



MARK

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS



Small Groups

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Have you ever experienced something so remarkable that you just had to tell someone the story? If so, you might understand where the Gospel of Mark came from. The people who knew Jesus experienced something previously unimaginable, and they passed down the stories for us. In this series we will explore together how the beginning of the good news of Jesus from centuries past continues to be good news for us here and now.

HOW TO USE THE FACILITATOR GUIDE

This is meant to be a resource to help you guide your group through a Bible-based discussion and into your prayer response time. You'll begin with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by a warmup question, often somewhat related to the topic of the study ahead. From there you'll read Scripture together, explore questions in an open conversation (remembering to practice good listening and encourage dialogue), and close with a time of prayer with each other. We end with prayer prompts that may help you tie these passages to the needs or desires of your group, and to bless what the Lord has done in your time together.

There are likely more questions and, at times, Scripture, than your group will have time to cover. This is by design. We would rather you have more questions than you need than too few. We advise that the facilitator review the lesson ahead of the meeting and choose a few questions they'd most like to ask, so that you can skip over some questions for the sake of time. Remember, you're meeting routinely, so there will be time to circle back on these conversations again.

Please allot appropriate time for prayer at the end of your meeting. Prayer is an essential and irreplaceable part of small group. We'd rather you abbreviate the discussion and move on to prayer rather than have a long discussion and speed through prayer. That doesn't mean you can't pray efficiently (Mat 6:7), but we believe that God hears and responds to our prayers, and that we are knitted together when we pray with each other.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Dan Kidd at dkidd@ualc.org.
For more small group resources, including facilitator training, visit ualc.org/smallgroups

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THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Mark 1:1-20

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 1

There are several different portions in this passage, moving quickly from one scene to the next. You may want to be sure to leave time to re-read the different portions as you come to them. We've included prompts for re-reading in the notes below.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

The Gospel of Mark opens with this simple introduction, "The beginning of the good news (the gospel) about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet." Notice how much is loaded into that very first sentence. Mark has a proclamation of good news for us. Jesus, he says, is the anointed one (*messiah*). He is the Son of God. And his coming was foretold by the prophets. Even in this first sentence we are promised that this is going to be a remarkable story.

In the weeks ahead we will encounter the good news about Jesus (the Messiah and Son of God) in the stories, sermons, and parables collected and masterfully woven together by Mark. And, appropriately, we will start at the beginning of this good news in Chapter 1.

OPENING QUESTION:

- If you could ask Jesus' disciples one question about him, what would you ask?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Good and Gracious Lord, it is a gift to join you today, along with sisters and brothers in the faith as we unite to study your Word. As we begin this study, allow the words we read and the conversation we share to draw us closer to one another and to you. We ask that you would lead and guide our gathering and make yourself known to us throughout this time.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Mark 1:1-20. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

- What stands out to you about the way the Gospel of Mark begins?
 - You might note that Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, doesn't begin with the stories of Jesus' birth or childhood, but instead begins with Jesus' adult life and the inauguration of his ministry in his baptism.
 - You may also note that he begins quoting explicitly from Isaiah (though technically beginning with Malachi 3:1 before quoting Isaiah 40).
- Why do you think Mark's Gospel begins by quoting from prophets and with the introduction of John the Baptist?
 - It may seem strange that in a story about the good news of Jesus we begin with a character other than Jesus. But each of the evangelists (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John) relates the story of Jesus to the prophetic ministry of John, each of them quoting Isaiah 40 (Matthew 3:1-3, Mark 1:2-4, Luke 3:2-6, John 1:19-23). Connecting John (and thus Jesus) to the prophetic proclamation of Isaiah appears to be a fundamental part of the gospel story.
 - John prepared the way for the coming Lord by "preaching baptism and repentance of sins."
 - It's also worth noting Mark's description of John: He "*appeared in the wilderness*" He clothed himself in camel's hair, a leather belt, and he ate locusts (that is, short-horned grasshoppers) and wild honey.
- What is the significance of John's baptisms to the story of Jesus?
 - Ritual washing was an important part of Jewish tradition, especially for the priests in the temples, but also for lay people. John's baptisms took place in the wilderness, far away from the temples. The focus was less on ritual purity and more on repentance and forgiveness in preparation for the One who would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit.
 - John the baptizer fulfilled the words of the prophets by calling the people to repent as they prepared for the coming of the Lord; promising them forgiveness.
- Why was Jesus baptized by John?
 - We are not told why Jesus chose to be baptized. Jesus, who never sinned (2 Corinthians 5:21), would not have any individual sins to confess or receive forgiveness for. But at least 3 things were likely accomplished in his baptism: John's ministry was validated, Jesus modeled baptism that his followers would imitate, and his baptism gave occasion for the Spirit to fall on him and the Father to proclaim "You are my Son, whom I love; and with you I am well pleased."

