



Some Things Never Change

TEXT
Mark 1:12–15;
6:14–29

February 28, 2016 — 8:00 a.m. — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

This is a terrible story. And yet Mark tells it in painstakingly gruesome detail. Mark, who skips over so many of the good moments the other gospels include.

Have you ever noticed that we never read Mark at Christmas? That's because he has no Christmas story to tell. Matthew, Luke and John get all the attention because Mark has no time for a baby. Jesus is a full-fledged adult where Mark begins. And when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness? Forget the long, elaborate conversation between Jesus and Satan the other gospels relay. Mark just says, "It happened."

Mark is the shortest gospel because he tells fewer stories and he gives fewer details. Even when it comes to the resurrection, he simply leaves it this way: "There was no one in the tomb," he says. An angel told the women that Jesus had been raised, but we never *see* Jesus. "The women were afraid," Mark says, and that's his last word on the subject.

I think that's actually instructive. Mark's gospel is told in a rush because he's talking to an entire community of people who, just like those women at the tomb, are afraid.

Have you ever called 911? I hope you haven't, and I hope you never need to. But if you have, you know that the operators who take those calls want only the most relevant information, and they want it quickly.

When I was the director of a camp and conference center, I had to make a terrible emergency call one summer. We had a child who nearly drowned in the pool. His name was Scott. Scott was not breathing when we got him out of the water. I was the one on the phone, and I was giving them information I thought might be helpful.

"Ma'am," they said, "stop talking. We're going to ask you a few questions, and then we're going to walk you through everything you need to do. But you need to listen now, very carefully."

I want you to know that Scott eventually made a full recovery, in large part because in those most critical moments, the 911 dispatchers knew exactly how much information they needed and exactly how much information I needed. There was no time for anything more, or anything less.

I think Mark is a little bit like that. And Mark — who wastes not one word and not one moment; who knows how to talk

to people in crisis — knew we would need this story.

There's a great family movie called *We Bought a Zoo*. In it, a young father is trying to make his way with a new profession, and he's trying to make his way as a newly single parent. He and his son are both tangled up in chaos and grief; and trying to nudge his son into life and love, the father says to him: "You know, sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage. Just literally 20 seconds of embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it."

Mark knew we would need this story, this story of John's arrest, because he knew we would need 20 seconds and then some¹ — because some things never change. John, in some way, somehow, somewhere, is always being arrested.

Mark structures his gospel around this truth. Now you might say, wait a minute, isn't it true that the gospels are structured around the good news of Jesus Christ? They are.

But for Mark, the good news of the gospel and the harsh realities of the world always exist hand in hand.

As far as Mark is concerned, John is always being arrested.

We hear about it in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6. Keep reading, and you'll hear about it in Chapter 9 and Chapter 13 too. It's all throughout the gospel. So it occurs to me it might be important to be very clear about something: John is actually only arrested once. Mark just can't stop talking about it.

Here's why: Every time Mark refers to John being arrested, he's not reading us a police log or teaching us about a historical event. He's teaching us a theological reality. He's reminding us that when it comes to discipleship, there is always a cost. This is an uncomfortable lesson, but one we do well to remember.

There is a school of thought that says, the more faithful you are, the more blessings you will encounter. There is a direct correlation, this line of thinking suggests, between the depth of your discipleship and the circumstances of your life. I hope you already know this, but I'm going to say it anyway: That's theological baloney. Neither life nor faith is that predictable and systematic. In fact, today's readings suggest the exact opposite.

The further we travel down the road of discipleship, the higher the cost becomes. Mark wants us to understand this from the very beginning.

Look at Chapter 1. Pull out your Bibles and follow along. Mark does something incredible here. He begins by quoting Isaiah. He tells us that. "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah," he says, "I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will

prepare your way."

But then he *keeps* quoting Isaiah. He just doesn't keep telling us that's what he's doing.

Jesus is baptized in verse 10: "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him." That's Isaiah. "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down," the prophet cried.

And then in verse 11, a voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." That's borrowed from Isaiah, too.

Then we get to Mark's abbreviated version of Jesus' temptation. "He was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

He was with the wild beasts. No other gospel includes that line. It sounds a little ominous.

Or maybe it sounds an awful lot like "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and fatling together. . . . They will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain." Guess where that comes from? Isaiah. It's Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom.

Mark isn't plagiarizing here. He's deliberately using language that would catch his people's attention. They knew their scripture. We need help to hear it, but they would recognize Isaiah's voice in a heartbeat. *This is it, Mark is saying. This guy — he is the Messiah. Everything we have been waiting for has arrived with this man. God's promised day — it is here.*

That is as good a setup for successful ministry as there has ever been. And yet in the same breath, right on the heels of that proclamation, Mark follows up with, "Now after John was arrested . . ." Because of course, there will be a cost. It's one of the first things Mark wants us to understand. For all of us — no matter who we are, no matter how good things seem — ministry always has a cost. Discipleship always has a cost. It is the way of things.

