

Exploring Message and Mysteries in Mark

Although the Revised Common Lectionary follows the pattern of offering texts every third year, there is no limit to the wonder and surprises we can discover in the Word of God. The Gospel of Mark from earliest times has provided enigmas and mysteries for readers to ponder and explore. The authors of this lectionary issue invite us to explore the varied facets of Mark from fascinating and insightful angles. We trust this issue will spark the imaginations of readers and preachers to rediscover the poignancy of Mark's tale and enter into creative new paths of inquiry.

In the lead article **James W. Aageson** explores how Mark's Gospel presents its theology in narrative form where the actions and words of Jesus challenge readers with a powerful vision of God's reign. Mark provides an expansive and inclusive theological vision of God's kingdom. As the journey of discipleship unfolds in Mark's narrative, it becomes clear that the destination of this journey is the cross. Disciples—and by implication the contemporary followers of Christ—learn that this kingdom turns things upside down: the first are last, the sinners and the dishonored are invited to the table of fellowship, and those closest to Jesus often are filled with fear rather than faith.

Norma Cook Everist demonstrates how the Gospel of Mark urgently leads people into a world of systemic evil. Jesus, the teacher, taught in diverse places among all types of people. Her essay is fast paced to match Jesus' immediacy in the biblical text. People's response to Jesus' authoritative teaching and healing is often mere amazement rather than deep understanding. In teaching and preaching from Mark's Gospel, one needs to question and confront systemic injustice and be ready to engage actively in Christ's call. Amid uncertainty, Christians are freed from complacency for courageous vocation.

David M. Rhoads, in the first of two offerings, ferrets out the Markan standards of judgment to lay bare the moral backbone of this Gospel. This analysis of Mark's foundational beliefs and values makes explicit the norms that undergird the narrator's description and evaluation of characters and events in his story of Jesus. By means of these distinctive standards of judgment, Mark draws the audience to embrace his perspective on life. Interpreting the entire Gospel through this lens illuminates many episodes.

Laura Sweat Holmes investigates how the Gospel of Mark is well-known for its themes of secrecy and concealment. However, readers are less likely to notice that every time the Gospel

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causes us to notice secrecy, silence, concealment, or hiddenness, there is also proclamation and revelation. These events occur in the presence of the disciples, indicating that they are also related to readers' actions as followers of Jesus. Although Mark presents these themes as concealment and revelation, they may resonate more as uncertainty and clarity. Thereby, Mark's Gospel deepens readers' knowledge, encourages hope, and enlarges trust in a God who conceals but also reveals.

Amy Lindeman Allen teaches that although the baptism of Jesus is the only baptism specifically described in the synoptic gospel accounts, proponents of infant baptism have lifted up Jesus' blessing of children, unique to Mark, in support of this practice. By reading these two texts together within Mark's larger vision for the kin*dom,(realm) of God, the author proposes a religious-theological interpretation that understands baptismal vocation in light of the central place of children within the kin*dom.

In his second offering, **Rhoads** analyzes one of the most fascinating Gospel stories, the episode of the Syrophenician woman. It has been interpreted from many perspectives, not only for its surprising portrayal of Jesus but its depiction of the Gentile woman as a role model. This exploration takes account of the characters, settings, events, structures, and language, as well as the pervasive Markan themes, stylistic devices, and motifs that thread their way through this text within the context of the Gospel as a whole. The analysis unpacks the meaning of the story while explaining how to interpret by employing narrative critical techniques.

Ronald J. Allen underscores that Mark wrote the Second Gospel shortly after the fall of Jerusalem when many groups in Judaism competed for authority. Mark uses a rhetoric of vilification to caricature Jewish leaders, and eventually also the crowds, to undermine the authority of competing leaders in Mark's own historical context. While Mark was neither anti-Jewish nor anti-Semitic, Mark's rhetoric contributes to these things. Preachers who make a simple analogy between the Jewish leaders and contemporary history reinforce anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. A better strategy exposes the damaging effects of Mark's rhetoric and examines how we continue to do what Mark did—namely caricature, even vilify, others—while offering the possibility of repenting and moving toward more realm-like ways of relating with others.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon juxtaposes the Book of Jonah with its tale of a sea voyage on the Mediterranean with the Gospel of Mark's recounting of three boat trips across the Sea of Galilee. A cluster of verbal parallels signal the audience to keep the Jonah story in mind when hearing the Jesus story (the same words are used in the Greek of Mark 4 as in the Septuagint of Jonah 1). However, it is both the broader narrative parallels and the contrasts in the two texts (similar or opposite actions in each story) that give the audience—ancient or modern—a clearer understanding of what the Markan storyteller hopes we will “get” from these biblical allusions.

In the *Currents Focus* feature **Victor I. Vieth** combines original Luther research with an argument for vigilance in protecting children from physical abuse. Although Martin Luther described his own experience of three egregious acts of child physical abuse, most Luther biographers ignore, excuse, minimize, or make light of this violence. The notable exception is Erik Erikson. Although many scholars rightly conclude that Erikson's analysis went too far, these same scholars fail to address adequately the impact of child abuse on Luther's theology, his own treatment of children, his views on child discipline, and his thoughts on education. This article takes a fresh look at Luther's statements about being beaten and critiques the dismissal or minimizing interpretations by Luther biographers. The author advocates for a more balanced view of Luther's childhood beatings and that a deeper, more honest assessment of these beatings will yield meaningful insights into Luther and his theology.

This issue includes another selection of fine book reviews. Again, we are deeply grateful for the thoughtful introduction to the lectionary provided by our contributors to **Preaching Helps**, under the excellent editing of Barbara Lundblad. These months from October through Christmas present special challenges for pastors: preaching without seeing people (if worship is still online); a tense election looming on November 3; racial injustice and violence continuing; and living with the results of the election whenever it is officially over. May the Spirit direct our preaching and teaching of these texts as we move into the new church year, centered on the Gospel of Mark!

Craig L. Nesson, Issue Editor

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