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SESSION 1

The Good News Begins

Mark 1-4

Session Objectives

This session's readings and discussion will help participants:

- Understand some key facts about what makes the Gospel of Mark unique.
- Appreciate why and how Mark uses Scripture to communicate the meaning that ancient as well as today's audiences find in Jesus's story.
- Consider how John's message and Jesus's baptism (Mark 1:1-11), Jesus's call to and table fellowship with tax collectors (2:14-17), and Jesus's parable of the sower and his seeds (4:2-9) can shape beliefs and practices today.
- Begin building your group's working definition of what "good news" means in Mark's Gospel and in their own lives.

Biblical Foundations

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,*

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’ ”*

so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Mark 1:1-11

Also consider Mark 2:14-17 and 4:2-9 for this session.

Before Your Session

- Carefully and prayerfully read this session’s Biblical Foundations—more than once. Consult a trusted study Bible or commentary for background information.
- Carefully read the introduction and chapter 1 of AJ’s book. Note topics about which you have questions or want to research further. You might want to keep a record of places where AJ’s translation and your Bible translation differ; you can share these differences with the group and discuss what difference AJ’s more literal reading makes.
- You will need: Bibles for in-person participants and/or screen slides prepared with Scripture texts for sharing (be

sure to note which translation you are using); newsprint or a markerboard and markers (if meeting in person).

- If using the DVD or streaming video in your study, preview the session 1 video segment and choose the best time in your session to view it.

Starting Your Session

Welcome participants. Tell them why you are excited to study *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner's Guide to the Good News* with them. Invite volunteers to talk briefly about why they are interested in this study and what they hope to gain from it.

Playfully announce that you have found several fascinating details about Mark. You can ask your fellow participants if they had heard these details before—you can also ask them if the details have any significance.

- Mark is the shortest New Testament Gospel. *Here you might mention famous passages that Mark does not have, from the Sermon on the Mount (that's Matthew 5–7) to the parable of the good Samaritan (that's Luke 10) to the wedding at Cana (that's John 2).*
- Scholars generally consider Mark the earliest written of the extant New Testament Gospels. Most scholars date Mark to ca. 70, after Rome destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Thus, Mark is writing *after* Paul.
- While early church tradition suggests that “Mark” is the “John Mark” who was Peter’s traveling companion, this is probably not the case. You might encourage participants to keep track of how the Gospel presents Peter. In many cases, the presentation is not complimentary.
- Mark contains no stories about Jesus’s birth or childhood. *Thus, participants might consider whether a “Christmas” story*

is necessary for the “good news” of Jesus. What if anything does the Christmas story add that is needed?

- Mark also contains, at least in the earliest manuscripts, no stories of Jesus appearing after his resurrection. *As with consideration of Nativity accounts, participants might discuss whether an actual appearance is needed for the Gospel story to be compelling.*

Opening Prayer

Eternal God, you inspired your servant, the one we call Mark, to write the good news about Jesus. May your Spirit now inspire our reading, hearing, and discussion of these ancient words, so they become for us new and living words that make us more faithful followers of the one we call your Son, Messiah, and Lord. Amen.

Watch Session Video

Play the video for session 1. Then ask the following questions:

- Which of AJ’s statements resonated with you the most?
- What questions did this video segment raise for you?

Book Discussion Questions

Exploring Mark 1:1-11

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Mark 1:1-11 as other participants listen, Bibles closed. (As AJ notes, Mark was “designed to be read aloud.”) You might have another participant read aloud AJ’s translation. After the reading, ask participants what most caught their attention—an incident, an image, a word, or phrase—and why.