John prepares the way of the kingdom and is handed over to Herod. Jesus embodies the kingdom and ends up hanging on a cross. Some things never change. So if we disciples follow in their footsteps, we have a hard road ahead.

One of the strongest memories I have of learning this was through my brother's high school religion class. We both attended different Catholic schools. My brother went to school in Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit where over 30 percent of the population identifies as Muslim.

We both grew up sharing Catholic classrooms with lots of Muslim students. I didn't think much of it, until the day my brother came home and said one of his religion teachers had resigned. They had been learning about different types of prayer, and the teacher had asked the Muslim students to teach the other students some of their prayer practices.

As that teacher soon learned, apparently it was acceptable to ask Muslim students to participate in Christian prayers, but not the other way around.

The administration instructed the teacher to apologize to the Christian students for subjecting them to “foreign religious practices.” She refused. She told her students, “We live together. We work together. We learn together. Surely, surely, we can pray together?” And then she turned in her resignation.

When it comes to the cost of discipleship, courage is the currency that carries the day.

It was a number of years ago that an elderly woman sat down in my office with tears in her eyes. “My grandson has just told me he’s gay,” she said. “And that doesn’t bother me one bit. I love him very much.”

“So why the tears?” I asked her.

“His mother,” she said. “My daughter, she does not accept this. She is removing herself from his life, and she told me I have to choose. How do I choose? How do I choose between my daughter and my grandson?” Of course, she had already made up her mind. She didn’t need me to tell her what to do. She just needed me to acknowledge how painful the whole thing was.

Cost ... and courage. Living in the world as it ought to be, rather than the world as it is, is one of the hardest things we are asked to do. It takes guts. It takes 20 seconds and then some. Discipleship is not for the faint of heart. And yet we are little more than clay jars.

I am most aware of just how much clay I am made up of in those moments when I am the one who is asked to choose courage. Because sometimes, most

times, I think, courage really is a choice.

Jesus knew what that was like. Later in the story, out in a garden, in his last hours, he cries out to God. “Remove this cup from me,” he says. *I do not want this*, he says. “But not what I want, but what you want.”

Courage is choosing something bigger than ourselves. It is recognizing that our own fears, our own uncertainties — they exist. They are just not always what matters most.

Marilynne Robinson, a prolific author who writes beautifully about faith, recently said, “Fear is not a Christian state of mind. We are to fear not the death of our bodies, but the loss of our souls.”

John was that kind of disciple. I want to be that kind of disciple. But I don’t always manage it. I sometimes feel like I am just flat out of everything — energy, and faith, and courage, and all the rest.

There’s a tapestry in Normandy, France, called the Bayeux Tapestry that records in woven pictures and words one of the great events of European history: the Battle of Hastings, at which the Norman duke, William the Conqueror, defeated the English king and his armies.

In one scene, William’s brother, Bishop Odo, is shown rallying the troops, encouraging them into battle by waving a club in their direction. The caption above this scene reads, “Odo comforts the men.” It is, of course, the old meaning of the word *comfort* — “con fortis,” which means “with strength.” In

the midst of a battle, to comfort someone is to give them strength² — to help them find courage they didn’t realize they had.

So when you, too, feel like you are losing the battle to be the disciple you want to be? When the cost feels higher than you can reach? I promise you, all the comfort — which is to say, all the courage you need — it’s there. It’s always there.

Pull out your Bibles and read these stories again, but keep going. On the heels of our first reading today, Jesus calls his disciples. He is alone in the wilderness, but his next move is to surround himself with community.

And after the second reading, he feeds the 5,000. We move directly from the story of Herod’s horrible banquet to the story of another feast, where Jesus is the host. There, with people all around, he takes five loaves and two fish, and he blesses them and divides them up. Everyone eats their fill and then some. There is so much food that baskets of leftovers are collected — baskets upon baskets. There is enough for what they need in that moment, and there is enough for every moment still ahead.

Right there, Jesus offers 20 seconds of courage in the form of bread, broken and shared, and a lifetime’s worth left over.

It’s no mistake that these stories are smashed right up against each other here. Mark may be the shortest gospel, but in the end, he is careful to craft this story after the shape of God’s own heart, where the harsh realities of this world are never left without

the good news of the gospel to sustain us.

Mark tells us a terrible story — a story that tells us how much will be asked of us. But it is wrapped up with an embarrassingly extravagant promise that God will always give us what is needed.

That is why we disciples have learned to come here, to this place, to this community, where bread is broken and hands are held and courage is found and clay jars are strengthened over and over and over again.

Thanks be to God, some things never change.

¹With thanks to Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin for sharing the connection of this movie to this text.

²This story of the Bayeux Tapestry is shared by Michael Lindvall in his book *A Geography of God*, p. 113.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.