

Preparing the Way with Mark
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
December 5, 2021-AM Service
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Mark 1:1-8

So we come to the second in our series of sermons on the introductions to the gospels. During the season of Advent, as we prepare for the coming of Jesus, we will go to each of the four gospels to see how they prepare for his arrival. Today we come to Mark. And Mark wants to say something to us about power. Every gospel shares the same main theme: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and how it saves us. But under that main theme there are subthemes, and one of Mark's great sub themes is the theme of power.

Power. We hear a lot about power in the church today. Mostly we hear about how the church is losing power, how the church is in decline. We've all heard it. 'We used to be bigger! We used to have more members. We used to be the center of people's lives, but now we are an afterthought.' All the surveys testify that people are leaving the pews. Frankly, we don't need surveys to see it: everywhere we look, churches are closing. Ministers are quitting and retiring at record rates. We ministers complain about powerlessness too. We're as good at whining as the next person. 'Nobody listens to us anymore. They care more about Dancing with The Stars and The Bachelor than they do about us. People used to talk theology; now they talk football. How can my message, how can my ministry, compete with all the bright shiny objects out there?'

Mark is a gospel written for people who feel like they're losing power. I wonder, do you have in your head when Mark was written and the circumstances of its writing? It's something worth knowing. Tradition suggests that Mark was written around 68 AD or so. Tradition says it was written by John Mark, the same John Mark who was a companion of Paul on his first missionary journey. Tradition also suggests it was written in Rome for the Christians there. If you were a Christian in Rome in 68 AD, you were powerless. Things had been fine for Christians of Rome until 64 AD and the great fire. Emperor Nero blamed the fire on Christians. They were an easy target because they were the outsiders. They were already viewed as people with anti-social tendencies because they didn't participate in the big patriotic festivals that involved emperor worship.

So Nero blamed the Christians for the fire and for a few years the persecution was intense. Paul was executed in Rome during this persecution. The church Mark writes to would have endured the trauma of seeing its great hope for a leader beheaded by Nero. Paul wasn't the only one. Written around 100 AD, not long after Mark was written, the Roman historian Tacitus described some of the persecution: "Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animal skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight." Terrible stuff. Most Christians in Rome escaped that fate, but those who did, lived in the shadows and gathered in secret. They had no social power. They had no political power. They had no financial power. So it is no surprise that when Mark writes his gospel, power should be one of his main themes.

Not only is power a theme of the whole gospel, it's a theme of Mark's prologue. Where do we see that? Certainly John the Baptist tells us that Jesus will be powerful. "After me comes the one more powerful than me. It would be an honor for me to fall at his feet and untie his sandals. I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!" John proclaims a forceful Jesus, a powerful Jesus.

Mark also tells us that this power will come against two other powers in the world. Our passage suggests two powers in this world who stand against the word of Jesus. What powers are these? Mark shows us the first contrasting power in verse 1. It's subtle, but clear. Mark announces, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." In that verse, Mark is taking a subtle dig at the emperor and the power of Rome. We don't hear that with our modern ears, but his ancient readers would have heard it. How so? Well, Mark says he will tell us 'the good news' about Jesus. In the Greek, he will tell us the 'evangel' of Jesus. 'Evangel' means good news. We moderns think of evangel as an exclusively Christian word. It's the root of the word evangelism. But in the ancient world it was a pagan word before the Christians used it. Evangel was a word used by pagans to talk about the beneficence and power of emperors.

In the ancient world the emperor was worshipped like a god. There were rituals and festivals celebrating his greatness. The anniversary of his coming to power would be marked by a festival and all the people would be called together to celebrate. The announcements of such festivals were sent out as 'evangels.' "Good news everyone! We bring you glad tidings of great joy! Come celebrate the emperor with us!" Here is an inscription found in Asia Minor right from the time of Jesus' birth, calling people to celebrate the birthday of Emperor Augustus. "*It is hard to say if the birthday of the divine Caesar is more joyful or advantageous; we may rightly regard it as the beginning of all things. Augustus has set all things right and given us hope!*" And now listen to this sentence: "*The birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning of good news to the world.*" Do you hear the parallel? The powers of the empire proclaim "*The birth of the god Augustus is the beginning of good news to the world!*" Mark hears that, shakes his head, and writes the first sentence of his gospel: "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus, the messiah, the son of God.*" Mark receives the imperial evangel celebrating the power of Augustus, he crumples it up, tosses it aside, picks up his pen and writes an alternative evangel, an evangel about the power of Jesus. Mark is making a dig at Roman power. In a subtle way, he's knocking down Augustus and Nero and lifting up Jesus. It's Mark's way of saying: Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.