Invite all participants to turn to Mark 1 in their Bibles and/or share prepared slides. Discuss:

- AJ states Mark's Gospel resembles an ancient biography or "life," written "less to record what happened and more to provide moral guidance." How do you respond to the idea that Mark may be this kind of "life"?
- AJ notes Mark's opening "invokes Genesis" (verse 1). Why might Mark have started his book this way?
- "For ancient Israel," writes AJ, "salvation did not mean an eternal blessed afterlife. It meant salvation from this-worldly dangers. . . ." How could this insight affect our understanding of what Mark means by "good news" (verse 1)? How does this insight affect our understanding of what we think of as "good news"?
- According to AJ, the titles "messiah" (Greek "christ"), "son of god/God," and "lord/Lord" (verse 3) had specific meanings in the ancient world. For example, "messiah" (from the Hebrew, *meschiach*) meant "anointed"; it could refer to a king or even a foreign king, a priest, someone commissioned by God. It did not, outside the New Testament, suggest a divine figure to be worshipped. "Son of God" could refer to Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or Hercules. "Lord" (Greek: *kyrios*) could just mean "sir" or it could refer to the divine name in the Old Testament, *YHWH*. What do these various titles mean to you?
- "Understanding ancient texts as referring to something in the present is not a misreading," writes AJ. How do you think Mark understands ancient texts from Malachi (3:1) and Isaiah (40:3-4) to be referring to the story being presented in this Gospel? When have you found new meaning in "ancient texts"—not only Scripture, but also hymns, novels and poems, old movies, and so on—for your present? How, if at all, is that experience like or unlike Mark's "repurposing" of prophetic texts? Why?

- AJ notes that though “classical [i.e., written] prophecy” was believed to have ceased with Malachi, John can be located among the “sign prophets” mentioned by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. How, beyond his hairy wardrobe (verse 6), do you understand John to be a prophet? Do you think prophecy continues today? If so, whom would you identify as a prophet, and why?
- Malachi anticipated God sending a “messenger”—in Mark’s Greek quotation (verse 2), an “angel.” “Why look for angels with harps and haloes . . . ?” asks AJ. “There are angels, good-news givers, all around, if we have ears to hear.” When has someone been a bringer of good news for you? When have you been one for someone else?
- John baptizes “in the wilderness” (verse 4)—what do you think of when you think of “wilderness” or “desert” (the Greek is the same for both)? Do you recall any Old Testament stories about the wilderness? How might they affect the way you understand Mark’s story about John?
- In what wildernesses—physical, emotional, mental, spiritual—do people need to hear good news today? What do you and your congregation do to be “good-news givers” in these wildernesses?
- AJ explains the baptism John practiced was not “anti-Temple protest” but “an invitation for people to repent and then rededicate themselves toward doing what God wants.” It is a “public testimony” about personal commitment, accountability to the community, and an indication of the urgency of entering a right relationship with God and others. How is John’s baptism like and/or unlike Christian baptism, as your tradition understands and practices it? How, if at all, do you think Christian baptism should be more or less like John’s baptism, and why?

- “Repenting means fixing broken relationships,” writes AJ, “and so doing one’s best to restore community.” When have you seen such repentance—or practiced it yourself?
- AJ suggests the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” John anticipated (verse 8) may be “possession” by the Holy Spirit, as opposed to possession by Satan. How do you react to the idea of possession by—or indwelling by—the Holy Spirit? What might signs of such possession be?
- Mark does not suggest that Jesus receiving John’s “baptism of repentance” is inappropriate. Do you find Jesus’s allowing himself to be baptized problematic? Would AJ’s suggestion that Mark’s Jesus knows what it’s like “to sin, to repent, and to be forgiven” diminish or enhance Jesus in your view, and why? How does AJ’s emphasis on Judaism’s community-based identity—in which every individual is also part of the community, so that one person’s deeds impact the rest of the community—affect your understanding of Jesus’s baptism?
- AJ wonders whether Jesus “saw a dove” at his baptism (verse 10) “and interpreted it as a divine message.” When, if ever, have you interpreted something in the natural world as a message from God—and how did you respond to that message?
- AJ cites Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 42:1, and Genesis 22:2 as Scriptures Mark may be echoing and “repurposing” in verse 11. These texts can be seen “as pointing to Jesus,” she writes, “but they will always have additional meaning. . . . Anyone can be a beloved child, a suffering servant, a seeker of justice.” When and how have you found yourself in one or more of these roles? What about your congregation?

