarity and stability. Peter Berger refers to religion as a “sacred canopy,” hovering over us as a protection against dangers of all sorts. There are many who find the relativizing forces in our culture intolerable and who long for a clear glimpse of God, some unambiguous sign: “O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down” (Isa 64:1). In fact, the heavens are torn apart; God does come—but hardly without ambiguity. His coming is not greeted with cheers but with misgivings and finally with violent rejection. Jesus’ ministry holds promise, but that promise leads to the cross.

The interpretive task would seem to be to get at the promise in these epiphany texts while taking seriously the particularity of the good news and the specific setting in which the lives of hearers are planted.

I. TEXTS FOR THE EPIPHANY SEASON

The Baptism of Our Lord, Mark 1:4-11.

Jesus’ ministry begins with a dramatic tearing (not opening!) of the heavens, with the descent of the Spirit, and with a divine pronouncement. The world is changed. The promised deliverer has arrived and his public career commences. The words of the heavenly declaration conjure up images familiar to those who know the scriptural promises (Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1; perhaps Gen 22). Yet the dramatic scene brings surprises. Jesus’ anointing and confirmation occur as part of his baptism at the hands of John. Jesus, the one who will be greater than John and will eventually baptize with the Holy Spirit, is himself baptized by the one who preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4). The scene is wrong; the career of the promised offspring of David should begin with appropriate splendor; Jesus should be hailed by crowds. As it is, his inauguration occurs in the desert, away from centers of civilization. The attendants are the hordes who come to be baptized by John. There are no cheers, no conversions. The tearing of the heavens makes no obvious impact on any audience but the narrator’s—just as the conclusion of Jesus’ ministry, the tearing of the temple curtain, makes no obvious impact. The world is a different place because of Jesus, we learn. A barrier separating God from his creation has been tom away. But people still live as if nothing had happened. The epiphany makes no obvious impact. Hiddenness is the dominant motif. So is surprise. The Jesus who comes to accomplish God’s promised deliverance is not the sort expected.

Throughout the story he will consort with the wrong sorts of people and will trouble the righteous. The story opens with an epiphany, but that epiphany is a surprise and a challenge.

Epiphany 3: The Dawning of the Kingdom and the Call of the Disciples, Mark 1:14-20.

The theme of Jesus’ ministry is introduced in 1:14: He is the herald of God’s kingdom. There has been considerable discussion about the meaning of the phrase “kingdom of God.” The problem is that the phrase is not defined: Mark presumes his audience knows what that kingdom

is. Recent scholarship has emphasized the active character of the noun “kingdom,” translating “kingly rule.” The term may also designate the sphere of God’s rule (thus assuming spatial connotations). Perhaps the best we can do is to note how the imagery is employed in Mark and in the rest of the New Testament, since data external to the New Testament is capable of more than one reading.

The announcement of impending change suggests that what was occurring was not in accord with God’s will. If Jesus must herald the dawning of the kingdom, it must be that people have been living in darkness. Repentance must accompany the announcement that the kingdom’s epiphany is at hand. The gospel provides some glimpses of life in the darkness. In the opening chapters Jesus heals the sick, frees those in bondage to demons, and eats with social and religious outcasts. The human family is fragmented, in bondage to sin and evil. In the stories we glimpse both the problem to which Jesus’ ministry is directed, and we begin to glimpse the solution.

In this light, it is important to note subtle foreshadowing in the story. These early events are not separate stories but pieces of a larger ministry, a ministry that leads to a final confrontation in Jerusalem between Jesus and the established religious and political authorities. There is already a shadow cast over Jesus’ ministry at the outset. John the Baptizer is the one who prepares the way, and his preparation lands him in prison. It is on that note—the mention of his arrest—that Jesus’ own preaching and healing mission begins. It is hardly a surprise to discover later that Jesus will share John’s fate.