It's interesting, in many ways the gospels don't seem like political documents. Jesus doesn't complain about Roman rule. He doesn't rally the Israelites for revolution. In fact, many Israelites—the disciples included—thought Jesus wasn't political; enough. You can make a good case that people killed Jesus because he didn't use his power for overtly political purposes. But in other ways, Jesus message did have a political edge, especially when political power tried to put itself in the place of God. When kings and emperors claimed god-like powers and wanted people to give them their hope, Jesus pushed back. I think of his words to Pilate in John 19:10. Pilate says to Jesus, "*Why do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have the power either to free you or to crucify you?*" And Jesus says, "*You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.*"

Political power is recognized and respected in the New Testament. We are called to pray for authorities. We are called to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. But Jesus is always the king of kings. And we Christians are always first and foremost, citizens of his kingdom. So the first power that Mark's gospel pushes back against is political power that tries to take the place of God.

But there's another power Jesus comes against in this gospel. When Jesus exercises power in this gospel, who is his chief adversary? It's not Rome. It's Satan. It's the evil one. Our passage says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit, and in the very next passage Jesus goes down into the Jordan river where the Holy Spirit descends on him. After that baptism, what happens? Bam! He's in direct conflict with the evil one in the desert. And from that day on Jesus

will do battle with demons and impure Spirits. From the very first day of his public ministry, the Holy Spirit will put him in conflict with evil spirits. Encounters with demons are mentioned no less than ten times in the first ten chapters of Mark, and in every case, Jesus and his disciples triumph over the powers of the evil one. The powers of evil flee before him. And when the people see that, do you remember what they do? They marvel at his authority “Who is this? A new teaching and one with authority!” Mark agrees with Paul—our battle is not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, with the forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Jesus shows his power most clearly in his confrontations with demons.

So, especially for the first 9 chapters of his gospel, Mark’s portrait of Jesus is the man of power. Mark proclaims him greater than Caesar. Mark shows him casting out demon after demon. Jesus heals diseases, calms storms, forgives sins, outsmarts the teachers of the law, draws enormous crowds who marvel at his power. You have a sense that this is all going to end grandly, with Jesus enthroned in Jerusalem, surrounded by adoring crowds, while the kings of the earth bow before him.

But then Mark’s gospel makes a turn. In chapter nine Jesus tells them that he will go to the cross and die. After nine chapters of showing he’s more powerful than all the powers of the world, Jesus says he’s going to give himself over to those powers so that they can torture and kill him. He starts talking about the last being first, he starts talking about being a servant. He starts talking about giving up your life. He tells his disciples that if they want to follow him, they must pick up a cross.

His disciples are confused. They don’t like this talk. Peter says, “No Lord, you have power! Why would you let yourself die?” James and John push their crosses aside and ask for thrones instead. Can we have places of honor on your right and your left when you come into your kingdom? Judas becomes so disillusioned, he betrays Jesus. “It was going so well, we were really growing, but then Jesus started to get into all that servanthood stuff. We’ve lost the thread. The strong leadership just isn’t there anymore.” And the crowds? When they realize he’s not the kind of king they want, they cry ‘crucify him!’

And that’s what they do of course. The man who has power over the demons, the man through whose hands fashioned the earth and the stars lets violent men crucify him. Where’s his power? It’s like he goes limp. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t defend himself. He doesn’t fight back. It’s like he’s powerless.

But as he dies something unexpected happens. In his death power is poured out. The sky goes dark. The whole creation heaves. Temple curtains are torn. Through the blood of Jesus, a power is unleashed on the world that will turn everything upside down. Evil gets a mortal wound. Satan falls like lightning from heaven. And—do you remember!?!—the centurion, that representative of roman power, falls to his knees and says, “Surely this man is the son of God.” From beginning to end, the gospel of Mark is about power. It proclaims Jesus as the all-powerful king, the son of God. But it also shows us that his power is totally different than the power most people think runs the world.

I don’t like the modern church trends. I prefer growing churches to shrinking ones. But the power of the gospel does not find its root in numbers, it finds its root in Jesus. The power of the gospel does not find its root in political influence, it finds its root in Jesus. The power of the gospel does not find its root in financial might, it finds its root in Jesus. In advent, the Holy Spirit says to us, “Stop complaining. Stop worrying.” The Spirit brings us to the side of the manger, and says to us, “Look at that tiny frail child! Look at that helpless babe. There is your king” Then the Spirit takes us to the foot of the cross and says, “There is your victory.”

Here's the truth about power. Whenever two or three Christian people get together and pray simple prayers in Jesus name, the gates of hell quiver. Whenever we Christians endure the pain of death and loss, but we still come together and hold each other up and say "Alleluia," the host of heaven rejoice, and the evil one seethes. Every time a mom sits and prays at the bedside of her toddler, the evil one staggers like a punch-drunk boxer. Every time a caregiver reaches across the table to her struggling spouse and smiles at him before she prays, the powers of evil cry out in pain. Every time a volunteer at the shelter slaps a spoonful of mashed potatoes on the plate of the resident, the powers of evil know that they are beaten. And every time the church of Jesus Christ takes, eats, remembers and believes that the blood of Christ was shed for the complete forgiveness of all their sins, the victory of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, and we know that *his* is the kingdom and the power and the glory. Forever.

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