Consider having someone to re-read vv.9-13.

Imagine the scene: Jesus is baptized and as he rises up out of the water, the heavens are torn open and the Spirit descends upon him. And then he heard those words "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

This was the moment when God declared that Jesus was his Son and that he was pleased with him. Jesus' identity had been confirmed! And then, "at once" (an expression Mark uses dozens of times), the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness where he spent 40 days being tempted by Satan.

- What stands out to you about Mark's telling of Jesus' temptation by Satan?
 - Receive all answers. Note that Mark does not specifically detail the temptations (unlike Matthew and Luke). We're told Jesus was with the wild animals and that angels "attended" Jesus.
- What do you think might be the significance of Jesus' temptation and 40-day isolation in the wilderness? How might that time have influenced the ministry ahead of him?
 - Receive all answers.
- Have you ever experienced a time or season of solitude or isolation? What was that like?
 - We might feel isolated even when we are surrounded by family and friends. We might feel alone, or as though we're in the wilderness. We may question our identities, our worth, our purpose.
 - Invite the group to share their experience as they're willing; how they coped, how they moved through to the other side.
 - Consider how solitude may be difficult for us and also how it may be good for us.
- What was the good news Jesus proclaimed entering Galilee?
 - Notice the shift from John's proclamation and practice. We have no record of Jesus baptizing, but he proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had come and he called on those who heard him to believe this good news: even though Caesar still claimed to be the king of kings, lord of lords, and savior of the world, God's Kingdom had come with and in the anointed King Jesus.
- How does the kingship of Jesus differ from the other leadership and governments? What might it look like to live as a citizen of God's Kingdom?
 - Jesus' kingship reconciles us with God, forgives our sin, transforms our hearts and minds, adopts us into God's family, liberates us, and defeats death.
 - Consider the numerous, practical ways we might embrace and enjoy the abundant lives as we've been saved into, as citizens of God's Kingdom and members of God's family.

Today's passage concludes with Jesus selecting his disciples. (*Consider having someone re-read vv.16-20.*)

Jesus was a rabbi, and it was very normal for rabbis to have disciples. In most cases, students would approach the rabbi and ask to be his disciple, which was followed by an "interview process" of sorts. However, Jesus didn't wait for the disciples to come to him. Instead, he went out and asked people to follow him, to be his disciples. He didn't interview them. He didn't choose this group for their theological or Scriptural expertise. Instead, he asked fishermen, a tax collector, and a zealot to follow him.

What stands out about them is that they dropped what they were doing and they followed him.

- What does Jesus' group of disciples tell us about Jesus and his ministry?

- In what ways does Jesus call us to be his disciples today? How have you been called to be a disciple of Jesus?
 - Share with each other how Jesus has called you to be his disciples. It may have been an event that felt like an obvious choice; safe, in your comfort zone. Or the call may have been far from your comfort zone and you wondered why would Jesus possibly be calling you to that. How have you responded to Jesus' call? Was it easy? Quick? Difficult? A long process?
 - Share how Jesus has met you as you've followed him.
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

There was a lot covered in today's lesson. The beginning of the good news is packed full, and this is just the beginning! This would be an opportune time to share what God has stirred up in each other as we have looked at these passages and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The call upon us is great – baptism, repentance and forgiveness, the possibility of being tested, living with dual citizenship: Kingdom of God and our own country, being called to follow him.

Take this opportunity to prayerfully reflect on and share the exciting parts of this, as well as the parts that make us nervous, fearful, anxious, etc. Is there a particular part of what was discussed today that is especially challenging or fulfilling?

Then spend time praying over those responses.

Close by praying a blessing over all participants that God would continue to open their eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to his call.

KINGDOM COMING

Mark 2:1-22

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 2

This week we are reading and discussing the theme of God's reign and Kingdom coming here on Earth as illustrated by the Gospel in the book of Mark.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

In these first months of the new year, we are reading together from the Gospel according to Mark. Today, we'll take a closer look as a group at the second chapter of this good news story about Jesus, focusing on the theme of "the Kingdom coming."

OPENING QUESTION:

- Have you ever heard someone say, "Phew! God had my back in that situation!" or "I must have had an angel looking over me then!"? Have you ever had such an experience?
 - To prime the pump further, you might invite your group to consider these follow up questions: Do you think in these instances, the people who've made such comments believed the Kingdom of God was "breaking through" into our realm of daily life; that there was spiritual intercession on their behalf?
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OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Lord, we begin by proclaiming your majesty and honor. As we prepare to hear your Word in the scriptures, we are thankful that you have invited us to know you, that you love us, and that you are good to us. Prepare our ears and our hearts for your good news today. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Mark 2: 1-22. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

The book of Mark begins with the author's proclamation of who he thinks Jesus is. The opening line of Mark states that it's "the beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God." And then, in the scripture that follows, the author strives to influence their audience to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, too, by showing Jesus and people's reaction to him. About mid-way through chapter one, Jesus

himself proclaims good news that “God’s Kingdom has come near” (Mark 1:15), and in chapter two, Jesus brings God’s Kingdom in daily situations.