Exploring Mark 2:14-17

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Mark 2:14-17 as other participants listen, Bibles closed. You might have another participant read aloud AJ's translation. After the reading, ask participants to share initial reactions, then turn to Mark 2. Discuss:

- AJ suggests tax collectors in first-century Judea were “the ancient versions of loan sharks and drug dealers, pimps and traitors.” Are there certain people with whom you would hesitate associating, or having your children associate with? What do you make of Jesus's table fellowship with people who have harmed the communities in which they live?
- Does thinking of Jesus as “a physician who makes house calls” change your image of him? Have you ever made a “house call” to people who did not know that they were “sick” in the sense of disrupting the community? Is making such a house call potentially dangerous?
- Citing 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, AJ notes Jesus's followers generally didn't continue his practice of eating with “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:16). Were Jesus physically to attend your congregation's next potluck or picnic, would he recognize it as a meal shared with others in his name? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Scripture uses eating and drinking together as a metaphor for the messianic age (as in Isaiah 25:6-9)? When, if ever, have you experienced table fellowship as a foretaste of God's kingdom? How much do you think your congregation's observances of the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion; the Eucharist) express this aspect of the meal's meaning? Are there any other situations, aside from dining together, that you think might be fitting descriptions of the messianic age?

- Why do you think Levi disappears from Mark's Gospel after this story (note his absence in Mark 3:17-18)? How do you and your congregation respond when someone dines with you (literally or figuratively) but doesn't return? If you could write the end of Levi's story, what would it be?

Exploring Mark 4:2-9

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Mark 4:2-9 as other participants listen, Bibles closed. You might have another participant read aloud AJ's translation. After the reading, ask participants to share initial reactions, then turn to Mark 4. Discuss:

- What strikes you about the sower's behavior?
- What do you recall happening to the seed the farmer sows? Why do you think you remembered these details?
- AJ says that "unsettl[ing] everyone," which is what parables can do, is "not a bad pedagogical [i.e., educational] move" on Jesus's part. Have you ever been unsettled when you heard a sermon, read a story, or saw a movie? What made the experience unsettling? Do you think you learned something from that experience?
- Read Jesus's explanation of his parable in 4:14-20. Does this explanation make it easier or harder for you to understand his story? Why?
- Review how AJ's teaching this parable at Riverbend prison reshaped her understanding of it. What might we gain from reading and processing Jesus's parables (and Scripture generally) with others, rather than always only by ourselves? Have you ever heard a sermon or read an interpretation that prompted you to think about a scriptural passage differently? Why do you think you changed your mind?

- As you read and hear this parable today, where and how do you see yourself in it? How might this understanding prompt you to action?

Closing Your Session

In her introduction, AJ explains that what “good news” means for Mark is cumulative: “Mark . . . offers an invitation: What ‘good news’ do we find with each story [in his book], and then how do we find ‘good news’ as we leave the empty tomb and carry the story forward?”

At the top of a sheet of newsprint or on your markerboard or on a videoconference slide, write: “‘Good news’ for Mark means . . .” You might start with what you think the good news, so far, is. Invite volunteers to complete the statement based on this session’s readings and discussion.

Tell participants your group will continue this project after each session. If meeting in person, keep the list visible for ease of reference during each session.

Closing Prayer

Jesus our Teacher, you went to the wilderness to be baptized, and by your Spirit you enter our wildernesses today, calling us to follow you as you sow your good news. May we receive your gospel with both joy and curiosity, always eager to learn more deeply what it means to us as individuals and as a community, and always desiring to embody it more fully. Amen.