

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study  
New Canaan, Connecticut  
Spring, 2010**

**The Gospel of Mark**

**III. Mark 4:35 – 6:29  
Jesus, Thou Art All Compassion**

Our stories for today are all about mercy. Our stories for today are all about power. Jesus uses his power to work mercy; more than that, Jesus' mercy is itself power.

Miracles are hard for us to trust. We think we're too sophisticated to believe some of these outrageous stories – especially the first outrageous story where Jesus does not simply heal somebody in trouble, he stills the storm. We pay meteorologists to tell us when storms are coming and we do not pay wandering prophets to still the storms when they come; we duck; we hide; we wait it out.

When things get bad enough we sympathize entirely with the disciples: "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" But we really assume nature will have run its course. No surprising stillnesses; no unpredictable calm.

Mark believes that Jesus represents God. And Mark believes that God (not just nature) not only created the world and all that is therein, God governs the world and all that is therein. When Jesus says to the storm: "Be still!" the storm obeys.

The next three stories seem more plausible, if plausibility is what we are after. The Templeton Foundation pours millions of dollars into showing the relationship between religion and health, and even the most ruthlessly scientific among us admits that our powers of prediction when it comes to illness are not one hundred per cent accurate. We do get surprised.

What was most surprising to Mark's audience was not that Jesus helped people. What was surprising was who he helped – and how. He helped the most unlikely people, and he helped by reaching out to them. Jesus mercy was itself power.

The man possessed by an unclean spirit in Mark 5:1-20 is in trouble every which way. He lives among the dead, which makes him both emotionally unhealthy and religiously unclean. He is isolated from everybody else; when they try to lay hold of him he shakes them off. He is isolated from himself: he hurts himself. He's in the

thrall of powers he did not invent and does not understand. Everyone of us who reads this passage knows people like that; everyone of us knows that some days we are a razor's edge of sanity away from that disaster ourselves.

It's a battle of Good Spirit vs. Bad Spirit (remember chapter 3 and Jesus' empowered by the Holy Spirit). It is the opposite of self help; it is God help. We know the man is cured when he is clothed and in his right mind. He wants to do what we often want to do when we've known mercy. Just latch on to Jesus and be religiously religious. Jesus tells him something much tougher: Go home to the people who knew you at your worst; bear witness to your God."

(In the midst of all this Mark recalls a Jewish joke, how all the demons filled the unclean animals and sent them to their un-kosher death.)

Then Mark tells us about Jesus reaching out to two women, one who has died, and one who has a flow of blood. Mark loves to tell sandwich stories; right in the middle of the story of Jairus' daughter, we get the woman with the hemorrhage. It is a great story telling device; suspense builds as we stand with Jairus and wonder whether Jesus will ever move in to heal our daughter.

It is also a great poetic device; a kind of parable (one thing thrown against another). Two kinds of women, but both women. Both unclean by the rules of the time, one because she menstruates the other because she has died.

One is brought to healing by another's faith; one is brought to healing by her own faith. The woman's faith looks like audacity. She recites no creed. She trusts; she acts; she pushes toward healing. Of course Jesus recognizes that as faith.

The father's faith is more hesitant. Perhaps he is just a more hesitant person than the woman; he has to overcome fear, says Jesus, as faith always overcomes fear. Perhaps the miracle he needs is even more miraculous than the woman with the blood flow; he needs a resurrection. This whole Gospel will need a resurrection, and when it happens in chapter 16 there will be a contest between faith and fear again.

John Donahue and Donald Harrington also think that Mark tells the story of the two women because Jesus returns them to the possibility of child-bearing. The little girl is raised so that she can go on and have children; the older woman is healed so that she can bear children again. What we have, they think, is not only mercy but new creation (*Mark* in the Sacra Pagina Commentary Series).

What we clearly also have is power. The woman with the flow of blood so trusts Jesus' power that she knows that touching his garment may suffice. When Jesus heals her he feels the power leave him. In a way it's kind of magic; in another way it is what we've seen. The Spirit at work. The Spirit works hard, and takes its toll.

Then in chapter 6 of Mark's Gospel we are back to rejection again. Rejection dominated chapter 3, and in truth it never entirely goes underground. When the demoniac is healed the townsfolk want Jesus to go away. When the woman is healed Jesus' disciples are puzzled and befuddled. When Jesus gets ready to heal the girl the mourners start giggling.

Now it's not the religious leaders or his family who are upset with Jesus. It's his townsfolk. They are upset because they can't believe that all that power and all that mercy come together in, well, in that carpenter's son. Now their opposition is so strong that Jesus can't do miracles among them. Their lack of faith contrasts with the faith of the hemorrhaging woman and the girl's father. He was amazed at belief in chapter 5; in chapter 5 he is amazed at unbelief – which has its own power, too.

We get the story about John the Baptist's death because John the Baptist is an essential character in this story. We can't really understand Jesus without understanding the prophet who foretells him and foreshadows him as well. Here, sadly, John the Baptist foreshadows Jesus by dying a violent death at the hands of an oppressor. Here John's disciples foreshadow Jesus' disciples by the starkness of the contrast. When John dies his disciples bury him; when Jesus dies his disciples will be nowhere to be found.

### *General Questions:*

1. How do you understand Jesus as the embodiment of God's mercy? Do you identify with any of the figures in our stories – the fearful disciples, the distraught man, the insistent woman, the grieving father?

2. Looking at the first six chapters of Mark's Gospel, how do you understand the meaning of "faith" for Mark? Do you see that kind of faith in lives around you? in you?

*Focus Questions:*

1. Mark's world (Jesus' world) is full of miracles. Do we simply have to admit that that was then and this is now, or that the belief in miracles demands a simpler faith than we can manage? If we can speak honestly of actual miracles, what do we mean?

2. Mark tells his Gospel stories in part to inspire us to follow the Jesus we see. How might we combine power and mercy in our own vocations, our families, our church life?

*For Further Study:*

- George Buttrick, “The Wonderment of Jesus,” reprinted from *Pulpit Digest* 33 (1952), 33-38.
- Carol Marie Noren, “Storm at Sea,” in William H. Willimon, *Sermons in Duke Chapel: Voices from “A Great Towering Church”* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

