



LUTHER BY MEANS OF MARK

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Everyone knows that Luther had his Reformation breakthrough while reading Romans, that his most detailed account of justification by faith is in the Galatians commentary, and that his favorite Gospel was John (though he actually preached more on Matthew). He gave the last ten years of his life to Genesis, and along the way commented on a whole heap of other biblical books, even Deuteronomy and Ecclesiastes.

But Mark? Who ever associates Luther with Mark? Who ever associates *anyone* with Mark? Slim and impoverished compared to its Synoptic brothers, even the early and medieval church tended to think of Mark as an abbreviation of the more “orderly account” (Luke 1:3) found in the other two. Mark’s reputation has fared a bit better since historical-critical studies have concluded that it was probably the first and original Gospel, embellished later by Matthew and Luke for their own purposes. But it’s hard to imagine any church or theologian building their structures on a Markan foundation.

If Mark really was the first one to undertake the business of “compil[ing] a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1), then he and his Gospel deserve better. Read in its own right, this Gospel discloses not a bare-bones biography by a well-meaning if inadequate reporter but a unique, powerful, disturbing, and astounding theological vision. Luther may not have taken his cues directly from Mark—or may not have realized that he was doing so in such a way as to give the First Evangelist credit—but the sympathy between the two is strong, as we’ll see in what follows.¹

One of Mark’s favorite words is “immediately” (*euthus*), and fittingly that’s how his Gospel starts: immedi-

ately, suddenly, without preamble or angelic annunciation. John the Baptist’s abrupt appearance in the wilderness is the only forewarning we get. Jesus appears on the scene as a puzzle and gives his disciples and the crowds seven chapters to figure out just who and what he is.

Of course, it doesn’t help that, in this Gospel, Jesus is the only witness to his own divine confirmation: “immediately he [Jesus] saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (1:10). John the Baptist is left out of the equation, which the other Evangelists saw fit to remedy in their versions. Then “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness” (1:12) to face a temptation by Satan and fellowship with wild beasts, neither of which we are invited to watch firsthand, either.

Once he gets out among the people of Galilee, though, we viewers/readers are finally offered some evidence; we can start compiling our casebook on Jesus. His first words are: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:15). What’s the kingdom? What’s the gospel? If we are to judge by what Jesus does, the kingdom-gospel is constituted in Jesus himself, calling, teaching with authority (astonishing! 1:22), and a whole lot of healing and exorcism. This sounds pretty good, actually. It’s the kind of good news people want. Before the first chapter is up, Jesus can’t even walk about openly without being mobbed by the needy. At the beginning of chapter 2, four faithful friends actually bust through the roof of Jesus’ own home in Capernaum to get their paralytic friend the healing he needs—to which Jesus adds the forgiveness of sins. None of them seems to have realized the paralytic needed that, too.

So far so good. Let’s call the hero we have so far “the

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prosperity-gospel Jesus.” Stop here and everything is solved, the earth is at peace, righteousness reigns. But Jesus doesn’t stop. He hangs out with despised people like tax collectors and sinners. He gets into a dispute about fasting and then has to go and declare himself Lord of the Sabbath. Can’t leave well enough alone, he heals a withered hand on the Sabbath. By chapter 3 Mark is already destroying our pious illusions about happiness and wholeness. The Pharisees want to destroy him. His family thinks he’s crazy. The scribes think he’s possessed. Blithely unconcerned, Jesus keeps right on healing and exorcising. He forms a little band to go with him on his merry way to destruction.

Not that the disciples are a whole lot more clued in to Jesus than anyone else. The Sermon on the Boat (Mark leaves the mount to Matthew and the plain to Luke) is full of mystifying parables, that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven” (4:12). Jesus explains in private, but his not-so-quick-studies don’t get it. Shifting from words to actions, Jesus asserts his power over the forces of nature by stilling the storm, but all the disciples can do is ask each other, “Who then *is* this...?” (4:41). Then Jesus asserts his power over demons by sending the Gerasene’s legion into the hogs. *Then* he asserts his power over disease by healing the hemorrhaging woman. At the end of this series of raw displays of omnipotence, he asserts his power over death by raising Jairus’s daughter. A lump of coal could figure it out. But back home in Nazareth, Jesus can barely pull off a single miracle because of his compatriots’ disbelief.

Clueless or not, the disciples are sent out on their first preaching mission. They manage to cast out some demons and heal some sick folks. In the meanwhile John the Baptist loses his head. When the team regroup, Jesus gets back to his wonderworking stunts by feeding five thousand and walking on water. But Mark is out to

cure us of the notion that miracles and power can solve the problem of human disbelief. Quite the opposite of finally disclosing his true identity, this latest spectacle leaves the disciples “utterly astounded” because “their hearts were hardened” (6:51–52). They’re not really doing much better than the Pharisees, honestly, who get into another dispute with Jesus about unclean foods. *Everyone* comes out guilty when Jesus shifts the blame from the unclean food to the unclean heart. Yet unlikely candidates remain receptive: the Syrophenician (that is, non-Jewish) mother badgers Jesus to heal her daughter; a deaf man hears the Word and so receives hearing and speech.