Beginning with the story of the paralyzed man, which we read about in 2:1-11.

- In what ways are God’s kingdom illustrated as present in this story?
 - In v. 5 Jesus forgives the paralyzed man’s sins.
 - In vv. 11-12 Jesus physically healed the paralyzed man
- Did anything seem peculiar or difficult to understand from this story? If so, please share.
 - Receive all answers.

Imagine for a moment you were in the house when this man was lowered into it.

- Do you think one of Jesus’ actions would have shocked or impressed you more?
 - Specifically, would Jesus speaking forgiveness over the man’s sins, or the man getting up and walking away after being told he was healed, have been more alarming for you to witness?

Let’s now consider the story of Jesus calling Levi to be a disciple.

Consider having someone re-read vv.13-17, inviting them to imagine themselves as a character of their choosing in the scene.

- As you heard this passage, did you imagine yourself as a guest of Levi in the position of being another tax collector or sinner, a disciple of Jesus, or a Pharisee?
- How comfortable, or uncomfortable, did Jesus’ response in verse 17 make you feel, given the role you in which you found yourself in this story?
 - You might ask your group that, if they are going to share about someone else, they do so respecting their dignity and perhaps not sharing a name and avoiding gossip.

In verse 17, when Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ criticism of him keeping company with *scum* (NLT), *misfits* (The Message), and *sinners* (NIV).

- Do you remember any other instances in Scripture where Jesus was accused or criticized for who he spent time his time with?
 - In addition to instances of Jesus being a friend to sinners, you may also highlight these instances of God placing special concern on the wellbeing of those who are vulnerable or marginalized in society, like widows and orphans, such as in Psalm 68: 5-6 and James 1:27.
- Have you ever been in a situation where you were doing or saying something you believed was appropriate, but proceeded to be criticized for it? How do you think Jesus would want you to respond in such a situation?

Finally, we will take a closer look at the passage on the topic of Jesus and fasting from vv. 18-22.

Jesus is asked “How is it that John the Baptist’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?”

- How might you summarize Jesus’ response (vv.19-22)?
 - Essentially, it’s not appropriate for Jesus’ disciples to feast since he, the Son of Man, is with them and, therefore, this is a celebratory time as God’s Kingdom is present on earth reigning through Jesus.
- How should we respond to this text? That is, what message should we take away, and what is there to implement into our daily lives or practice of our faith?"
 - Receive all answers.

A summary of Jesus’ message in the book of Mark, regarding God’s Kingdom coming near, might be given in three tiers of good news: First, through Jesus, God has a rescue operation for the world. Second, God’s Kingdom will confront evil. And third, all people are invited to live under God’s reign by following Jesus.

- Why do you think we have found the Pharisees particularly struggling with Jesus’ words and actions in Mark 2?
 - The Pharisees were scholars of the religious law and not open-minded to the good news of the coming messiah being the savior of *all people*.
- In reference to God’s Kingdom, have you ever heard the expression that we live in both the “here and not yet”? If so, what does that mean to you? Or in other words, how does that resonate with you and your understanding of God’s reign and intercession in our lives?

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

In today’s passage we’ve encountered (at least) two instances where Jesus transformed the lives of people in need. Christ continues to bring his Kingdom in transforming, liberating, and forgiving work today. In what ways or areas of your life would you like to see Jesus’ liberation, transformation, or forgiveness?

Pray along with each other (either as a full group or in smaller groups of 2 or 3) that Jesus would meet you in your needs today, that the Kingdom would continue to grow and flourish in your lives and in the lives around you.

PARABLES

Mark 4:1-34

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 3

Today we are going to be tackling a portion of the Gospels that many people find intimidating and overwhelming: parables. You may want to share or paraphrase the following brief teaching on parables in your introduction to the group.

The parables of Jesus are not clear-cut descriptions of desired human behavior, nor are they factual representations of narrative history. Likewise, Jesus' parables are not primarily moral lessons. Rather, they are literary devices that state truth in creative and usually cryptic ways. Often, they upset the expectations of the listener, and so they are by nature mysterious, opaque, and also surprising. The Hebrew word for parable (*mâshâl*) is otherwise translated "riddle," or "puzzle."

When Jesus uses parables, he is typically first revealing something about himself or his ministry. The first question we might ask when we encounter one of Jesus' parables is: "What does this reveal to us about Jesus, his ministry, or the Kingdom of Heaven?" One of the reasons Jesus may have used parables so often is that parables require their hearers to ponder what they've heard, to ask follow-up questions, and to seek understanding from their source. To grasp the meaning of parables, we have to "lean in" and pay close attention.

