

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participants’ Guide – Week 1 (week September 13)

Introduction

Video: David

This session will introduce the basic question: who do you think Jesus is? There are, indeed, competing understandings of who Jesus is; what are they?

It will also offer some helpful guideposts for reading Mark and discerning the Good News within its words.

Goal: to name how we actually think about Jesus: Moral teacher, dead guy, God in a “man-suit,” therapeutic safety net... Also, it will discuss how to read Gospels, what they are and what it means to read them well.

Following are the items and questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn’t required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

Who is Jesus and how have you thought about him? Whether you have been actively involved in the church for decades or just started back into it, there is a constant need to grow in our understanding of—and relationship with—Jesus.

Scripture speaks about Jesus in multiple different ways in order to reveal different aspects of his character, and one of the primary ways that we grow and continue in our faith is by refreshing our minds and hearts with the various ways the Bible presents him to us. Additionally, it can be helpful to reflect on the ways that we have failed to recognize who he really is.

Phillip Yancey writes in *The Jesus I Never Knew*

“If you peruse the academic books available at a seminary bookstore you may encounter Jesus as a political revolutionary, as a magician who married Mary Magdalene, as a Galilean Charismatic, a rabbi, a peasant Jewish Cynic, a Pharisee, an anti-Pharisee Essene, an eschatological prophet, a ‘hippie in a world of Augustan yuppies,’ and as the hallucinogenic leader of a sacred mushroom cult. Serious scholars write these works, with little sign of embarrassment... in the midst of such confusion, how do we answer the simple question, ‘Who was Jesus?’”

1. You might not fit neatly into any of the above categories, but we often think of Jesus in ways that relate to our own experiences and needs. Over the course of your life, how have you spoken of Jesus? And how do you tend to think of Jesus now?
2. Read Philippians 2:5-8, and then read Colossians 1:15-17. What do these verses say about Jesus? Do you identify with one description of Jesus over the other? Which one sounds like the Jesus you know? Why?
3. The above verses speak to Jesus’ identity. But what about his character? How would you describe Jesus’ character (or personality)? What Bible stories come to mind?

4. Read Mark 8:1-3, Mark 6:30, 31, Mark 11:15-17. What do these verses tell us about Jesus' own character? What do you find captivating here?
5. As we saw from the video, Mark has an unrelenting interest in revealing who Jesus is through his actions. Have you ever sensed Christ's own action in your own life? If so, how?
6. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participants’ Guide – Week 2 (week September 20)

Read: Chapter 1

Video: Leigh

The Good News is revolutionary, but it is not foreign. This session reminds us what the Gospel is and is about. Jesus appears as one who baptizes and calls the Jewish people into repentance.

Goal: to see how Mark communicates that Jesus is one with God of Israel...and to learn what that entails.

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn’t required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. In the short video, Leigh mentioned Mark’s use of Isaiah. Read Isaiah 40:1-5. How do you think these verses from Isaiah, inform your understanding of John the Baptist—and Jesus? What kind of continuity is Mark trying to make in using Isaiah?
2. Read Mark 1:16-28. Simply describe what is going on here using your own words. In basic terms, what do you think is happening?
3. Why do you think the disciples so abruptly decided to follow Jesus? What in these verses clues you in to your understanding? Also, how might the disciples’ response model the kind of “repentance” that Leigh spoke about in the video?
4. What do these various interactions with Jesus say about him?
5. Think back on your own story; why did you decide to follow Jesus? Tell the group as much as you are comfortable sharing.
6. Leigh mentioned the Holy Spirit working in four ways: 1) Giving the power to be free from sin and death; 2) the power to be brought into relationship with Jesus; 3) the power to participate in Jesus’ ministry; and 4) the power to see ourselves in the broader sweep of Scripture. How do you see this work occurring in the readings for this week?
7. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participants’ Guide – Week 3 (week September 27)

Read ahead—Mark: Chapters 2 and 3

Video: Colin

The controversy of Jesus. There is inevitable controversy in believing the Gospel, and Jesus’ interactions with the Pharisees reveals this. Here the opposition is made clear, and the end is already set in place—Jesus’ death. Why does Jesus meet this opposition? Do we see this in our own lives and hearts?