Then the whole cycle repeats itself once more: four thousand get fed, the

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Pharisees strike up another quarrel, the disciples “do not yet perceive or understand” (8:17), a blind man sees the light of life. What *we* still don’t see is any way of breaking out of this cycle of incomprehension and hostility. We are probably tempted at this point to suspect ourselves better disciples than the disciples.

And then the most unexpected thing happens. Peter, the beloved blockhead, gets it. At least for a split second. “You are the Christ” (8:29). Somebody has finally managed to piece the clues together and confess that the time is fulfilled—just like Mark warned us right up front (1:15). Rather comically, Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone. As if it would matter.

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of theology—but one almost never taught—is to look for what’s *not* being said. What hasn’t been said all this time? What’s the secret driving this whole plot but behind the scenes, under the radar? At the end of chapter 8, Jesus reveals the McGuffin at last. It’s the cross. Not one word has been said of the cross so far, but now that the secret’s out, now that Jesus is confessed as the Christ, it’s absolutely essential not to delay another minute before filling in the full content of what it means to be Christ. It means to be headed for the cross.

Peter’s moment of glory is over. He likes the time arrived, he likes the healing and feeding and all that, but he does not like the cross. Who can blame him? Embarrassed, he won’t even contradict Jesus openly but draws him aside for private instruction on the proper understanding of that little word “Christ.” We may feel sympathy, but Jesus hears it for what it is: the voice of Satan. If Peter really knew God, he would really know the cross. The rug has been pulled out from Peter—and all the rest of us. Here we were cleverly tabulating all the credits to Jesus’ omnipotence but it turns out divinity is not like anything we expected. For the first time, our complicity with Satan’s logic is exposed. If we’re not uncomfortable with this story yet, we haven’t been paying attention. Goodbye for good, prosperity Jesus.

Of course, Jesus does have a tender spot even for ol’ rocks-for-brains, so there is a consolation prize to offset the hard news about the cross. He takes the inner circle up high and gets transfigured in their sight. Peter blows it again and tries to petrify the tableau into adoring, cross-free worship forevermore, but at least he doesn’t get called Satan this time. And Jesus adds, now, that a resurrection will follow the cross. The disciples aren’t exactly elated by the news, just puzzled, and they try to change the subject by asking about Elijah. Still, this is better than what the other nine have managed in Jesus’ absence, which is

nearly to incite a riot over their inability to exorcise a tormented child. It's another case of Mark's blistering narrative logic: what's the first thing that happens after we finally know who Jesus is? Failure.

But again, there are certain kinds of failure Jesus can put up with better than others. The disciples' faithlessness aggravates him, but the wobbly faith of the boy's father evokes his compassion. "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24): it could be the Gospel's subtitle. Mark's purpose is to get you, the reader, to the point that you can say the same, which would be a great achievement indeed. The follow-up to this belief/unbelief is Jesus' second teaching on the cross, but the disciples are if anything less receptive than before: "they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him" (9:32). So they put their minds to solving more important questions, like who among them is the greatest and whether they get to shut down a rival exorcist. Jesus decides to talk about millstones and dismembered members instead.

The Galilean ministry winds down with a few more refrains of familiar tunes. Jesus teaches, this time on divorce, and then promptly blesses the children, which is no accidental juxtaposition. The rich young man goes away sad after finding out that the law kept is not enough if wealth is kept, too. Jesus tries teaching on the cross a third time, and James and John demonstrate how well they grasp the concept: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (10:37). Sigh. Jesus speaks again of the baptism of his death (maybe they'll get this better than cross language), insists he's a servant and not a tyrant, and gives his life a ransom for many. Once again the blind see better than the seeing: Bartimaeus is made well by his faith.

The entry into Jerusalem is good for palms but bad for figs, laden with the unpleasant task of symbolizing the temple ill-prepared to accept the Christ in season. The disciples should

learn from that negative example to believe, pray, and forgive. The chief priests and scribes challenge Jesus' authority, but he fools them with a riddle. In fact, it's nothing but riddles for the rest of Jesus' teaching career: the parable of the vineyard and the stumbling block/cornerstone, rendering to Caesar, exposing the Sadducees' living faith in a dead God, compressing the multitude of commandments to just two, teasing about David's son. Yet the whole debate culminates—not in the cross quite yet—but in the widow and her mite. There is no mockery or riddling where she is concerned.

The story is almost over now, but Jesus gives the disciples, and Mark gives you, one last chance to get it. The "little apocalypse" forecasts the end while warning that no one knows when it is, therefore everyone

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is to "keep awake." Seriously: keep awake now. The drama is drawing to a close. Here comes the cross. And the resurrection...?