A portion of today's passage will be the Parable of the Sower, which some scholars have identified as a parable about Jesus' parables. We will explore that later in our discussion.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, M. Eugene Boring states that Jesus is "the parable of God, the Messiah who upsets our expectations." That we may struggle to comprehend these passages can be itself revealing of just how unexpected, and mysterious, and grand our God is. At the same time, he gifts us with revelation by his Spirit as we come to see him more clearly in one facet of his being through these images and stories. If your small group struggles with today's text, don't despair! This is a beautiful indication of how deep, multi-layered and rich God's word—and God's very self—is.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Today we will be examining the parable passages in Mark 4, where we will discover just how rich and multi-layered God's word can be. While many often seek guidance for human behavior in parables, we're going to focus today on what truth these parables reveal about Jesus and the Kingdom in creative, often mysterious and opaque, ways.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Has there ever been a time you have been deeply moved by a piece of art or song that someone else just didn't connect with in the same way? What was that experience like?
 - Similarly, has there ever been a time someone you know has been deeply moved by some artistic work that left you "in the dark," so-to-speak?
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OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *God of all wisdom, we ask you to stretch our imaginations today as we seek to experience more of the truth about who you are. As we open the pages of your word, open our hearts to know you more by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Mark 4:1-34.

You may want to break this into two sections (Mark 4:1-20, and Mark 4:21-34), but be sure that the reading flows together, as this passage is meant to be taken as a whole. Be sure to thank the volunteer/s for reading!.

DISCUSSION:

A helpful first question whenever we read Jesus' parables is, "What is this parable saying about Jesus, his ministry, or the Kingdom of God?" Let's try to apply that question to the Parable of the Sower in vv.3-8.

- What does this parable (vv.3-8) reveal about Jesus, Jesus' ministry/mission, or the Kingdom of God?
 - While answers may vary, one may reasonably conclude this parable demonstrates a proclamation and gifting ("sowing") of God's word has taken place and continues. And that the fruits of God's word is still flourishing and growing.

In v.13, Jesus says to his disciples, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" Some scholars believe that this first parable in Mark's Gospel is intended to teach us about parables. That is, the Parable of the Sower may be a parable about how Jesus' parables will be received and responded to.

- How might Jesus' parables be understood as the seeds in this parable?
 - Here we are reading Jesus' explanation of the parable (vv.14-20) such that Jesus' "word" is delivered through parables. Consider together how different people might respond to Jesus' word in the form of parables. Read this way, we can anticipate that Jesus is teaching in parables knowing that some will receive them and some will not, and, he concludes, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

- How does this parable increase our faith in, and reliance on, Jesus?
 - Answers will vary. It may be tempting to focus on how we can respond to God's word, which is not wrong. However, it may be helpful to point your small group members back to Jesus, his ministry, and his Kingdom as the subject of the parable. In this case, we can be assured that he is the one sowing seed and that, while we have some role in how we respond to the word that is proclaimed, it is ultimately God that causes the seed to be sown and to flourish.
 - His word, in all its forms, is active and working in our lives. It is only through our reliance on him—the wisdom and will of God—that we can know and embrace the life he intends for us.
 - In the case of parables, which are by design difficult to understand, we look to and rely on Jesus to understand them and respond to them.

Parables are also often used to subvert and challenge listener's expectations about the state of the world.

- How do the parables in this passage challenge our expectations about Jesus, his ministry, or God's kingdom?
 - We may, like the disciples, not entirely understand why Jesus chooses to speak in riddles or parables, rather than explicitly. But in the Parable of the Sower Jesus gives us some insight into his ministry, including the use of parables, and how he anticipates the word will be received.
 - In the parable of the lampshade, we may find that the good news of Jesus and the present Kingdom, though hidden, would and is being revealed.
 - In the case of the growing seed (vv.26-29), we may notice that the Kingdom starts with the scattering of the seeds but mysteriously grows, ripens, and comes to harvest. Likewise, the Kingdom of God unexpectedly begins like a tiny mustard seed and grows into a gigantic tree.

In Mark 4:10-12, Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah.

Read Mark 4:10-12 again. Then have someone read Isaiah 6.

- What similarities do you find between the situations of Isaiah and Jesus? How might the passage from Isaiah help us further understand Jesus' ministry?
 - Isaiah and Jesus are prophesying, revealing truth to God's people, despite the unwillingness or inability of some to hear God's word and truth. Some may struggle with the implication that Jesus is actively seeking to harden some hearts and make his mysteries inaccessible to some hearers. While scholastic interpretation varies, one interpretation may be that Jesus' (and Isaiah's) words serve not necessarily to harden hearts, but to describe the reality that some hearts are hardened, and to call hearers to repentance and reliance on the Lord.
- What insight does Mark 4:26-29 (the Parable of the Growing Seed) reveal about the work of God in our lives?
 - While we may tend to and cultivate the work of God in our hearts, it is ultimately not us who make the word of God take root and flourish in our lives; it is the grace of God.
- In what ways have you seen God's Kingdom take root and grow in your life or in the lives around you lately?