When we see this inevitable tension it calls us into a new way of living and associating with others. That’s what we see in the call of the twelve. Jesus asks us, “Who is my family?” Who is yours? Name them.

Goal: to discover and name the ways we might face opposition in following Jesus.

Opening Collect – together or pray on your own... *Almighty God, by the hand of Mark the evangelist you have given to your church the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God: we thank you for this witness and pray that we may be firmly grounded in its truth through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever, Amen.*

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn’t required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. Read Mark 2:1-12. Why does Jesus pronounce forgiveness of the paralytic’s sin before healing him?
2. What does this story teach about Jesus, and why does Colin describe it as a controversy?
3. Would you describe the forgiveness of sins as miraculous? Why or why not?
4. Read Mark 3:31-35. What does the forgiveness of sins have to do with Jesus’ description of family?
5. Jesus lays down the conditions of true kinship. It is not solely a matter of flesh and blood. What is “family” according to Jesus and why?
6. Think about those with whom you are close. What has drawn you, and keeps you, close? How might this story inform your relationship to others?
7. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participant Guide – Week 4 (week of October 4)

Read ahead—Mark: Chapters 4 & 5

Video: Margery

The way parables work.

Margery focuses on the parable of the sower... a parable about parables.

They require something of you—your attention.

Jesus calming the sea is about Jesus being the king (God) pushing back the dark forces at work in the world.

Goal: to determine if we have been open to Jesus’ teaching (the nature of parabolic language) and to his healing.

Opening Collect—*Almighty God, by the hand of Mark the evangelist you have given to your church the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God: we thank you for this witness and pray that we may be firmly grounded in its truth through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever, Amen.*

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn’t required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

One person reads through Mark 5:21-43.

1. What is a word or phrase that strikes you in this passage?
2. What is the context of this passage? Where is Jesus?
 - a. What powers and authority has Jesus demonstrated in the end of ch 4 and the beginning of ch 5 (4:39, 5:8)?
 - b. To whom does he speak? What is their status relative to society and family?
3. On three occasions in this passage, physical contact is made. How does that strike you, especially now, and how was it significant in this passage?
4. What would it have meant for this woman to hear Jesus call her “daughter” a term he uses nowhere else in the gospel? Where does your identity come from?
5. If you were to see yourself in this account, watching Jesus, who would you be? Why?
6. How does this passage inform our faith (what we believe) and our hearts (how we love)?
7. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participant Guide – Week 5 (week of October 11)

Read ahead—Mark: Chapters 6 – 8:21

Video: David

Jesus continues to reveal who he is—somehow one with YHWH. He heals; he walks on water; he feeds crowds with almost nothing. To follow Jesus is to receive his abundance, but it is not always easy to believe, as the disciples show. “Do you not yet understand?”

What are you struggling to believe about Jesus?

Goal: to articulate the kind of abundance Jesus provides in your life and to square up with your failures to recognize it.

Opening Collect: *Almighty God, by the hand of Mark the evangelist you have given to your church the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God: we thank you for this witness and pray that we may be firmly grounded in its truth through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever, Amen.*

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn't required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. Read Mark 8:14-21. What do the disciples not understand? How might it be connected to the “leaven of the Pharisees”?
2. What are things that you struggle to believe about Jesus and his abundance?
3. Read Mark 7:24-30. How would you compare this woman with the disciples? How would you compare her with the Pharisees?
4. What does the woman's ethnic identity tell us about Jesus and his response?
5. Have you ever asked God for healing in your life? Tell your group as much as you are willing. What did God do?
6. What would it look like for you to believe that Jesus provides in abundance? Where do you need to believe that in your life? And what do you think his abundance for you looks like?
7. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participant Guide – Week 6 (week of October 18)

Read ahead—Mark: 8-22 ~ 10

Video: Leigh

Jesus is the Christ, and we discover with even greater intensity what that means.