The death scene begins with a sepulchral anointing before the protagonist has even died, and "wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (14:9), a funny foreshadowing of the the words of institution. From there the action is pell-mell: Judas plots the betrayal, there's a Passover supper and sleepy digestion in Gethsemane, arrest, trial, denial, trial again. Then, at last, the long-awaited event happens: the wonderworker-teacher-lord is nailed to the cross.

If we've followed Mark and Jesus the whole way, it's impossible not to feel at least a tiny bit of sympathy with

the sarcasm (which literally means "flesh-tearing") of the chief priests and scribes: "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (15:31–32). Seriously, *why not?* Why does it have to be this way? Jesus has told of the cross but never adequately explained it. Mark has never adequately explained it, either. It is not in the realm of the explicable. The cross proves not to be a period at the end of Jesus' sentence, but it remains a question mark. It is Jesus' own question mark: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (15:34).

Then the temple curtain is torn in two, and the terrible void at the holy of holies where the ark of the covenant most definitely is *not* lies exposed to the eyes of all. The presence of God has shifted to the person of Jesus—and we just killed him. Only the Gentile centurion, hardly an innocent in his line of work, can face up to it. "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (15:39). Dead God is buried as the women look on.

What happens in the last chapter? What really counts as the last chapter? In the oldest manuscripts the abrupt, postpositive-particle ending is at 16:8, the "for" in "for they were afraid." There is no mention of God, but there's one white-robed young man with strange news—still strange, despite every attempt at spoilers throughout the story. But no one tells. Trembling, astonishment, silence. How does Mark even know how the story ended? *Has* the story ended?

There are three big themes in Mark, themes that should already be well familiar to students of Luther.

The first is election. *God* is the one who does the choosing, revealing, and saving. On our own, not one of us can choose God or get God to choose us. "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him."² A strange confession of faith—unless you have learned the gospel

from Mark, in which case it is the only honest confession to make. Even Jesus' disciples don't grasp what's going on most of the time; his friends and family misunderstand him as badly as his enemies; the faithful women at the end run away in terror. Everyone is stuck, even believers! *Simul justus et peccator* indeed. At this level alone, Mark is a most discouraging Evangelist. It's as if he dares you to keep on reading, dares you to own up to how little you accept or comprehend any of the events unfolding before your eyes.

If election were Mark's only point, then he may as well have stopped at that disturbing quotation from Isaiah: "that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand." But not even Mark is quixotic enough to write a gospel for the express purpose of disproving its message. There is another theme that comes to the fore: "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel..."³ So Luther; and Mark too: "for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (13:11). When and only when God comes to you, He opens up the possibility for you to respond in faith. God gives faith, teaches faith, encourages faith, and responds to faith. He even responds to *other* people's faith on your behalf. Jesus declares, "All things are possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23). *So glaubst du, so hast du*, Luther said: "If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things."⁴ This would be a dreadful taunt if faith were our business alone. But Mark and Luther definitely do *not* mean that our faith

creates reality or is our own work. They mean that the promise of God can't do any good until it is received and believed. Faith exists only inside of God's election.

Election-and-faith alone would make for an obnoxious religion of holy chosen super-believers pitying the great unwashed. That was always the danger in Jesus' ministry up to the moment of Peter's confession—a theology of glory. "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened... He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."⁵ Left to themselves, election and faith misdirect. But for Mark, election and faith both belong to the cross. The God Who elects is the one Who went to the cross for you. His blessings of forgiveness, healing, exorcism, teaching, and feeding led Him to the cross. If you have been given faith, it's in the one Who died on the cross. Faith will cause you to deny yourself and take up your own cross and follow the crucified (Mark 8:34). No one who rejects Jesus' cross will remain long in election or faith, which is why for Luther the cross is the seventh and final mark of the church.⁶

Mark's Gospel has no ending because the gospel is not finished. Mark has walked you through Galilee and up to Gethsemane and on to Calvary with the Christ; he has given you the privilege of sharing in the

disciples' incomprehension. He has brought you to the waters of life but he cannot make you drink. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. "[W]e could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the LORD Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart... But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit."⁷ *LF*

Notes

1. Luther preached infrequently on Mark, partly because the lectionary in use at his time gave so little space to this Gospel; Synoptic parallels were more likely to turn up in Matthew or Luke. A handful of Luther sermons on Mark can be found at <www.martinlutherspostil.com/> (accessed January 15, 2016), treating 7:31–37, 8:1–9, 16:1–8, and 16:14–20. However, the latter two spend far more time on Paul's and the other Gospels' accounts of Jesus' resurrection and ascension than on Mark's. Without doubt, Luther's favorite verse of Mark was 16:16, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned"—although nowadays it is assumed that this is part of a later addition to Mark's text.

2. Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 355.

3. BC 355.

4. "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 31:348–9.

5. Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," LW 31:40.

6. Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," LW 41:164–5.

7. Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," BC 440.