- How might we take notice of the many ways God's word and Kingdom are flourishing in and around us?
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Invite your group to prayerfully answer these questions, either individually or aloud in a group of one or two others:

What stood out to you today from our reading? What insight are you walking away with? What leaves you feeling yet unresolved or uncomfortable?

It might be beneficial to encourage group members today in any potential discouragement from the hard work of interpreting and sitting with parables. Rather than focusing on the uncomfortability of the mystery, it might be helpful for those not accustomed to sitting with unresolved questions and tensions to be encouraged by the promise of the kingdom of God.

Pray with each other for the Holy Spirit to continue to root the word of God deep in our lives and train our imaginations to see and receive the beautiful work of God as he continues to grow and flourish his kingdom, both in our lives and in the world around us.

GARASENE DEMONIAK

Mark 5:1-20

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 4

Today's passage tells of the demonic possession and Jesus confronting demons head on. This is the kind of thing that, were it to take place in a movie, might have a "viewer discretion advised" warning attached. Such subject matter may prompt strong feelings and emotions in your group as you work through it—because demonic possession is inherently ugly stuff. It may also prompt tangents speculating about Satan and demonic activity or spiritual warfare. Pray for yourself and your group ahead of time for God's guidance and protection, and ability to stay on track using the questions. The passage has a powerful message about the authority, power, mission, and mercy of Christ. May God grant you and your group the eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to believe with the same faith of the healed Gerasene man.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

It has been long speculated that the Gospel of Mark was written by John Mark, fellow missionary to Peter written about in the book of Acts. While we cannot know this for certain, Peter poignantly summarizes the content of Mark's Gospel message by saying, "You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him." That is exactly what we've heard of together in this series so far.

In today's passage, we will once again hear a story from Jesus' ministry, where he heals and restores a man tormented by the demons. It's an intense story, with an incredible ending.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Think of a time you had a hard time moving something. What made it difficult? Share your experiences.

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Lord God, we praise you for the glory of your holiness, grace, love, compassion and power. We are lost without you, and without you calling us to yourself, we never would have found you. Open the eyes of our hearts that we may behold wonderful things out of your word. We humbly place ourselves under your authority and teaching. As we open our hearts to you, grant us eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to believe. We thank you in advance. To God be the glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Mark 5:1-20.

This might be a great passage to consider leading your group through a *Lectio Divina* practice. *Lectio Divina* is simply a method of reading the Bible that invites the Holy Spirit to draw our attention to certain words, phrases, or portions in the passage that the Lord would use to teach or speak to us.

As the first volunteer reads, listen for the vivid, pithy language Mark uses. Close your eyes and listen with your five senses. After it is read, we will pause for one minute for you to jot down everything you noticed. Then our second volunteer will read, and you will listen with your eyes closed again. You will have another minute to add to your notes details that became clearer, or new things you noticed. (Complete the reading and pause for one-minute intervals while they jot down notes. Please thank the readers.)

DISCUSSION:

- What did you notice about the passage as it was read? What stood out or made you wonder?
- According to the passage, how did the possessed man approach Jesus? Had you been one of the disciples with Jesus at the time, how do you imagine you would have responded to such a man?
- What stands out to you about the way this Galilean man is depicted? What do you imagine his life was like?
 - We know that he was seen as a danger to his community, who it seems would attempt to restrain him but were unable. He lived in isolation in a graveyard, which almost certainly comes with social, psychological, and probably bodily injuries.
 - Though it's not explicitly stated, it seems we're meant to understand that his possession has given him a great deal of physical strength (enough to break through bindings), which presumably makes him dangerous to himself and others.

Many times in the passage, words like "beg," "plead," or "implore" are used as the characters interact with Jesus.

- Why do you think of repetition of this act of begging Jesus? What is happening when these words are used?
 - Receive all answers. Consider with your group why each of these characters (the demons, the people in town and countryside, and the Galilean man who was restored) met Jesus from a place of begging him. Discuss what this tells us about the authority and power they noticed in Jesus.

- Have you ever found yourself begging, pleading, or imploring the Lord for something? What was it for? What happened?
 - Facilitator, you may want to have an example ready to share to set the tone and model vulnerability to your group. We needn't force people to share what they're not ready to share, but we do want our group to hold a posture of safety and mutual trust.
- How do the different groups of people in the passage react differently to the man's deliverance and healing?
 - Specifically, you might compare the reaction from the pigs' owners and the locals who were brought to the scene to those who the Garasene man witnessed who responded with amazement. You might also imagine how Jesus' disciples might have received the whole scene.
- How was the man doing after Jesus cast Legion out into the pigs? How was his life changed after Jesus delivered him?