The healings of blindness at the beginning and the end show us how Jesus opens our eyes to his reality.

Peter understands who he is, then at the Transfiguration we see that Jesus is the God of glory.

And then we see people respond to him... he receives children, he has no need of the rich man's wealth, he is one who must die...and he is the true servant (10:45).

Goal: to reveal what it means that Jesus is the Christ; he is **both** Transfigured God and servant of all. We tend to stress one or the other, but we must stress both if we are to understand the cross.

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn't required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. Read Mark 9:30-37. Why does Jesus say, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" ? Why is receiving a child in Jesus' name like receiving Jesus himself?
2. Have you ever struggled to receive Jesus? Why?
3. Jesus predicts his own death 3 times in the Gospel of Mark (this is the last time). Why do you think the disciples struggle to understand Jesus' prediction that he will be killed?
4. What about vv. 33 and 34 reveals the nature of the disciples' misunderstanding? What are they hoping for? Are you ever tempted to think of following Christ as a means of power?
5. In the Transfiguration (9:2-13), Peter and John see who Jesus really is. What does that experience have to do with his command that the disciples receive him as little children? What do these two occurrences together reveal about Jesus? Which one are you drawn to?
6. Why does Jesus foretell his death and resurrection? What must the disciples prepare for? What do you struggle to believe about Jesus' death and resurrection? What does he want you to prepare for in receiving his death and resurrection?
7. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participant Guide – Week 7 (week of October 25)

Read ahead—Mark: 11 ~ 12

Video: Colin

The great turn. Jesus comes to Jerusalem.

He comes on a donkey, he curses the fig tree, and he cleanses the temple. This Messiah comes to reestablish, to judge and clean out the house of God.

The right response is to believe! The lesson from the withered fig tree shows us that Israel's bankrupt faith must be reestablished. This also emerges in the parable of the tenants....

Israel is the wicked tenants!

These wicked tenants, the scribes, Sadducees, and pharisees not only don't understand Jesus, they are threatened by him.

The one who understands is the widow with her two coins.

Goal: to recognize what Jesus is doing in coming to Jerusalem and to reflect on who Israel is at present. The one who believes rightly is not the one who believes she is justified, but the one who banks everything on God.

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn't required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. Read 11: 1-11. Describe the reaction of the crowd. What do you think their response means? Who do they think Jesus is and why would they act the way they do?
2. In verse 11, Matthew says Jesus went to the Temple and looked around. Why do you think he goes directly to the temple?
3. In the video, Colin mentioned how Jesus throws down the gauntlet against Israel's religious elite. Why does Jesus challenge their authority? What does he want from them? What does he want from us?
4. The majority of chapter 12 is about Jesus debating with the Sadducees and Scribes (the religious and legal leaders of Israel). You don't need to read back on the chapter aloud as a group, but why are they so concerned about Jesus? DO you think there are any parallels in our contemporary moment?
5. Read 12: 41-44. How does the widow's offering provide a counter to that of the rest of chapter 12?
6. How does the widow's offering challenge you? What do you think God might want you to offer to him? If you are willing, be specific.
7. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participant Guide – Week 8 (week of November 1)

Read ahead—Mark: 13

Video: Margery

There have been apocalyptic undertones from the beginning, but Jesus raises his significance to that level fully. Jesus is coming again; it will be a terrible day; and the task is to endure to the end.

Goal: to determine what our “end goals” are, what our working assumptions are about the end of the story. And also to encourage imagining what Christian endurance might look like in our lives.