Mark tells a story about Jesus, but not only about Jesus. The group Jesus gathers to serve as disciples and emissaries play a significant role as well. Their introduction into the narrative is abrupt. They are summoned to follow—with the promise that they will spend their time catching people instead of fish—and they respond. They are offered no explanations, given no guarantees; they understand little (as the story makes painfully clear)—and yet they follow. Their lack of enlightenment continues, though Jesus promises they will finally see. Yet however imperfect their vision of the truth, they continue to follow.

The relationship of the disciples to the reader is complex. They are the most sympathetic characters in the story; they are not enemies, not outsiders (chapter 4). Yet we cannot simply identify with the disciples. As readers we know from the beginning what they never learn. We witness their performance as followers and their almost incredible dullness from our privileged position. We know. But do we believe? We understand what they do not. But do we follow? What does it mean, what will it mean, to be a learner and a follower of Jesus? The gospel will explore those questions. We may at least assume that

Jesus can be as much a surprise and a challenge to Christians as he was to those who were in the dark about his identity. The art of preaching is to work that surprise for those who are supposedly insiders, who can use the Christian tradition as protection from Jesus.

Epiphany 4: Jesus and the Demons, Mark 1:21-28.

The first event in Jesus’ ministry is a dramatic exorcism. It is symptomatic of what is to come. Mark’s Jesus is less a teacher than an exorcist. He is an activist. His ministry will be one of conflict—most especially with the powers of evil. If Jesus is the herald of the kingdom of God, he is also its agent. Jesus is himself possessed—by God’s Spirit. And as the agent of God’s

rule, he invades Satan's domain to seize control (3:21-30). Several observations can be made:

(a) The confrontation takes place in a synagogue, a place where only the ritually clean gather for worship. There is an unclean spirit in this place of ritual purity, however, and it must be driven out by someone with power.

(b) The spirit knows who Jesus is. All the supernatural beings in the story recognize Jesus and make confessions, though people do not seem to hear what they say. There is some irony later when the religious leaders accuse Jesus of having a demon; even the demons know that is not true. They know that Jesus is the "holy one of God," the "Son of God," or the "Son of the Most High God." The demons are enjoined not to speak. There is a mystery about Jesus' identity; things are to remain concealed—until the time for disclosure arrives (4:21-22).

(c) While many of the healing stories provide examples of the power of faith, exorcisms have a rather different function. They offer no example of faith at all. The possessed have no control of themselves; the demons speak as they choose. These stories are about deliverance greater than anyone can even request, for people who are unable to ask for help.

Epiphany 5 and 6: Jesus the Healer, Mark 1:29-39, 40-45.

There is a notable contrast between the exorcism and Jesus' healings. In most of the stories about Jesus' restoring various people to health, faith is a factor. In the brief account of Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31), there is at least a suggestion that the disciples asked Jesus for help, believing that he was capable of giving it ("and immediately they told him of her"). When the sun has set (and the Sabbath is past), people who are sick flock to Jesus—confident that he can help (1:32-34). Their faith is rewarded. The story of the leper (1:40-45) provides a concrete and dramatic example of the same message: those who ask will receive. Jesus' conversation with Peter (1:35-38) indicates that he is not simply a healer—or perhaps more accurately, that his healing is tied to a larger campaign that involves announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand; his mission cannot be reduced to healing. Jesus' need to press on does not imply indifference to suffering, however. The stories of his encounters with the sick invite confidence—faith—and offer promises to those who ask.

Though the story of the healing of the leper will not appear in the pericope series this year, it is worth some brief comment since it brings to light the dangerous side of Jesus' ministry. Leprosy was a social as well as a physical

disease. Society was protected against lepers by the force of ritual purity. Lepers were social and religious outcasts, excluded from public life. There were good reasons for society to protect itself. But Jesus refused to respect the boundaries. He associated with those whose lives threatened the delicate fabric of society: sinners, tax collectors, the irresponsible whose lives demonstrated indifference to the rules. And he associated with other dangerous people, such as the lepers. He dared to touch the leper, to risk contamination. But he was not contaminated. The leper was cleansed; an outcast was brought back into the family.