In response to Jesus rescuing and restoring him, the man "begs" Jesus to allow him to join Jesus and the disciples.

- Why do you think Jesus didn't allow the man to join him in his mission? What does this tell us about Jesus and his mission at the time?
 - The Garasene man was an effective, personally transformed witness to the ministry and person of Jesus. Because of his witness in Decapolis, many people heard of all Jesus did for him, and they were amazed by it. Though that wasn't the response the man had in mind, Jesus used him as an evangelist among the Gentiles.
- Has Jesus' mercy, healing, or gospel ever prompted you to eagerly ask to "accompany him in the boat" (so to speak)? Or to implore him to leave?
 - As we heard in the Parable of the Sower from the previous discussion, there are so many ways we might respond to hearing the word of Jesus, and that response can be different for the same person in different seasons. Share with one another how you've come about hearing and responding to Jesus in different seasons and experiences.
- How does this passage illustrate the good news of Christ and his Kingdom?

Consider closing your discussion by reading Ephesians 1:17-23 with your group.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Invite your group to prayerfully consider these questions: How do you need to bow down before Jesus? For what do you need mercy?

Pray together confessing your unbelief and implore the Lord to have mercy on you to overcome powers that are "too strong to be subdued."

In response to the passage in Ephesians, you might pray something like this over your group:
Lord Jesus, we agree with Paul's words in Ephesians. We agree that you are far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. We praise you because God has placed all things under your feet, and appointed you as head over everything for us – your people, the church, your body. Give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so we may know you better, know the hope to which you have called us, the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints, and your incomparably great power for us who believe. We believe. Have mercy on us, and help us overcome our unbelief. You have promised that you are at work in us with the same power you exerted in Christ when you raised him from the dead and seated him at your right hand in the heavenly realms. Praise be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

WALKING ON WATER

Mark 6:30-52

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 5

Though the title of this discussion is Walking on Water, in true Markian fashion, a whole lot of content is covered in these 12 verses. The discussion begins exploring the disciples recounting their experience after returning from their two-by-two missions described in Mark 6:6-13. After that, the discussion moves to Jesus feeding the five-thousand, and then concludes with Jesus walking on water. We encourage you to consider if there's one portion of this series of stories that you'd like to spend most of your time discussing ahead of time, so that you can plan to be brief in discussing the other events.

In the discussion below we've encouraged the group to imagine themselves in a few instances of the stories being told, but not all. That said, if you'd like to take any portion of this series of stories and invite your group to imagine themselves there, this passage on the whole lends itself well to that exercise.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Today we're continuing on in our journey through the Gospel of Mark, the good news about anointed One, Christ Jesus, the Son of God. In our passage today we will hear of Jesus with his disciples, in the midst of their Kingdom ministry. We will see Jesus looking for solitude, showing compassion and generosity for the crowds, and then walking on water and controlling the weather.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- If you could have one superpower, what would it be? How would you use it?
- When was the last time you had a day to yourself, in solitude? What was it like?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Father in Heaven, thank you for the opportunity for us to be together today. Prepare our hearts to receive and our ears to hear the passage from your Gospel. Use this time to grow our faith, to draw us closer with one another, and to know you more, Jesus, that we may love and serve you as we were created. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone Mark 6:30-52. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

The passage begins *“The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.”* That, is they are reporting what they’d been up to since they’d been sent out by Jesus, in pairs, having given them authority over impure spirits,

“They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.” (vv. 12-13)

We can only imagine the many incredible stories that were shared between them, all summarized by a single sentence in this Gospel. But I’d like us to give a few moments to reflect on this moment in the story, imagining together what it would have been like to sit with the disciples and Jesus and hear the reports of these disciples’ missions.

- When you imagine them sharing these stories with Jesus and each other, what comes to mind? How do you imagine them gathered as they tell their stories? How do you imagine the other disciples responded to hearing the accounts of their sermons, their exorcisms, and their healing the sick? How do you imagine Jesus received these reports?
 - Help your group imaginatively set the scene of storytelling between disciples. Imagine together how their story sharing likely built up the faith and confidence of the group, just as it does today when we share the stories of how the Lord is active in our lives and in the world around us.
 - You may note the benefit of story sharing with fellow Christians. It could be that, as we hear the stories of God at work in the lives of our fellow disciples, we are emboldened and convicted to join in new kinds of Kingdom work with great expectation
- How might these missionary ministries—preaching, delivering from demons, and healing the sick—have shaped the faith and lives of Jesus’ disciples?
 - No doubt their experiences grew their own faith in what God could and would do in and through them.
- Why do you think Jesus chose to send his disciples out, in pairs, to do these ministries things apart from him?
 - Receive all answers.