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn’t required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. Read Mark 13:1-13. As Margery mentioned in the introduction, apocalyptic literature in Scripture can refer to multiple things. In this case, Jesus predicts a variety of events: the downfall of the temple in Jerusalem (which happens in 70 AD), the persecution of the disciples, and his own second coming. How would you characterize Jesus’ main point to the disciples?
2. Which prediction strikes you as most relevant? What do you think the significance of the destruction of the temple might be? (Hint: read John 2:21)
3. A clear point of emphasis here is the way Jesus describes the persecution of the disciples. Why might they be persecuted? Why do you think Christians are now persecuted? Have you ever been persecuted in some way?
4. Jesus gives three direct commands in the reading. What are they? How might you take those commands seriously?
5. For some of us, Jesus’ message might seem... intense!... how do you think Jesus might be challenging you with this directive and warning?
6. The final verse of our reading, verse 13, is latent with importance for our own moment. What might it look like for you to “endure”?
7. Is there a word or phrase that you have heard today that you sense God intends for you to take away and hold on to?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participant Guide – Week 9 (week of November 8)

Read ahead—Mark: 14 ~ 15

Video: David

Jesus, by his own will, offers up his life on the cross. This act is not one of stoic resolve, but passionate (and mysterious) intentionality.

Jesus is God who is betrayed by all, and in doing so, the Crucifixion is both a profound act of obedience and an atoning sacrifice.

Goal: Encourage pondering the mystery of the cross. That is, encourage reflection on why Mark's dénouement is the crucifixion when he is so insistent on construing Jesus as God. What all does it mean that God dies for us? Sin is real; God loves us; history is in his control, and so on.

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn't required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. Read Mark 15:16-37. Name some of the details you find remarkable about this passage. What are details that suggest *why* Jesus was crucified?
2. In vv. 29-31, onlookers ask why Jesus can't simply save himself. Why do you think Jesus doesn't save himself? Why can't he find another way?
3. Find all of the references to Jesus being a king. What is going on here? What do you make of this deep irony that combine the mocking of the crowds and Jesus true identity? What might that mean for us?
4. The only place that Jesus speaks in our reading is his cry of dereliction on the cross. Why does he use these words? Where are they from?
5. What does it mean that Jesus is forsaken by God? Can we take this statement seriously?
6. In the video, David pointed out that the cross accomplishes something. What do you think it accomplishes? What does it mean for you? What has it meant for you?
7. Again, as mentioned in the video, what does it mean that God and Jesus together will this event? What does it say about God and Jesus? And about your own life?

Essentials: Gospel of Mark – Participant Guide – Week 10 (week of November 15)

Read ahead—Mark: 16

Video: Leigh

The resurrection is completely unexpected even though Jesus has told his disciples three times that he must die and rise again. Resurrection is *not* something that we expect either if we're honest.

The angel directs them to proof of his resurrection (see here they laid him...), and then directs them to the proper response: tell the rest!

Goal: To relate the power of the resurrection to our own lives: do you believe it? It means nothing less than the redemption of the material world, and it also requires a response. What might yours be?

Following are the questions to be discussed. Feel free to review them in advance, although this isn't required. You can come to each session just having read the assigned portion of the gospel.

1. Leigh points out the privileged status of the women who get to see the resurrected Jesus first. What do you think this detail might suggest about Jesus' kingdom?
2. Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Solome go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. Of course, something else happens! But when have you attempted to honor Jesus and had him exceed your expectations? Have you? How have you tried to honor Jesus?
3. How have you been surprised by Jesus as you have gotten to know him?
4. Jesus explicitly directs the women to go tell Peter. What grace is there in this directive?
5. The resurrection of Jesus is understood as an historical fact for Christians.. How does the factuality of this event impact you?
6. As Leigh mentioned, we know who Christ is through the account of Mark (and Peter). It is our task to finish the story of the empty tomb. Have you ever told anyone about the Jesus? Do you want to? Who do you think you should tell?
7. What is a major takeaway you have had from this study? What do you think God might have been telling you through Mark?