



## BIBLE STUDY

# JESUS OF NAZARETH

by Patricia Lull

## Opening

Hymn “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 249, verses 1, 2, and 4)

## Prayer

Gracious Spirit, open our lives to hear your living voice in these words of Mark’s Gospel. Help us to listen with patience, to speak with wisdom, and to grow in understanding. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Amen.

## Introduction to Mark 1:1–45

When I was a child, my family often spent Sunday afternoons riding in the car, visiting relatives out in the country. That was back in the days when two or three adults and a few children could all squeeze into the family sedan. The countryside included farmland and small towns in northwestern Ohio, where I grew up. Mercifully, these afternoon adventures often ended at an ice-cream stand.

I was the youngest child in my family, which meant I always rode in the backseat, getting the window seat only when an older sibling granted this privilege. My memory of these

rides includes a cascade of changing landscapes and a litany of questions from the backseat. “Where are we going?” “Are we there yet?” “Who are these people?” “Why are we stopping here?”

From the front seat, my parents’ answers often expanded to include stories of life in earlier decades, chronicles of our family’s history, and commentary on the changes that had occurred in the world I grew up in. Sometimes, questions also echoed from the front seat. “Don’t you remember when we came here last year?” “What are the names of your great-grandmothers whose graves we are going to visit?” “What would you have done if you had lived here in pioneer days?”

And always, before we exited the car to knock on a relative’s door, our mother would remind us how we were to behave. “Sit still and listen. Remember, these are people who have known and loved you before you were even born.”

Beginning a year-long study of the Gospel of Mark is something akin to embarking on an extended ride through the biblical landscape

## Theme Verse

*“The time is fulfilled,  
and the kingdom of God  
has come near, repent and  
believe in the good news.”*

Mark 1:15

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and culture in which the Gospel writer unfolds the story of Jesus for those who are ready to discover the God who has known and loved us long before we were even born.

Some of you have traveled this way before and will likely claim seats up front, helping to navigate the route, offering crucial insights as others discover the beauty and power of these texts for the first time. Others may be riding in the backseat, wondering what role you will get to play in this shared encounter with an ancient text.

On this journey from Jesus' baptism to his resurrection, there is an important place for the insights of experienced Christians and the fresh questions of those who are reading the Gospel of Mark perhaps for the very first time. Each of the nine sessions is built around questions that are asked in Mark's text, as well as questions participants bring to the text.

You may recognize this question-and-answer format from catechism. It is a pattern Christians have used for centuries to pass on the basics of the faith and guidelines for Christian living from one generation to the next. Asking questions and rehearsing the answers is also how families and communities pass on the stories that reveal their true identity and values.

Each session will begin with an introduction to the main themes for the month, a hymn and prayer to orient the group. Whether you do the concise, the full, or the extended version of the lesson as outlined in the Leader Guide, you will have an opportunity to know the joy that comes from reading the Bible with others.

### Behind the Written Text

As contemporary readers, we bring some standard questions to everything we read. Whether we are browsing at the fiction table in a bookstore or scanning articles on a popular Web site, we have learned to ask questions like these: Who wrote this? When and where was it written? What is this author's perspective

on life? How does this text relate to other things I have read? What will I gain by reading this?

Those are all good questions to have in mind as we begin a new Bible study on the Gospel of Mark, but they are not necessarily the most helpful questions for getting launched on our nine-month journey together. Consider, instead, the way the Gospel opens. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).

In Greek, the original language for this book of the Bible, the word for *good news* or *gospel* is *euaggelion*. Mark begins with a unique and powerful declaration that the very text of the book itself is a message of good news about the one called Jesus. While we call the first four books of the New Testament *Gospels*, only Mark claims that designation for itself.

Recognizing that the book we are reading is a Gospel invites us to embark on this study as a theological journey—a trip of mutual discovery into a text that was meant from the start to be a holy word. Whatever else we might conclude about the origin and authorship of this text, we will want to remember that in its form and purpose we are given an opportunity to encounter the living God.

All the same, as readers, we are curious. When, where, and why might this narrative have been written down? Over the centuries church scholars have had a variety of ideas about the origin of this text. The earliest of those considers Mark to have been written by an associate of St. Peter, perhaps in Rome, around the year 70 A.D. Most scholars think that Mark was the first Gospel to be written and that it likely served as a model for Matthew and Luke.

Mark introduces us to Jesus through a unique and innovative kind of narrative. Mark is not exactly a biography in the modern sense, with sources acknowledged and footnoted and various perspectives on a life included. But Mark is a coherent account of a life that contains crucial things that were said or done by Jesus as remem-

bered by those who had seen and heard him. Above all, a gospel is a theological commentary on who this Jesus of Nazareth is through the eyes of faith and what difference Jesus makes for our lives and for the world.

This innovative style of narrating the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection focuses attention on the theological significance of Jesus not just as a historically interesting figure but as the Son of God, as stated in the first verse and affirmed by the centurion at the cross in Mark 15:39.