After the disciples shared their stories, having not yet had a chance to eat, Jesus drew them away from the gathering crowd, saying *“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”*

- Why do you think Jesus sought to retreat from the crowds rather than to preach to them or attend to their needs?
 - Apparently retreating to be alone or in smaller community with his 12 disciples was part of Jesus’ routine. Not all of his time was spent addressing crowds or approaching new people. Here is an instance where we see Jesus delaying or even retreating from the crowds, and the kinds of ministry that accompany those crowds.

- Discuss with your group why time spent eating with only his 12 disciples may have been an important part of Jesus' life and his ministry.
- What might be the benefit of imitating Jesus' routines of seeking moments of smaller community, and, at times, isolation?
 - It's evident in Mark's Gospel that a lot of Jesus' ministry took place among the disciples, and then they would subsequently go and do the things Jesus showed and taught them. Like the rest of us, Jesus needed time to eat, he needed rest, and he needed different types of relationships, including close friends.
 - Whether you are re-energized by being in crowds (extroverted) or re-energized by being alone, all of us benefit in certain ways by being around other people and by being alone. The balance of this is something we see Jesus model with his disciples. Jesus was able to relate to and disciple the 12 in ways he couldn't when he was surrounded by crowds.

Even though Jesus sought isolation with his 12 disciples, when their boat arrived at the yonder shore, a crowd "from all the towns" had run to meet them as they arrived.

- How does Jesus respond to the crowd waiting for him on the shore where he sought solitude? What does this tell us about Jesus and the way he relates to people?
 - We hear that Jesus "had compassion on them." You might discuss with your group if they might have responded with the same type of compassion, and how Jesus' compassion directed his behavior. You might ask the group if they were in the same position, would they delay their meal and solitude to teach such a crowd.
 - Note that there are plenty of times where Jesus does isolate by himself and with his disciples. His compassionate response in this instance doesn't mean that Christians, as a rule, should skip their meals and never find rest or solitude. Rather, this instance should help us recognize that sacrifice is a part of Kingdom ministry, and that compassion has a meaningful role in our lives as disciples.
- How does Jesus respond to the disciples' suggestion that he send the people away to eat?
 - First by answering them, "You give them something to eat." Notice that he instructs the disciples to be the ones doing the ministry of feeding the crowd. He then proceeds rather than agreeing with the disciples' plan (and enjoying the solitude he'd sought with his disciples) he miraculously feeds the crowd of thousands of people.
- Why do you think Jesus chose to have his disciples feed the crowd rather than going along with their plan to send them away for a meal?

After this meal, Jesus sent his disciples in a boat to Bethsaida, dismissed the crowd, and then went by himself to the mountainside to pray.

- Why might Jesus have proceeded from these events to go and pray alone?

Jesus then joined the disciples in a way that they most certainly didn't expect; by walking on the lake water, out to the boat they were in. In vv.51-52, we hear "then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened."

- What might the loaves of bread that fed the crowd have to do with Jesus walking on water or quieting the storm?
 - Consider together how the miracle of multiplying the loaves to feed the crowd could have helped the disciples understand or even anticipated a thing like Jesus walking on the water to their boat.
 - In what ways might we prepare ourselves to have soft-hearts, ready and able to receive the activities of the Lord? What might factor into us remaining hardhearted?
 - Lord willing, it would do our hearts well to have eyes to see God's work in and around us; to have a good memory that often recalls what the Lord has done. We can be openminded to amazing things because we know that God does amazing things.
 - On the other hand, we can be shortsighted, forgetting the faithfulness God has shown in seasons or even moments past. We can underestimate the Lord, or explain away God's provisions and goodness as coincidence or luck.
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

The very same Jesus whose heart was moved to compassion for the people waiting for him on the shore is the One who receives and hears our prayers today. The Lord's compassion for us is trustworthy.

As we prepare for prayer today, group to imagine themselves among the crowd, having come from their home in the village to stand at the shore waiting to meet and receive from Jesus. Ask, what would you want to say to or ask of Jesus today? What would you like to share with or receive from the living God right now?

Share with each other what you would say or ask, and as a group, pray these things for one another.

THE YEAST OF THE PHARISEES & HEROD

Mark 8:14-21

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 6

You will note that we have moved directly from Chapter 6 to Chapter 8. If time permits, it may be a good idea to review Chapter 7 with the group, in which Jesus calls out the Pharisees' hypocrisy (v. 1-21), heals two people: a Greek woman's (hence, not a Jew) daughter, (v. 24-30) and a deaf and dumb man (v. 31-37).

