

Our Book of Faith Journey continues with a 4-week glimpse at the four different-and-similar stories of Jesus's life, mission and ministry in the New Testament: The Gospels According to Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Compiled in that order, between approximately 70-95 Common Era (CE, or AD) they give us four unique interpretations of the Jesus Way -- the movement started by Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. Each contain a variety of unique and similar material. In addition to these four, there are other gospels from the first three centuries of Christianity. Those are: The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Mary, The Sayings Gospel "Q" (used as a source for Matthew and Luke), The Secret Gospel of Mark, along with 12 others. Each week we'll try to capture a glimpse of one or more highlights of each of the four New Testament gospels as we apply the Jesus story to our Way of following him today.

+++++++

Week Beginning Sunday, January 17, 2010 -- the Gospel According to Mark

+++++++

SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF MARK'S MESSAGE ABOUT JESUS...

1) Mark Begins with the first sermon of Jesus (1:14) which serves as sort of a mission statement of his entire ministry, according to Mark: "The Kingdom (Reign) of God is at hand (near). Repent (turn around, change your mind and perspective) and believe the good news (gospel)."

The Kingdom of God was not a place to go when people die, according to Jesus, but rather a Way to see the world and our lives, and a Way to live and order our lives, here and now, with eternal implications. According to Jesus, we can choose to follow him as participants in this Way now. But in order to do that, we are invited to turn away from whatever philosophy or "way" we are living that encourages us to believe in bad news. "Repent" literally means "about face" as well as "change your mind". Mark's Jesus wants us to see a God of Gospel, Good News, (grace?) instead of a god of bad news.

Questions to Ponder:

- + Compare and Contrast a God of Good News and a God of Bad News: What does each look like? How have you experienced examples of each in your life, or from those who represent Christianity or religion?
- + Would you say that Pat Robertson's take on Haiti's disaster was an example of a God of Bad News?
- + What is missing from Christianity -- as a Way of following Jesus -- if we reduce our faith to a system of "getting to heaven when we die"?
- + If the main point of following Jesus is not "getting to heaven when we die" then what is? What words would you use to describe it?

2) Some scholars point out that Jesus did not accept the title of "Messiah" in Mark's story. Instead, Jesus taught his followers that he was the "son of man." (See Mark 8:27-38) The "son of man" references come from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament, the Bible of Jesus' day). In Daniel, Zechariah and elsewhere, the son of man is a leader who is faithful and obedient to God no matter what, and who lives a life of peace. In Jesus' day, many thought the coming Messiah would be a military leader who would overthrow Roman occupation by force and restore governmental power to Israel.

Questions:

- + What, if any, thoughts and images do we hold about the Jewish term "Messiah"? (The biblical word "Christ" is the Greek word literally meaning "smeared one" that refers to the Jewish term "Messiah", who was believed to be the "anointed one" from God.)
- + What does Jesus' rejection of the title "Messiah", in Mark's story, and his reference to himself as "son of man" imply for our following Jesus today?

3) Mark constantly reveals the "blindness" of the disciples. Jesus is constantly frustrated by and disappointed with the disciples who don't "get it" and who don't seem to understand who he really is, what God's Way is about, and what it means to follow Jesus. Some scholars describe Mark as a story about "failed discipleship." Various outsiders seem to see Jesus and his Way more clearly, but the disciples struggle. Mark seems to be addressing "the church" through these disciple stories of misunderstanding. "Insiders" miss the point, while "outsiders" see Jesus and his message and his way in a more God-intended way.

Questions:

- + What are the joys and benefits of being an "insider" when it comes to Christianity? Lutheran Christianity? Participants/Members of First Lutheran?
- + What are the dangers, or things it is wise to be aware of, when we consider ourselves as "insiders"?
- + Have you ever seen the beauty, truth and grace of God revealed to, or seen by an "outsider"? How is that instructive and helpful?

4) Mark's gospel has the greatest sense of Urgency. Mark's is the shortest of the four NT gospels, and it contains the word "Immediately" 28 times! Matthew and Luke each use the word 12 times, and John only twice. This may have a lot to do with context. Mark, written around 70 CE, is born under crisis conditions. The year 70 is when the Temple, and much of Jerusalem is destroyed, crushed under the mighty force of the Roman Empire. Many Jews are scattered, while others are killed, and the central place of worship and religious life is now in ruins. No longer was Jerusalem "home-base" for the Christian movement.

Questions:

- + When have you experienced "urgent" or "crisis" points in your life and faith? What have you learned about God at those moments?
- + In an urgent situation, what do you think Haitians are struggling with in their own understanding of God and faith?
- + In an urgent situation like that of Haiti, how are we, looking from a distance, best able to be faithful to God and faithful to our following of Jesus?

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, let us again hear the prophetic words of the civil rights leader and pastor whose work we celebrate today... "Life's most persistent and most urgent question is this: What are you doing to help others?"

Blessings to you as we continue the journey together!

-- Pastors Jay & Charlie