### Themes and Echoes

Several prominent themes shape the pacing and movement of the overall story. These include: the identity of Jesus as the Christ, the meaning of discipleship, the coming kingdom of God, the tension between knowing and not knowing who Jesus is, hope in the sure promises of God, and the surprise of the resurrection. While each of these themes will be explored in greater detail as they appear in the Gospel narrative, they also provide clues as we try to imagine just who the first readers of this written text were and how they responded.

The first generation of Christians knew who Jesus was through the eye-witness testimony of those who encountered him during his earthly life. Scholars think that the next generation came to encounter Christ through a more tailored and standardized testimony or tradition passed orally from one community of faith to another. By the third generation, as the Christian witness spread geographically, a written account became necessary, even imperative, to carry forth this testimony to the good news.

Imagine questions such as these: Who is this Jesus? What does it mean to follow him? How does God's will affect our lives today? Why doesn't everyone turn and follow this Christ? What does Jesus' resurrection from the dead mean for us today? Those were questions of the faithful in the year 211 as much as they are our questions for many in 2011.

1. What questions do you bring to this Bible study of Mark's Gospel? List them.

### Beginning with Baptism

#### READ MARK 1:1-11.

The announcement of life-changing good news begins to take shape with the initial appearance of Jesus, not as a baby, but as a young adult. Mark's theological narrative introduces Jesus when he steps feet-first into a remarkable story that begins first with the Old Testament prophets and then with the striking figure of John the Baptist, the last of a long line of such figures.

Mark introduces us to the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, by quoting the prophets Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3) and Malachi (Malachi 3:1) in the second and third verses of his Gospel. Mark suggests that the identity of this one called Jesus is rooted in promises made at a much earlier time in God's history with Israel. The messenger or announcement-bearer of this good news is now John the Baptist or John the Baptizer. For John, baptism was a ritual washing meant to signify repentance, a person's desire to live in a new way and to draw close to God's will.

But this is not the only Old Testament clue in these first verses. John is described as dwelling in the wilderness and being clothed in an odd and distinctive way. These clues are meant to trigger a memory of other Old Testament prophets, especially Elijah (1 Kings 17) and Elisha (1 Kings 19). Mark suggests that the crowds that came out to the Jordan River to see and hear John were already primed for a religious encounter that would turn their old way of living on its head.

But notice that John directs attention away from himself and toward someone more powerful who is about to appear. That someone is this man named Jesus of Nazareth. The rest of Mark's Gospel will help us understand who this man is and why he has come in that time and at that place. What happens next is a signal to Jesus about the very nature of his identity, for as he came up

from the waters of John's baptism, he saw heaven "torn apart" and the Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove, and God's voice pronouncing him as the son, the beloved. We will hear very similar language about heaven being torn apart when we come to the crucifixion in Mark 15:38. Between now and then, Mark wants us to know that Jesus is God's beloved son and that God is pleased with who Jesus is.

For Christians, the baptism of a baby or an adult resonates with similar themes of identity, naming, and God's blessing on the life of the one who is baptized. Before diving more deeply into this text, pause to share a brief story about your own baptism. (See "We've Got People," p. 12.)

2. What do you know about your own baptism? Who else was there? How did it mark the beginning of your own story with God?

### From Jordan to Galilee

#### READ MARK 1:12–15.

A sense of urgency runs throughout Mark's telling of this Gospel story. The word *immediately* enters in verse 12 to describe the abrupt way that Jesus' baptism in the Jordan Valley leads to a time of profound testing in the wilderness by Satan. *Immediately* appears in several forms 17 times in this Gospel. Mark focuses our attention to the next important thing even before we have fully digested the significance of the baptismal scene.

Jesus has come to call others to repentance and forgiveness, but before that ministry begins he will endure his own time of being tested.

Mark does not try to describe what happened during those 40 days, but again we are given clues from other stories in the Old Testament when the people of Israel and various prophets wrestled with their identity and trust in God for a period of 40 days or 40 years, often in the wilderness.

Jesus is, however, not alone. The wild beasts are there, and, at the end of the ordeal, the angels wait on

him, suggesting that they fed him.

This is also a time of profound theological transition, as our attention shifts from the prophet John the Baptist to Jesus the Messiah. Both men invited people to turn again to God, but from Jesus there is a new message about the completion or fulfillment of God's plans. This is another clue that promises from the Old Testament are now being lived out in a fresh and life-changing way. Notice that Jesus invites people to repent and believe in the *good news*, the *euaggelion*, the *gospel* of this new era. This is not something we do only with our heads; this claims our whole life.

### Following and Serving

#### READ MARK 1:16–31.

Already in chapter one, Mark gives examples of what it means to catch on immediately to who Jesus is and the message he is preaching. In these 15 verses, four fishermen leave their old way of life to follow Jesus as disciples, demonic spirits recognize Jesus for who he really is, and Simon's mother-in-law rises from her sick-bed after Jesus heals her. And she waits on him as the angels did in the wilderness just a few verses back.

Each story is more than just an illustration. Each encounter introduces a significant theme that will thread throughout the Gospel. Jesus' profound call is "come and follow" as a disciple. Some will accept the call and others will reject it throughout the book.