Though today's lesson centers on Mark 8:14-21, we encourage you below to read vv.1-21, as the context of Jesus feeding a large crowd by multiplying food (for a second time) and the Pharisees then coming to question Jesus is relevant to the discussion about vv.14-21.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Over these past weeks we've heard the good news story of Jesus. Through narratives, sermons, and parables, all carefully selected and woven together, Mark has shown us Jesus' Kingdom ministry, and how those around him have responded to it. Today we will hear another story of Jesus' ministry and how the Pharisees responded to Jesus and his disciples.

OPENING QUESTION:

- What is your favorite dessert/bread to bake? Do you like to bake with yeast? Have you ever used expired yeast? What happens to your finished product with bad yeast?
- Have you ever had an instance where you felt like you were entirely misunderstood? Perhaps you sent an email or text that was received in a way you didn't intend? Was the issue resolved?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Lord, we thank you for your Gospel and for yourself. We thank you for the opportunity we have to be with one another today and ask that you would be with us in our time together, that you would use this Word and discussion to reveal yourself to us more, to transform our hearts, and to knit us closer as your family. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have one or two people read Mark 8:1-21. Remember to thank them for reading.

Note: This discussion centers on vv.14-21, but we've recommended you read vv.1-13 for proper context.

DISCUSSION:

- Why did the Pharisees approach Jesus in v.11? What does this encounter tell us about the Pharisees?
 - Consider that the Pharisees came to interrogate and test Jesus, demanding a sign, immediately after he'd performed a miracle of multiplying food. The way this story is framed seems to highlight the absurdity of the Pharisees' disbelief and unwillingness to accept the authority and ministry of Jesus.
- What events led Jesus to warn his disciples to "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod"? What does this tell us about how Jesus taught his disciples?
 - Jesus reflected on the previous events, the multiplying of bread, the interrogation by the Pharisees, and that the disciples had only one loaf of bread with them on the boat and he used this as an opportunity to teach.
 - Notice that his words are cryptic and confusing at first. This is typical for Jesus. But as he often did for his disciples, he follows up with a bit more explanation (though, in this case, he doesn't entirely explain the meaning of his teaching).
- What is the 'yeast' of the Pharisees that Jesus is referring to in v.15?
 - Receive all answers. Refer the group to Matthew 16:5-12. Consider reading that together.
 - According to Matthew, the disciples understand that the yeast Jesus is referring to is the teaching of the Pharisees (and, Matthew adds, also the Sadducees).
- How might the teachings of the Pharisees or the proclamations of Herod be like yeast? Why is Jesus warning them about this?
 - We can't be certain, because as is the case with his parables, there is an opaqueness to the teaching. But what is clear enough is that Herod's and the Pharisees yeast is dangerous, and, like yeast, the quality of that yeast will influence the quality of the whole product (person).
 - Jesus' reference to the food being multiplied perhaps suggests his concern that this bread of bad yeast may multiply if not attended to.
- How does the Pharisees' yeast differ from Jesus 'bread'?
 - Jesus takes a small amount of food and miraculously feeds thousands of people with it. He expands the kingdom while the Pharisees focus on rules and regulations and exclude anyone who doesn't follow them or their interpretations of the letter of the law.
- How do the disciples respond to Jesus' warning? If you were among them, how might you have responded?
- Why do you think Jesus (as told by Mark) does not explicitly explain what he means by the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod? Why might Jesus teach his disciples in this way?
 - Receive all answers. Jesus regularly teaches in parables and riddles. There are many reasons this could be, but one of them is that he intends his hearers to ponder his words and to "lean in" to him

and the Holy Spirit for better understanding. He might be training his followers to depend on him.

- What does “hardness of heart” (v.17) mean? In contrast, what does it look like to have a soft(ened) heart?

In v.4, we see the disciples doubting Jesus’ ability to meet their needs, despite having seen him miraculously multiplying food only two chapters prior.

- Why do you think Jesus’ disciples continued to doubt his provision for them?
- Can you think of a time in your life where you have doubted that Jesus would come through for you? What leads us to this kind of doubt?
- How can we recognize the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod—that is, wrong teaching or false promises—in our own context?
 - Among many other things, this is where it is helpful to be part of a small group, wherein we hold one another accountable. There are so many sources of false promises of health, riches, and success, if we only behave a certain way, recite a mantra, set a new routine, or send in a check.
 - Good and trustworthy discipleship depends on Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, on the benefit of the Church community, and on pondering, meditating over, and embracing God’s words to us.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

As we spend time in prayer and ministering to one another, invite the group to prayerfully reflect on the discussion we’ve had. Invite them to ask: Is there ‘yeast’ in my mind that I need to discard? Is my heart in any way hardened to the Lord? If so, how so?

Spend time praying in groups of two or three, asking God for wisdom, understanding, and a softened heart.