We ought not to miss the risk of someone like Jesus. It takes very little to destroy the stability of a society; we live just a few steps from chaos. Jesus refused to settle with life as it was; he did not accept diseased and broken lives as inevitable. His assault on behalf of God's kingdom was costly, however. It required trust in him alone. There was no perspective from

which his work could be evaluated. He made up his own rules. And people were afraid, particularly those who were responsible for the political and religious well-being of the people.

That is made clear first of all in the setting of the exorcisms and healings in the story. People are impressed, but many are frightened or offended by Jesus' display of power. Religious leaders believe Jesus is possessed, and so he is, but by the Holy Spirit and not unclean spirits. The people in the land of the Gerasenes ask Jesus to leave when they see the results of his work (5:18). Power can be something fearful. It all depends upon the one who dispenses the power.

The situation is not much changed. On the one hand, there are people ready to believe anyone who promises healing and success. Witness the ability of religious peddlers to get rich selling their wares over the airwaves. Reasonable people want to believe there is some way to escape from suffering and to guarantee success.

There are others desperately fearful of healers and successful preachers. As a group, preachers are probably among the most skeptical. There is a special delight in parsonages as well as newsrooms when someone proves to be a fake. Discrediting an Oral Roberts exempts us from taking healing seriously. There is something comfortable about living in a world in which the rules are clear, even if we do not always win. If we can at least understand the losses—if we can blame viruses or weather patterns or air pollution—life may seem more tolerable. It may well be, however, that our peace of mind is more expensive than we realize. We may be comfortable with a god drastically reduced in size who cannot be blamed for the world's evils. But that also means we are ultimately victims of a world beyond our control, a world that holds little promise.

Mark's stories promise far more. They speak of a God who has power to heal and to drive out evil. And they promise that the God in whose hand creation rests has chosen to disclose himself in Jesus. The promises may well strike us as risky. Praying for healing and deliverance suggests that God has the power to help and that he is involved in the world. Such a God cannot be manipulated and must simply be trusted. We can easily learn to hate a God with such power. His failure to act where we believe God ought to act becomes a problem. The stakes are high. In thinking about these texts, it is important to recognize the forces within us that resist faith in such a God and that recoil at such promises.

II. REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING

Preaching on these texts in a contemporary setting means being aware of the context. We have at least two conflicting responses. There is on the one hand the desperate willingness to believe in supernatural deliverance as a way out. People want to believe that when they pray their prayers will be answered; they want to believe that there are guaranteed ways of keeping evil at bay. They hope for an epiphany of God in light of which all darkness is driven away and life is lived solely in the sun. For such people it is necessary to read these healing stories within Mark's Gospel as a whole. Jesus' ministry leads him to the cross; his life is not without pain. And his disciples do not escape from trouble and ambiguity. Even Easter will not simply remove the veil so that truth becomes public and unambiguous. The frightened women run from the tomb; the world looks much as it did before Jesus' coming. The time of clarity and safety will come—but not yet. Life is lived in the shadow of the cross, until Christ returns to finish what he began.

Yet there are also those who use a "theology of the cross" as an excuse for a weary skepticism that expects little from God or anyone else. The cross is not an obliteration of all that

precedes in Jesus' ministry. God vindicated Jesus by raising him on the third day. There is something hopeful in the cross, a promise of healing and forgiveness and deliverance. We have ways of speaking about that promise in traditional terms. The line from the Great Thanksgiving reads, "It is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you...." The word "salutary" is well-chosen; it has to do with what is healthy. Likewise we pray, "We give you thanks, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through the healing power of this gift of life." May we not speak of the healing power of Word and Sacrament? Are we not invited to believe that lives are made whole, that we are freed from bondage to sin and death? The challenge in preaching is to make those promises plausible—to accomplish that healing in the lives of a congregation. We can dare to pray that things be changed—that God's kingdom will come for us.

The Epiphany Season marks a revelation of God's glory, and it assumes the particular shape of Jesus.