To learn from such witnesses, watch for how disciples, including "the 12," behave. But also be attentive to other examples of men and women who respond to Jesus' power as a teacher and healer by taking up his way of life. How many will you discover in Mark's Gospel? You may want to keep a running tally like on the chart on the next page.

### Disciples of Jesus

3. What does it mean to you to be a disciple? Is this an identity you have claimed your whole life or did a particular experience

## Disciples of Jesus

BIBLICAL PASSAGE	NAME OF DISCIPLE	DESCRIPTION OF DISCIPLE
Mark 1:16	Simon or Peter	Fisherman; leaves nets to follow
Mark 1:16	Andrew	Fisherman, brother of Peter; leaves nets
Mark 1:19	James	Son of Zebedee, leaves boat and nets
Mark 1:19	John	Son of Zebedee, brother of James; leaves boat and nets

lead you to this identity? Why is discipleship still important in the 21st Century?

In Mark 1:23–27 a man cries out while Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. This was likely as unsettling in Jesus’ day as it would be in the midst of a formal worship service today. Yet this disruption allows Mark to set an important matter before us. “What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” the troubling spirits in the man cry out. Yes, Jesus has come to destroy them, because he is, as the evil spirits shout, the “Holy One of God.”

When Mark was writing his Gospel, both physical and mental illnesses were understood differently than we understand them today. Yet, our medical and mental health views parallel Mark in recognizing that God wills all creation to be whole and well. Notice that Jesus honors the man who calls out to him and heals him on the spot.

This exorcism or healing is followed by a story of discipleship that is easily overlooked but points to the important role of women disciples in Mark.

We can imagine Jesus and the first four disciples retiring to Simon’s house after the commotion in the synagogue. Simon’s mother-in-law is herself ill in bed.

Jesus tends to her needs, heals her, and she in turn rises to serve the group as a good host. Watch throughout this Gospel for the way that women appear as disciples, whether they bear that title or not (See “Women of Mystery,” p. 22).

- Who are some of the women who have modeled Christian living for you? What was it about their way of life that made them a living witness and disciple?

The story continues at a fast pace. People press in on Jesus, desiring the gift of healing. His reputation spreads quickly; too quickly in the sense that he silences the demons (1:34) because they are “on” to him and who he really is. His command over demons and illness cannot be hidden. (If time allows, read Mark 1:32–39.)

### The Secret’s Out

#### READ MARK 1:40–45.

Here is a glimpse of Jesus’ tender mercy being extended to a man with leprosy. In ancient times such skin diseases turned a person into an outcast who was no longer allowed to live within the community. While we understand diseases from a very different perspective today, people with certain diseases still bear a stigma

that makes it difficult for them to enjoy life with their family and neighbors. (See “Journey to Healing,” p. 26.)

5. What diseases set people aside in your own community? Does your congregation have a way of reaching out and including such people in the fullness of life?

At the end of Mark 1, we sense the tension between *telling* and *not telling* that was introduced with the troubling spirits or demons in 1:25 and 1:34. Jesus wishes to shape the way that people perceive his mission and respond to his identity. But, ironically, as the first chapter comes to a close it is Jesus who can no longer travel about freely. Yet those who were once forced to the margins by possession or disease are now free to live normally among other people. Do you sense how highlighting this tension helps to draw us deeply into the narrative? Now we are even more curious to learn what happens next.

6. What have we learned in Mark 1:1-45 about Jesus and his true identity? At the start of his public ministry what is it about Jesus that most interests you?

### Looking Ahead

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” the demons cry out in Mark 1:24. Theirs is the chief question for this first session. The Gospel of Mark was written not only to record stories about Jesus, but to allow the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to speak to us as the living, life-defining Word of God.

As you prepare for session two in

the coming weeks, let the question “What have you to do with us” speak deeply to your own life. Continue to notice the ways in which this ancient account of Jesus’ identity and Jesus’ actions intersect your own life. (See “Burning Bush Chaser,” p. 6.)

### Closing Prayer

Living God, just as you called others to follow and serve Jesus Christ in ancient days, send us out as ones who have been given a new identity as women of faith. Amen. 🌿

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### If Time Permits: An Open Exchange

Now, imagine that you are a visitor in another country. As a guest and an outsider, you would be eager to hear from a native about the most interesting sites to visit and the most important events to experience. Who could you ask to help you think about the Gospel of Mark from a perspective that differs from your own? (See “Back in Jesus’ Day,” p. 16.)

Jumping ahead in the narrative, we meet a “certain young man” in Mark 14:51–52 during the arrest of Jesus in Gethsemane. Read this passage and try to imagine who this young man at the edge of the story might be.

Like that young man at the edge of the biblical text, responses from those outside the community of faith (or at least from beyond your study circle) can help you hear these chapters of Mark’s Gospel in a fresh way. If you have such a conversation partner, read Mark 14:51–52 together. Talk about the many ideas about Jesus that people hold today as you discuss these questions.

7. Who has helped you discover your own identity? Are there values that seem to be missing from the churches you have known? If you could ask any question of God what would it be?